

First Epistle to the Corinthians

13 – Essay Two: Sex –In Harmony with the Gospel (2.4) – Part 2

1 Corinthians 7:10-24

1. Essay Two Outline: Bailey¹ (Essay Two Subject: Men and Women in the Human Family)
 - a. Immorality and the Church (4:17-6:8)
 - b. (Three Road Blocks: Leaven, Immorality, and the Law Courts [5:6b-6:8])
 - c. Theology of Sexual Practice: Kingdom Ethics (6:9-12)
 - d. Theology of Sexual Practice: Joining the Body (6:13-20)
 - e. Sexual Practice in Harmony with the Gospel (7:1-40)
2. Earlier Summaries
 - a. Paul sees arrogance among some of the Corinthians believers as the primary issue
 - b. Paul addresses three objections Corinthian believers might raise
 - c. Paul reminds the Corinthian believers what it means to live as members of God's kingdom
 - d. Paul reminds the Corinthians of the correct theology of the physical body
 - i. In contrast to Greek philosophy, Christian theology values the body. It represents the wholeness of the person. There is no person without the body. The body continues from this life to the next.
 - ii. Individual Christian bodies come together to form the body of Christ. Bodies do not belong to individuals. Individuals are not free to do what they want with their bodies. The bodies belong to Christ.
 - iii. Christian eschatology includes past, present, and future. God has freed us from the power of sin; we are members of Christ; we will be resurrected into a glorified body.
 - iv. For Christians, all activity done in the present life, including sexual ones, must honor and respect others. Doing so brings honor and glory to God.
 - e. Paul writes against asceticism – marriage is good, sexual relations are a gift to one another
 - i. Men and women are equal partners in marriage
 - f. Paul writes that both singleness and marriage are *charisma* – spiritual gifts
 - i. Neither is better than the other – both are good
 - ii. Live and remain in the state you are gifted to be
3. Outline –7:1-40²
 - a. Equality in conjugal rights (7:1-5)
 - b. Widows/widowers (7:6-9)
 - c. Believers and unbelievers: marriage, separation and divorce (7:10-16)
 - d. Jew and Greek, slave and free: remain in your calling (7:17-24)
 - e. The Unmarried and the impending distress (7:25-31)
 - f. Marriage and anxieties (7:32-35)
 - g. A man and “his virgin” (7:36-38)
 - h. In case of death (7:39-40)
 - i. Paul's concluding personal appeal (7:40)

¹ Bailey, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians*, loc. 1777

² Bailey, location 2266

Table 1: From Bailey, location 2372

1 Corinthians 7:10-16		Motifs
1	10 To the [believing] married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband 11 (but if she does, she should remain unmarried [<i>agamos</i>] or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.	The ideal: No separation Reconciliation No divorce
2-A	12 To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her.	Unbelieving wife If congenial Stay together
3-A	13 If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.	Unbelieving husband If congenial Stay together
4-B	14 For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of [<i>through/in</i>] his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of [<i>through/in</i>] her husband.	Unbeliever Made holy
5-B	Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.	Children Holy
6-C	15 But if the unbelieving partner [<i>desires to</i>] separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved [<i>bound</i>]. [<i>For</i>] God has called you to peace.	Unbelieving spouse Desires separation then separate The goal--peace
7-C	16 For how do you know, wife, whether you will save [<i>keep</i>] your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save [<i>keep</i>] your wife?	Can you Keep your spouse?

Paul's response, along with that of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels, has served as the basis for canon law in the church on the whole question of divorce and remarriage. But one must remember that the original intent of the passage was not to establish canon law but to address a specific situation in Corinth—their apparent rejection of marriage on ascetic grounds. The text needs to be heard in its own historical context before it is applied to broader contexts.³

4. Believers and unbelievers: marriage, separation and divorce (7:10-16)
 - a. Verses 10-11 set the ideal condition for married believers
 - i. It is a directive (but not law) from “the Lord,” not Paul’s opinion
 - ii. Are these broad principles applicable to all marriages between believers, or specific to the Corinthian situation? (Scholars are divided.)
 - iii. Under Jewish law, women could not initiate divorce, but under Roman law, either party could
 - iv. Incontrovertible –
 1. Ideal: no divorce between married believers

³ *New International Commentary on the New Testament: First Epistle*, introductory comments to 1 Cor. 7:10-11.

- 2. Reality: divorce happens; it is not a moral failing
- v. Marriage to a new partner is proscribed
 - 1. Goes against the Jewish view of marriage as “one flesh” – general
 - 2. If it was the women who were refusing sex, and they were the ones seeking divorce because their husbands wanted sex, then it would make no sense for the women to marry a new partner – specific
 - 3. Note the recurrence of *agamos* – widow/widower – previously married
- vi. Reconciliation
 - 1. If fractured relationships cannot be restored within Christian community, what does it say about Christianity? – general
 - 2. Asceticism within marriage was already condemned, so let the married repent of their aberrant theologies and reconcile – specific
- vii. Oh, and husbands should not seek divorce either
- viii. The married state, where both partners are believers, is a good, spiritual condition
 - 1. Don’t seek to change it – other states are not better, just different
- ix. Concern is with self-indulgent basis for divorce; not divorce out of necessity
- b. Verses 12-16: mixed (believer/unbeliever) marriages; Paul’s informed opinions
 - i. Key is verse 14 where unbelieving partner and children are made holy through the marriage
 - ii. Another key is last phrase of verse 15, “God has called you to peace”
 - iii. We encounter two difficult ideas: 1) unbeliever and children made holy through the believer, and 2) you will save the unbelieving partner
- c. Pair A – verses 12-13
 - i. The believer’s preference is always to marriage; divorce is a last resort – remain as you are
 - ii. Unbeliever has last word in relationship status (priority of peace over marriage)
 - iii. If the context of asceticism is found here as well, some may be saying that mixed marriages contaminate the sanctity of marriage and the spirituality of the church
 - iv. Notice once again that Paul writes to both women and men as equals
- d. Pair B – verse 14 – Paul gives reason why mixed marriages should remain as is
 - i. Center of this set of verses on marriage and divorce
 - 1. Two Hebrew poetic devices used in v14a exhibiting Paul’s care here
 - a. Greek word order: Made holy – unbelieving – believing / Made holy – unbelieving – believing
 - b. Ring composition: Husband – wife – wife – husband
 - ii. Holiness, defilement, clean and unclean
 - 1. Purity laws generally held that the clean would become defiled when clean came into contact with the unclean (clean and holy, though not identical, are closely associated)
 - 2. There are a minority of OT texts that show holiness can also be transmitted to make the common holy, but again, purity laws generally dealt with the transmission of defilement
 - 3. Jesus’ actions countered OT ideas by revealing that the holy cannot be overcome by the unclean
 - iii. The problems Corinthian believers have with mixed marriages
 - 1. Since sexual relations causes two bodies to become one (c.f., 6:16), is this resulting body where one is an unbeliever, clean or unclean?

2. Since the unbelieving partner inevitably performs pagan practices (immorality), isn't having sexual relations the same as committing sexual immorality and didn't Paul command believers to flee from sexual immorality (c.f., 6:13, 18)?
- iv. Paul's response – Christ's holiness is more powerful than paganism
 1. The single body of marriage is made holy because of the believing partner
 2. The children of a holy marriage is also clean/holy
- v. What does Paul intend by "holy"?
 1. Orr/Walther thinks it means "salvation"⁴
 2. Gordon Fee in *NICNT* presents a different solution⁵
 - a. Key is Romans 11:16, "If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches"
 - i. Part of parable of Jews rejecting Jesus, while Gentiles grafted in as a result
 - b. "Holy" is not the same as "saved"
 - c. "Holy" does mean "set apart"
 - d. Although the Jews rejected Jesus, they are still "set apart"
 - e. A few believed (firstfruits) and their faith makes the entirety of Jews "holy" and in a special relationship with God (though not salvific)
 - f. Likewise, the believing spouse changes the dynamic through which God is able to work with the unbelieving spouse and the children of the marriage. They are "made holy" in this sense.

Through the believing partner, the marriage between a pagan and a Christian is withdrawn from the control of the powers of the world. In living together with the world, the "saints" are the stronger party. The decisive idea lies not in an ontological definition of the state of the non-Christian members of the family, but in the assertion that no alien power plays any part in the Christian's dealing with them.⁶

- e. Pair C – verses 15-16
 - i. Believers hold to a higher ideal than that of nonbelievers; therefore, the believing partner ought to always prefer remaining married
 - ii. However, the unbelieving partner is not bound by the Christian ideal; s/he may request divorce
 1. Important principle with wide-ranging applications outside of this specific example
 - iii. In this situation peace holds a higher priority over maintaining a marriage – believer should respect unbeliever's desire
 - iv. So far, Paul's statements are fairly clear, but...
 - v. "In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved [*bound*]"
 1. Some think this means remarriage is allowed to the believer for this specific case
 2. Fee sees the "binding" in regards to the ideal to maintain the marriage⁷

⁴ Bailey, discussing Orr/Walther, at location 2412.

⁵ *NICNT*, entry for 1 Cor. 7:14.

⁶ *Understanding the Bible Commentary: First Corinthians*, entry for 1 Cor. 7:14, quoting Conzelmann.

⁷ *NICNT*, entry for 1 Cor. 7:15.

- a. In this particular case the Christian partner is no longer bound to the ideal of remaining married
- b. Fee writes that nowhere in these passages is remarriage a concern of Paul; i.e., Paul simply does not address that issue

Our situation is usually made more complex because our concerns are often the precise opposite of theirs, which caused this to be written in the first place. They wanted to dissolve marriages; we want to know whether remarriage is permitted... Paul does not speak to the question of remarriage. If that is one's concern, then it must be wrestled with in the much larger context of Scripture; and the answer is not clear-cut. In many cases such marriages are clearly redemptive. Even if it is not the ideal situation, God still redeems our fallenness, whether it be individuals or broken marriages. On the other hand, there is nothing redemptive in remarriage that is simply an excuse for legalized lust.⁸

- vi. Finally, “You will save [sozo, keep]...”
 - 1. Majority view seems to be that believing partners should not seek a change in status (remain as you are) because mixed marriages may lead to the salvation of the as-yet-unbelieving family members
 - 2. Bailey suggests that Paul simply meant “keep the marriage” because only God can save a person⁹
 - a. The believing partner’s high view of marriage and his/her desire to maintain peace might be enough to keep/save the marriage

Table 2: Bailey, location 2441

1 Corinthians 7:17-24		Motifs
1	17 Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches. <i>[To each as the Lord assigned {merizo: distributed – spiritual gifts?}, and to each as God has called {kaleo} -- let him walk. This is my directive in all the churches.]¹⁰</i>	Follow Your calling
2	18 Was anyone at the time of his call [<i>kaleo</i>] already circumcised?	Jew
3	Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call [<i>kaleo</i>] uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision.	Don't seek Change in status
4	19 For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. <i>[For circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God.]</i>	Jew (is nothing) Greek (is nothing)

⁸ NICNT, entry for 1 Cor. 7:16.

⁹ Bailey, location 2435.

¹⁰ Bailey’s translations included where word order and translation makes a difference.

1 Corinthians 7:17-24		Motifs
5	20 Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. <i>[Every one in the calling {klesis} in/to which he was called {kaleo} should remain.]</i>	Remain in Your calling
6	21 Were you a bondservant when called [<i>kaleo</i>]? <i>[Were you called {while} a slave?]</i> Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.)	Called -- slave Gain freedom
7	22 For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman ¹¹ of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. <i>[For the person in the Lord called {kaleo} a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was called {kaleo} free is a slave of Christ.]</i>	Called slave Free in the Lord Called free Slave of Christ
8	23 You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants [<i>slaves</i>] of men.	Set free Stay free
9	24 So, brothers, in <i>whatever condition</i> each was called, there let him remain with God. <i>[Every one, in that which he was called {kaleo}, brethren, let him remain with God.]</i>	Remain in Your calling -- with God

5. Jew and Greek, slave and free: remain in your calling (7:17-24)
- Why does Paul suddenly introduce a topic of ethnicity and social class into a discussion dominated by marriage and sex?
 - Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"
 - Three areas of social contention – Paul has dealt with male/female, now for completeness' sake he includes Jew/Greek and slave/free
 - The overarching theme of "remain as you are" extends beyond male/female
 - Is Paul discussing socio-economic and ethnic *status* (be content with whatever lot life has dealt you)? Or is he discussing God's *calling* (don't seek a different assignment/calling)?
 - Both readings are possible and scholars are divided
 - It certainly is true that Christians can and ought to live Spirit-led lives regardless of situation
 - In the set of commentaries I've been using, *UBC* and *NICNT* fall into the "status" side, Bailey and *Reading the New Testament* read "calling"

¹¹ *Freedman* refers to someone who used to be a slave. A free man would be someone who was born free.

- ii. The Greek words are consistently “called” and “calling”
 - 1. Translations change some of them to (or insert) “condition” or “state”
- c. Issue of circumcision
 - i. First, the Corinthians weren’t terribly concerned about it – Paul includes this discussion for completeness’ sake and as further illustration outside of male/female/marriage that touches on status as it doesn’t relate to spirituality
 - ii. For Jews, circumcision was a serious issue – it was *the* identifying mark of whether or not one “belonged” to the right spiritual group (i.e., covenant). If anything should qualify as separating the spiritual haves from the have-nots, it should be circumcision.
 - iii. Paul brings in circumcision as *the* prime example of status that doesn’t matter
 - iv. What matters? Keeping the commandments of God. But what is it?
 - 1. Chapter 13: love
 - 2. This chapter: following God’s assignment and calling that is unique to each person; i.e., be true to yourself as God has called and gifted you
- d. Is Paul really saying he isn’t really concerned about slavery? Is Paul really only concerned with just the spiritual condition of each person?
 - i. Scholars are divided on interpretation
 - ii. Some think Paul isn’t really concerned because of his eschatological views (i.e., the end of the current order is near, so why fight for social change?); or because the history of slave rebellion has been brutal, bloody, and unsuccessful (why encourage actions doomed to failure?)
 - iii. We see slavery through Western, modernist eyes. Perhaps the ancients didn’t consider slavery to be the evil that we do today. Perhaps Paul was concerned with maintaining societal order (as is suggested by some of the earlier sections of the First Epistle). Or perhaps Paul doesn’t have in mind the social context of slavery at all.¹²

This imagery of course, must be understood in light of Greco- Roman slavery, not that of recent American history. Slavery was in fact the bottom rung on the social order, but for the most part it provided generally well for up to one- third of the population in a city like Corinth or Rome. The slave had considerable freedom and very often experienced mutual benefit along with the master. The owner received the benefit of the slave’s services; and the slave had steady “employment,” including having all his or her basic needs met—indeed, for many to be a slave was preferable to being a freedman, whose securities were often tenuous at best. But the one thing that marked the slave was that in the final analysis, he did not belong to himself but to another. That is Paul’s point with this imagery.”¹³

- iv. Ken Bailey suggests a different view¹⁴

¹² See Gordon Fee, *NICNT*, endnote 11 in “2. The Guiding Principle—Stay as One Was When Called (7:17-24)”

¹³ *NICNT*, entry for 1 Cor. 7:22.

¹⁴ Bailey, location 2544.

1. There was very little Paul could do publicly against slavery
2. It is one thing to speak privately, among believers, against slavery
3. It can be likened to Christians who lived under Stalinist Russia – who had to be very careful about what they said in public and wrote down that could be used against them – it is not about cowardice, but prudence

In the first century, preaching in the catacombs by the light of an oil lamp was one thing. There they could speak freely. Circulating a *written document* was something else; into whose hands might it fall...? Paul could not, *in writing*, attack the institution of slavery and survive... In this critical passage Paul pushes the envelope as far as he can. In effect he says:

If you are caught in slavery, try to get free. If you are free—do not become a slave. Yet, if you are caught in this (horrible) institution you can yet find and carry out an *assignment*. You can exercise your *gifts* and respond to your *call*. If you are a slave do not look wistfully at me with my freedom and the privileges of Roman citizenship and say, “Of course the Lord can use *him*. But I am a slave—I *can do nothing!*” Don’t forget *your calling*, and *never imagine that there is no calling for you because you are a slave.*¹⁵

- e. What is Paul telling the Corinthians?
 - i. Status does not affect your ability to live as a Christian, which is to carry out God’s assignment according to his call and gifting to you
 - ii. Don’t seek a change in status as a means of improving spiritual condition
 - iii. Don’t use status (lack of privilege) as an excuse to not carry out God’s assignment
 - iv. (If you are given the opportunity to improve your lot, do so)
 - v. Live your calling, not someone else’s...
 - vi. And... Don’t force your calling onto someone else
6. Summary thoughts
 - a. Single vs. married is irrelevant to one’s call and gifting (7:1-9)
 - b. Christians can live out their calling, even if their partner is not a believer (7:10-16)
 - c. Religious status is irrelevant to God’s call (7:17-20)
 - d. Socio-economic status is irrelevant to God’s call (7:20-24)
 - e. What matters is faithfulness to remaining in God by being true to God’s call for you, and only you (7:24)

¹⁵ Bailey, location 2548.