

First Epistle to the Corinthians

14 – Essay Two: Sex –In Harmony with the Gospel (2.4) – Part 3

1 Corinthians 7:25-40

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
 - g. Paul writes that Christ's holiness cannot be overcome by paganism
 - i. When one partner becomes a Christian, the marriage is sanctified, too
 - h. Paul writes that all have an assignment from God and gifted to fulfill it
 - i. Socio-economic, religious, gender differences are irrelevant to God's calling
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: Bailey, location 2570

1 Corinthians 7:25-31		Motifs
1	25 Now concerning the betrothed [<i>virgins, parthenoi</i>], I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.	The virgins Introduction
2-A	26 I think that in view of the present [<i>impending?</i>] distress it is good for a person to remain as he is.	Trouble is threatening
3-B	27 Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. 28 But if you do marry, you have not sinned, [<i>does not sin</i>] and if a betrothed woman [<i>girl, virgin</i>] marries, she has not sinned. [<i>does not sin</i>]	Remain as you are
4-A	Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that.	Trouble is threatening
5-C	29 This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on,	Time is short
6-D	let those who have wives live as though they had none, 30 and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, 31 and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it.	Family Social occasions Economic activity All transient
7-C	For the present form of this world is passing away.	Form of this world passing away

4. The Unmarried and the impending distress (7:25-31)

- a. Introduction followed by A-B-A and C-D-C
 - i. This passage reads perfectly coherently without the B and D sections
 - ii. A: Things are tough, C: Time is short
 - iii. B and D – sets of poetic parallelisms providing examples of (in Paul's opinion) attitudes Christians ought to hold
 1. B: Marriage, D: Various interactions with the family and the world
 - iv. This much seems fairly clear
- b. 7:25-40 is said to be the most difficult to figure out in all of 1 Corinthians³
 - i. All interpretation is tentative, with hesitations and caveats
 - ii. Are there multiple topics within this 7:25-40, or one (virgins/betrothed)?
 - iii. What is meant by *virgins*? Never married women, or ones currently betrothed?
 - iv. Does the preceding context of asceticism continue through this section?
 1. How can Paul affirm celibacy without affirming asceticism?

³ Following issues are raised in the *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle* under "3. About the 'Virgins' (7:25-40)"

- v. “Remain as you are” makes sense for those who are single or already married, but what about the betrothed?
 - vi. Paul’s language is very tentative, almost unsure of himself, unlike every other Pauline writing
- c. Introduction – v.25
- i. Three ways to interpret “virgins”
 1. Up to the 20th century, nearly all interpreters have assumed this referred to virgin daughters whose giving in marriage (by her father) was under question. Perhaps this daughter was beyond the usual marrying age and was acting “dishonorably” in view of the father.
 2. Introduced in modern times, a second view took the case under question to be that of “spiritual marriage” where men and women were living together, but without sexual relations. Abstinence turned out to be difficult so questions were raised in regards to “virgins” and the advisability of consummation.
 3. As adopted by the ESV translation and nearly all modern (i.e., not KJV or derivative) translations, “virgins” is understood to mean “betrothed.” By the time Paul writes, men generally had control over who they married (rather than having to ask the woman’s father).
 - ii. What Paul writes is his opinion
 1. But it is trustworthy – Paul’s best advice on a complex situation
 2. Basis? The Lord’s mercy
 - a. Not Paul’s status as apostle or the founder of the Corinthian church
 - b. Not his spiritual authority in Christ
 - c. Not Christ’s commands or his examples
 3. Mercy: what seems to be in the best interests of the Christians
- d. Troubles – v.26-28
- i. Is Paul writing with some kind of [unknown] distress already happening in Corinth, or does he have in mind the general time of trouble [impending] for all Christians?
 1. The word “present crisis” connotes “necessity” indicating Paul is probably dealing with something that is very specific to the Corinthians
 - ii. Is Paul’s reluctance toward marriage because of the Second Coming, or because of the specific distress in Corinth, or simply that marriage introduces its own set of problems?
 - iii. Paul appears to be encouraging those who are pledged to be married (betrothed women as well as their male partners) to become married
 - iv. On the other hand, if they are not already pledged, he suggests that they don’t seek marriage
 - v. But marriage or singleness is *not* a make-or-break condition. Neither is spiritually wrong. There is no theology that says one must be married or one must remain single. It is a matter of gifting. (But consider present conditions before you decide.)
 - vi. Paul gives a different reason (present distress) in favor of celibacy than the one given by the Corinthians (asceticism)

Marriage or singleness per se lie totally outside the category of “commandments” to be obeyed or “sin” if one indulges... Unfortunately, our reading of the text [as marriage is perfectly okay] cuts in two ways. Our culture, especially Christian subculture, tends to think of marriage as the norm in such a way that singles are second-class citizens.

For such people this text is merely “Paul’s opinion,” and is seldom listened to at all. That, too misses Paul’s point. Some are called to singleness still; they need to be able to live in the Christian community both without suspicions and with full acceptance and affirmation.⁴

- e. Time is short – v.29-31
 - i. Traditional interpretations of this entire section (7:25-40, but also entirety of ch.7)
 - 1. Because the return of Christ is so near, to marry adds troubles that will soon go away, so why marry?
 - 2. The marrieds can’t devote as much of their time and energies to spiritual matters because they are distracted with pleasing one another, so singleness and celibacy is the better option
 - ii. In v.29-31 Paul moves from the narrow focus on marriage and its appropriateness to the broader concern of how Christians are to relate to the world
 - 1. First three poetic pairs deal with family and social relationships
 - 2. Last two pairs deal with civic dealings
 - iii. Crux of the matter – the interpretation of “time is short”
 - 1. Time as literal quantity, or time as historical epochs?
 - 2. For Paul, the salvation event of the cross initiated the final epoch of the world’s history
 - 3. Believers straddle the epochs of the end-time and the age-to-come
 - 4. Paul is *not* saying the Corinthians have only the present generation before the Second Coming
 - 5. Rather he is saying that believers are already living in the kingdom
 - 6. So all relationships must be entered into in the light of this new age
 - 7. The reasons for marriage, for mourning, for celebrations, for purchasing things, and for entering into dealings with entities of the world must now come from the understanding that believers are in the kingdom
 - 8. These things can and ought to continue (because believers are still in the world, too), but the reasons should go beyond the limited perspective of the world’s
 - iv. The present form of this world is *in the process of* passing away
 - 1. Don’t let the priorities of the world dictate who you try to become
 - 2. Don’t let the stuff of the world control your actions and beliefs

In view of the “time” and the fact that the “form” of this present world is passing away, [Paul] calls for a radically new understanding of their *relationship to the world*.⁵

Table 2: Bailey, location 2601

1 Corinthians 7:32-35		Motifs
1	32 I want you to be free from anxieties.	Intro - free from anxieties
2-A	The unmarried [<i>de-married, agamos</i>] man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord.	Demarried man Free for the Lord

⁴ NICNT, 1 Cor. 7:28

⁵ NICNT, “3.b. Paul’s reasons for singleness”, 1 Cor. 7:29-35

3-B	33 But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, 34 and his interests are divided.	Married man Busy with wife
4-A	And the unmarried [<i>de-married, agamos</i>] or betrothed [<i>virgin, parthenos</i>] woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit.	Demarried woman Free for the Lord
5-B	But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband.	Married woman Busy with husband
6	35 I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.	Conclusion Securing undivided loyalty

5. Marriage and anxieties (7:32-35)

- a. Paul's apparent distaste of marriage continues
 - i. Surface reading gives a reason: marriage distracts from devotion to God
 - ii. But there is a problem:
 1. "I want you to be free from *anxieties*" is followed by "The unmarried ___ is *anxious* about the things of the Lord" and "The married ___ is *anxious* about worldly things"
 2. The words "anxieties" and "anxious" *appear* to be used in different ways
 3. Paul wishes no anxieties, but then unmarrieds are said to be anxious for the Lord. Huh?
 4. Interpretations of key words ought to remain consistent, when used so closely together and in such obvious poetic parallelisms
- b. Three interpretation options for "anxious"
 - i. First use is positive, the second negative
 1. "Anxious for things of the Lord" is good; "anxious about worldly things" is bad
 2. Therefore, married life is bad
 - ii. Both uses are negative
 1. "Anxious for things of the Lord" is speaking to Corinthian asceticism
 2. "Anxious for worldly things" is the traditional interpretation
 3. It is consistent but difficult to reconcile how being "anxious for Lord" (which is bad in this case) leads "to please the Lord"
 - iii. Both uses are positive
 1. The words translated as anxieties and anxious can be translated to mean "care for" in a positive sense
 2. The unmarried cares for things of the Lord and how to please him
 3. The married cares for things of the world and how to please the spouse
 4. Both are good and legitimate concerns
 5. This option fits best with the preceding section about living in the world but having the attitude of one living in God's kingdom
 6. The married are divided, but this does not connote a bad thing: the married care for both things of the Lord and things of the world
 7. None of this has to cause anxieties

- 8. The unmarried with full devotion obviously has more opportunities to serve the Lord, but that does not make that existence better than the married who have to divide their energies
- c. Paul repeats what he said to the men, now to the women, but with a few differences
 - i. “How to please the Lord” → “how to be holy in body and spirit”
 - 1. Negative use of “anxious” → Paul citing Corinthians asceticism and how the women were trying to by holy through celibacy
 - 2. Positive use of “anxious” → to be whole as a single body (not separate body and spirit)
 - ii. “And his interests are divided” → not present
 - 1. Don’t know why Paul didn’t balance the text
- d. Finally, Paul frames his advice as tentative
 - i. He is certain what is best for him, and he recommends it for others, but he is not dogmatic on this point
 - ii. He is speaking to their best interests, but strictly from his perspective

This passage in particular, instead of being viewed as to our advantage, has often been burdensome for the young. But that is probably less Paul’s fault than or own... The irony of our present situation is that Paul insisted that his own preference, including his reasons for it, were not to be taken as a noose around anyone’s neck. Yet we have often allowed that very thing to happen. Roman Catholicism has insisted on celibacy for its clergy even though not all are gifted to be so; on the other hand, many Protestant groups will not ordain the single because marriage is the norm, and the single are not quite trusted.⁶

Table 3: Bailey, location 2616

1 Corinthians 7:36-38	
1	36 If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed [<i>virgin</i>], if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry —it is no sin.
2	37 But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed [<i>virgin</i>], he will do well.
3	38 So then he who marries [<i>gives in marriage?</i>] his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage [<i>giving in marriage?</i>] will do even better.

6. A man and “his virgin” (7:36-38)

These verses are remarkably obscure...⁷
 [Writing about 1 Cor 7:36-38] As T. W. Manson somewhere said about the parable of the unjust steward (Lk 16:1-8), “The literature is voluminous and unrewarding.”⁸

⁶ NICNT, 1 Cor. 7:35

⁷ *Understanding the Bible Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, 1 Cor. 7:36-38

⁸ Bailey, location 2621

Vv. 36-38 represent a notorious crux...⁹

- a. The most puzzling section of this puzzling chapter
 - i. A young man and fiancée, or...
 - ii. A father and his virgin daughter, or...
 - iii. Some kind of a “spiritual marriage”, or...
 - iv. A levirate marriage
- b. Seems to be saying: Marriage is fine and so is remaining single (and this is what I, Paul, prefer), but let your gifting and circumstances determine what you choose.
- c. What do you think about these verses?

So at the end Paul has agreed, and disagreed, with the Corinthians in their letter. They prefer celibacy for “spiritual” reasons; he prefers it for pastoral and eschatological ones. But quite in contrast to them, he also affirms marriage; indeed, he does so strongly...¹⁰

Table 4: Bailey, location 2623

1 Corinthians 7:39-40a	
1	39 A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives.
2	But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.
3	40a Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is.

7. In case of death (7:39-40)
 - a. Reviewing earlier material in chapter 7 (specifically v10-11 and also v12-16)
 - b. This is not a command, but a pastoral advice: marry “in the Lord”, i.e., a believer
 - i. Part of the “kingdom priorities” thinking that believers ought to have
 - c. Paul is really happy with his single/celibate condition and he recommends it heartily to anyone who will listen (or even if they don’t, he’ll tell them anyway)
 - i. No different than someone who is really happy with {swimming as exercise, going vegan, the company they work for, etc.} who is out to convince everyone else that they should try it, too
 - ii. Paul does not use dogmatic language, however

1 Corinthians 7:40b

And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

8. Closing of Essay Two
 - a. Paul cannot write “imitate me” as he did in the first essay
 - i. (Even though he might want to...)
 - b. What does Paul mean?

⁹ NICNT, “3.c. But marriage is no sin”

¹⁰ NICNT, 1 Cor. 7:38

- i. Option one: the Corinthians claimed to have the Spirit so Paul is saying, “You say you have the Spirit, well, I think I do too.”
- ii. Option two: Paul is saying, “Yes, I’ve written on many things that I don’t have a direct word from the Lord, but I think I am speaking with the help of the Spirit.”

Does not Scripture say in fact that singleness is *better* than marriage? To which the answer is No. First of all, this reflects Paul’s own opinion (vv. 25 and 40), and he is concerned throughout that it not be taken as “Scripture,” that is, as some form of commandment or principle. It is an *ad hoc* answer in light of some “present distress.” But more importantly, vv. 36-38 are *not* a judgment on marriage or singleness per se at all, but on whether or not engaged couples in that setting should get married. Paul thinks it better for them if they do not; but he also makes it clear that marriage is a perfectly valid option. It has nothing to do with good and evil, or even with better or worse, but with good and better in the light of that situation. It is perhaps noteworthy that the entire discussion is carried on quite apart from one of the major considerations in our culture—love for one another. One can only guess what Paul might have said in a different setting.¹¹

9. Summary

- a. Essay Two is about spiritual arrogance and its effects on a believing community
 - i. Sexual immorality is a symptom, not the main issue
 - ii. The precise definition of sexual immorality is, to a great degree, culture-bound
- b. Arrogance leads to breaking relationships; it is against love
 - i. Arrogance abuses others
 - ii. Arrogance twists good things to serve its own interests
 - 1. E.g., ideas about marriage, celibacy, and sex
- c. No one is above another; no one is better than another; no one is more special than another
 - i. All have assignments from God; all are called by God; all are gifted by God for the purpose of fulfilling their assignment and calling
 - ii. Gender, religious status, ethnicity, socio-economic status – none are characteristics that are considered relevant to God’s calling and gifting

¹¹ NICNT, 1 Cor. 7:40