

PAUL:
ANTI- MARRIAGE ?
ANTI- SEX ?
ASCETIC ?

A DIALOGUE WITH 1 CORINTHIANS 7:1-40

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1. The Scope of the Study

This study will focus on an examination of the apostle Paul's attitude to sex, marriage, and celibacy in 1 Corinthians 7.¹ Are we to view Paul as ascetic? Is Paul against marriage (or sexual relations within it) per se? Does this chapter affirm that the celibate life is morally or spiritually superior to the married life? Does Paul actually argue that it is evil for a man to have sex with a woman or for that matter to even touch one? Many interpreters from the patristic era to the modern would respond in the affirmative regarding such questions. In their opinion, Paul was ascetic, held the celibate life to be a higher, more spiritual form of existence than the married, and thought sex was evil. The only reason to get married, if at all, was to avoid sexual immoralities.

Tertullian, the Father of Latin theology,² writing around the year 200, sees Paul implying that it was evil for a man to have contact with a woman.³ Ambrose argues that all Christians, especially the clergy, should keep themselves untainted by sex.⁴ Jerome, born sometime in the 340's, argues for a similar view.⁵

¹ There is considerable debate concerning whether or not this chapter (among others), belongs to what we have come to know as 1 Corinthians. We agree with those scholars who maintain the integrity of the letter. The high degree of subjectivity manifesting itself in the variety of reconstruction's offered for the present form of the letter are indeed a telling mark against the multi- letter hypotheses. C. K. Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, (BNTC; London, 1968), 11-17, concludes, 'As long, however, as it seems that the epistle as it stands makes reasonably good sense, historically and theologically, the balance of probability will remain with the view that we have it substantially as it left the author's hands.'

² T. Lane, The Lion Book of Christian Thought, (Herts, 1984) 17-20.

³ Tertullian, On Monogamy 3. In response to 1 Cor. 7:1b, 'It follows that it is evil to have contact with a woman; for nothing is contrary to good except evil.'

⁴ Ambrose, Duties of the Clergy 1, 184, 258.

As we move into the more contemporary era it is evident that there continue to be many interpreters who maintain comparable views to those of the early church. Paul is often accused of having a negative, even misguided view of marriage and sex.

J. Weiss, for example, argues that Paul views sexual intercourse as leading a man away from God.⁶ Davies, speaks of Paul giving his, 'grudging approval of marriage' and of his perspective that 'sex is in itself an evil and undesirable thing.'⁷ Bornkamm argues that one cannot find anything positive in this chapter concerning love or marriage.⁸ Marshall regards Paul's position to be affirming complete sexual abstinence.⁹ Grant sees Paul's attitude toward sex as distasteful and pejorative.¹⁰

⁵ Jerome, Against Jovinian 1.7. 'If "it is good for a man not to touch a woman" it is bad for him to touch one: for there is no opposite to goodness but badness.... Notice the apostle's prudence. He did not say, "It is good for a man not to have a wife" but "It is good for a man not to touch a woman" - as though there were danger even in the touch.... He who touches fire is instantly burned.... Joseph, because the Egyptian woman wished to touch him, fled from her hands, and, as if he had been bitten by a mad dog and feared the spreading poison, threw away the cloak which she had touched.'

⁶ J. Weiss, Earliest Christianity, (New York, 1937), 582. 'Paul actually considers sexual intercourse as something which draws man from God and is degrading to him.'

⁷ R. E. Davies, Studies in 1 Corinthians, (London, 1962), 53, 58.

⁸ G. Bornkamm, Paul, (London, 1971), 207-208.

⁹ L. H. Marshall, The Challenge of NT Ethics, (New York, 1947), 336.

¹⁰ M. Grant, Saint Paul, (London, 1976), 25. Paul's 'unmistakably pejorative attitude towards sex does raise insistent questions about his own tastes and practices. Evidently he felt a deep distaste for sex.'

Conzelmann and Senft argue that Paul only offers marriage as an option in order to avoid sexual immoralities.¹¹

These interpretations of Paul in 1 Cor. 7, in our opinion, are not justified. We share essentially the same view of this chapter as Fee, Witherington, and other commentators, who argue that Paul is not an anti-sex, anti-marriage, ascetic.¹² It is our contention that such a view can be strengthened and complemented through an examination of the situational context, the discourse context,¹³ and the structure of 1 Corinthians 7.

2. Situational Context

It is important to develop a perspective of the situational context in order to have a better understanding of how Paul is going to deal with the issues of sex, marriage, and celibacy in chapter 7.

At the outset of our discussion we will briefly address B. W. Winter's suggestion that the situational context for our chapter is a famine and that the Corinthian questions (7:1, 25) emanate from this specific concern.¹⁴ We are not, in principle, against the excellent evidence that Winter has established regarding the

¹¹ H. Conzelmann, 1 Corinthians (Hermeneia; Philadelphia, 1975), 116; C. Senft, La Première Épître de Saint Paul aux Corinthiens (CNT 2/VII; Neuchâtel, 1979), 88.

¹² G. D. Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, (NICNT; Grand Rapids, 1987), 266-356; B. Witherington III, Women in the Earliest Churches, (Cambridge, 1988), 40-42.

¹³ The context is the text which immediately precedes and follows, in our case, chapter 7. V. Poythress, 'Analysing a Biblical Text,' SJT 32 (1979), 113-137; P. Cotterell and M. Turner, Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation, (London, 1989), 16.

¹⁴ B. W. Winter, 'Secular and Christian Responses to Corinthian Famines' TynB 40 (1989), 86-106.

likelihood of a famine in Corinth at this time, but only intend to disagree with his conclusions in regards to 1 Corinthians 7.

Winter proposes that the Corinthian questions in 7:1, 25 are centered on whether or not, in light of the famine, they should continue to have children or consummate marriages.¹⁵ This conclusion, in our opinion, over-reads the present 'distress' () in 7:26 and the sociological context, at the risk of under-reading the epistle itself.

We will argue, that while there may have indeed been a famine in Corinth, it is unlikely to be the genesis of the Corinthian questions in chapter 7. We propose, working from the letter itself, another reconstruction.

First, Paul writes to a church divided. There were factions, (1:10-12; 3:4-5) perhaps, the most serious of all between Paul and the community.¹⁶ Some in the

¹⁵ Ibid. 93-94. 'The discussion in 1 Corinthians 7:1ff. on how to deal with the present . arose out of two specific questions which the Corinthian church asked Paul concerning marriage. They sought advice as to whether they should have further children. Abstention from sexual intercourse would have been the only acceptable means of birth control for Christians (7:1). They also asked whether a betrothed couple whose relationship was officially a binding one should proceed to consummate the marriage (7:25).' On a closer reading of the epistle situationally, cotextually and structurally, we will argue that Winter's hypothesis is unlikely. The perspective on the latter question concerning whether or not to consummate marriages is correct, but not for the reason Winter assumes. The moral-spiritual validity of marriage itself is in question. Is it a sin to marry (28)? The former question in 7:1 does not concern whether or not to continue to have children, but whether sex for the sake of sex is legitimate in the context of marriage. The issue is sex, as verses 2-5 make clear, not whether to get married or have children. See our discussion on the structure of the chapter below.

¹⁶ Fee, First Epistle, 6 ; J. C. Hurd, The Origin of 1 Corinthians, (Macon, 1983), 111.

community may have suspected that Paul was not wise or spiritual (2:6-16; 7:40), and as such had no authority over them. This crisis of apostolic authority¹⁷ and the divisions it produced, mixed with the variety of religious and cultural backgrounds of the members of the community resulted in a good deal of confusion concerning the meaning of being Christian.

This is evident in Paul's treatment of several problems: Sexual immorality, some form of incest (5:1-13), lawsuits among believers (6:1-11), sexual immorality, sex, marriage, and celibacy (6:12-7:40), food sacrificed to idols (8-10), the misunderstanding over the Lord's supper (11:17-34), spiritual gifts and their function in the gathered assembly (12-14) and finally and most seriously, the denial of the resurrection of the body (15). This series of problems are likely to be the outgrowth of a larger problem in the situational context to which we now turn.

Second, Paul writes to a divided, splintered, but fiercely independent community steeped in what could be described¹⁸ as an over-realized eschatology.¹⁹

¹⁷ J. Murphy - O'Connor, 1 Corinthians, (NTM 10; Collegeville, 1979), xii, 'There was a tendency to question Paul's authority, and to inaugurate theological and ethical projects that gave an aberrant twist to what he had preached.'

¹⁸ E. Käsemann, New Testament Questions of Today, (London, 1969), 125-126; Barrett, First Epistle, 109.

¹⁹ The possible religio-philosophical influences that produced this must not be over-looked. J. J. Gunther, in 'St. Paul's Opponents and Their Background: A Study of Apocalyptic and Sectarian Teachings', (NovTSup 35, Leiden 1973), 1, has alluded to no less than thirteen different religious influences including Judaism, Alexandrian pneumatism (Jewish), ascetic Gnosticism, and libertine Gnosticism at Corinth. ; D. R. Macdonald in There is No Male and Female: The Fate of the Dominical Saying in Paul and Gnosticism, (Philadelphia, 1987), 65-70 argues, 'Something of a consensus has recently emerged concerning the religious mentality that birthed Corinthian theology on the one hand and the descendants of that theology on the other. The

This imbalance or distortion in the area of eschatology can be defined as a spiritual enthusiasm which devoured the delicate balance of the Pauline 'already / not yet.' In exchange for the latter, the Corinthians opted for an exclusive 'already' and denied the relevance of the 'not yet.' Paul unambiguously sets things in the context of a future

mother was Hellenistic Judaism (in our opinion the Judaism part is questionable); the descendants, Christian Gnosticism.'; R. A. Horsley in Paul and the Pneumatikoi: First Corinthians Investigated in Terms of the Conflict between Two Different Religious Mentalities, (Boston, 1970), has shown a number of parallels between Philo and the theology Paul battles with at Corinth, but says too much with his complete identification of the Corinthians as Philo-mystics.; W. Schmithals in Gnosticism in Corinth, (Nashville, 1971), has been keen to point out the parallels between later Christian Gnosticism and aspects of Corinthian theology, but in our opinion goes too far in stating that the Corinthians were Gnostics. This critique is supported by R. McL. Wilson in 'How Gnostic Were the Corinthians,' NTS 19 (1972), 65-74, with his more cautious and nuanced approach. He draws the careful distinction between gnosis, a popular religious mentality, and Gnosticism which refers to the classical Gnostic system of the second century. He argues that the theology in Corinth is more the former than the latter. '1 Corinthians shows "into how congenial a soil the seeds of Gnosticism were about to fall." We may suspect today that some of the seeds had already been sown, that some of them had even begun to germinate. What is certain is that in the New Testament period the field is still far from being ripe for the harvest. Gnosis in the broader sense is not yet Gnosticism, and to interpret New Testament texts which may reflect Gnosis in terms of later Gnosticism is to run the risk of distorting the whole picture.'; With the Corinthian emphasis on . . . (1-2) and . . . (8) and their de-emphasis of the body (6:12-20; 15) it seems fair to say with Murphy - O'Connor, x and Fee, 10-15 that they were seeking to synthesize the gospel Paul had preached with a Hellenistic philosophical dualism which in turn produced an over-realized eschatology influencing their perspective concerning their spirituality and what it means to be pneumatikos. See Paul's trenchant criticism of their supposed spirituality (3:1-3).

eschatological perspective and rejects the Corinthian one dimensionalism (1:4-9; 3:1-15; 4:5, 8; 6:12; 7:29-31).

Ellis argues against this situational reconstruction declaring that it is centered on primarily one verse (4:8).²⁰ Thiselton, however, sees this problem as the thread that ties the whole epistle together.²¹ This may be correct, if it is seen, as we would argue and Thiselton affirms, to be the umbrella under which the assorted matrix of problems Paul addresses find their place. Nock describes the situation as one in which the Corinthians thought too highly of themselves and their new found spirituality. They thought they had arrived and therefore could do as they pleased.²² Lincoln concurs with this point of view. He argues that many in Corinth believed that the kingdom had already fully arrived and that they were already living a heavenly

²⁰ E. E. Ellis, 'Christ Crucified' in R. Banks (ed.) Reconciliation and Hope. New Testament Essays in Atonement and Eschatology Presented to L. Morris, (Exeter, 1974), 73-74.

²¹ A. C. Thiselton, 'Realized Eschatology at Corinth,' NTS 24 (1977/8), 510-26. 'I suggest that far from relating only to one particular passage (see Ellis), the eschatological approach pinpoints a single common factor which helps explain an otherwise utterly diverse array of apparently independent problems at Corinth. I am not suggesting that an over-realized eschatology provides a *necessary* cause for each individual problem, but that it does provide a *sufficient* cause. As an explanation for the whole series of problems in 1 Corinthians, therefore, the argument is strictly cumulative.'; (*Italics his*) See also 1:7, 3: 8-13, 4:5.

²² A. N. Nock, St. Paul, (London, 1938), 174. 'Many of the converts, convinced that they were on a new plane of life, felt that they could do anything: they were kings (4:8), they were in the Spirit, they were dead to the flesh and emancipated - so that their physical conduct might seem to them a matter of indifference; they were altogether superior to the unchanged men around them.'

existence (15).²³ Paul attempts to respond to this attitude in various ways. He emphasizes his own suffering as an apostle (4:9ff.), speaks of the race not yet completed (9:24ff.), and that the perfect is still future (13:8-10).²⁴

This second point, in our opinion, is especially important for our understanding of 7:1-40. We will have cause to return to it in the course of our study. The situational context out of which the Corinthian questions arise, as developed from the epistle, is more likely to be a crisis of authority and an over-realized eschatology, than a famine. When the particular problems of marriage, sex, and celibacy are viewed in this light and in the wider context of the letter, we gain a better perception of the macro problem and its micro manifestations in Corinth.

3. The Cotext of 1 Corinthians 7

We will now briefly analyze the discourse cotext of 1 Cor. 7. Our efforts will focus primarily on the preceding chapters (5-6), but we will also refer to the chapters that follow. The main purpose in examining the cotext is to show the articulation of Paul's thought, as he comes to respond, in chapter 7, to the Corinthian letter. In addition to this, we will aim to offer, from the cotext, further support for the argument that the situational context relates to the general problem of an over-realized eschatology.

²³ A. T. Lincoln, Paradise Now and Not Yet, (SNTSMS 43, Cambridge, 1981), 33. 'Their life in the Spirit with its abundance of charismatic gifts seemed to them proof that they were already enjoying the eschatological blessings of freedom and fullness associated with the consummation.'

²⁴ Ibid., 33. 'The Corinthians, however, interpreted everything from their own perspective. The fact that their bodies had not changed simply showed that the body had no significant part to play in the life of God's kingdom. Such matters as the eating of meat sacrificed to idols (chs. 8 - 10) and sexual activity (chs. 5 - 7) therefore had no integral relationship to the kingdom.'

In chapter 5 Paul continues his argument from the previous section (4:14-21), but now applies it to a new topic. The continuity is expressed in the 'some have become arrogant' (4:18-19), and the attitude of the church 'you are proud' (5:2), as well as the mention of 'power' (4:19-20), and the 'power of our Lord Jesus' (5:4).²⁵ The new topic addressed is the specific case of some form of incest in the community.

In 5:1-8, Paul is attempting to deal not only with this problem, but also with the Corinthians' attitude to a type of _____ which does not even occur among the pagans. In 5:9-11, we have clear evidence of Paul's previous letter. He had written that the Corinthians were not to associate with immoral people. This had been either unintentionally misunderstood or deliberately misinterpreted.²⁶ It appears the message Paul wanted to communicate was that the Christian community should not associate with anyone who called themselves part of it, but yet refused to live in accordance with its teachings. In 5:12-13, he concludes the chapter with two rhetorical questions and an exhortation. God will judge those outside, but the Corinthians are to judge the behavior of those inside.

This leads Paul, first of all in chapter 6, to deal with a situation where the Corinthians were trying to settle internal disputes on the basis of outside judgments. In 6:1-11, he again poses a number of rhetorical questions seeking to point out the folly of their knowledge in practicing such activity.²⁷

²⁵ For the continuity of chapters 4 and 5. Fee, First Epistle, 194-195; Hurd, Origin 89.

²⁶ For a full discussion of various possibilities see Hurd, Origin, 149-154.

²⁷ Fee, First Epistle, 228.

Paul is shocked that the Corinthians find themselves in the present situation.²⁸ His argument vacillates between rhetorical questioning, sarcasm, shame and threat. He attempts to get those involved in lawsuits (and by way of them the whole community) to recognize the significance of their being saints. This means they should not turn to the outside for judgments.²⁹ Contrary to their own haughty view of themselves, the very fact that they are doing this means they are already defeated. Those engaged in such activities are in danger of losing their inheritance.

This danger is clearly communicated through the rhetorical question in verse 9a: 'Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God?' Verses 9b and 10 serve a double function. First, there is an expansion of the narrower injustice of the previous verses (see vs. 8 especially: 'Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and this to your brothers') making way for the more specific discussion of _____ in the next section of 6:12-20.³⁰ Second, the warning implied in the rhetorical question of verse 9a is affirmed at the end of verse 10. None of those mentioned in the list of 9b and 10, 'will inherit the kingdom of God.' The argument concludes with an affirmation in verse 11 of who the Corinthians really

²⁸ This is clear from his use of 'do you not know' _____ . _____ . 'three times in this section.

²⁹ Barrett, First Epistle, 135.

³⁰ A. Robertson and A. Plummer, The First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians (ICC Second edition, Edinburgh, 1914), 117. 'The Corinthians have shown themselves _____ in the narrower sense of 'unjust,' by their conduct to one another (_____ , v. 8). They need, however, to be reminded that _____ in any sense excludes a man from the heritage of God's Kingdom. The Apostle goes on to specify several forms of _____ which they ought to have abandoned, and finally returns to the subject of _____ .'.

are,³¹ with the implied appeal, that if this is the case, they should cease their present activity and listen to the apostle.

The broadening of the horizon of their present activities in 6:9-10 now facilitates Paul's entry into a discussion, in 6:12-20, of the problem of . in the wider context of the whole community. The case here is also a specific one, (some of the Corinthians are actively going to prostitutes)³² but the problem is surely more widespread than the individual case of in 5:1-13.

Paul argues that not everything is permissible, and that he will not be mastered by anything, in other words, one is not free to do exactly as they please in all circumstances.³³ He qualifies the Corinthians'³⁴ 'Everything is permissible' (6:12a)

³¹ 'And this is what some of you were (see vs. 9-10), but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified' in the name of Christ and by the Spirit.

³² For two different perspectives here see Hurd, Origin, 86, 'in this passage he (Paul) does not refer to any specific action of the Corinthians.'; and Fee, 250, fn 11, First Epistle, 'But the combination of their (the Corinthians') arguments in vv. 12-13 with the explicit mention of intercourse with prostitutes in vv. 15-16 is as specific as anything that has preceded.' (parenthesis mine) We agree with Fee, contra Hurd, who himself allows that, 'in preceding sections he (Paul) had been referring to a number of abuses in the Corinthian church which he desired to correct.' 86. (parenthesis mine) If Hurd is correct, why the sudden change here? See also R. Scroggs, The New Testament and Homosexuality, (Philadelphia, 1983), 103.

³³ Barrett, First Epistle, 146. 'Christian liberty is not licence, for licence is not more but less than liberty.' The Corinthians' theologizing led them to believe that the spiritual - knowledgeable person had bypassed any need for laws or restraints. Paul, however, points out that their new lives in Christ should not only be thought of in terms of freedom, but also constraint (6:15-17; 8:1-3; 10:24).

³⁴ See 6:13-20 and 8:1-3. Hurd, Origin, 68. Hurd presents a useful table of views almost all of which maintain that these two phrases are quotations from the Corinthians.

and their 'We all possess knowledge' (8:1b). He is against such a mentality and its subsequent misunderstanding of the body, knowledge, and eating idol meat. The Corinthians have not yet arrived at the final goal and they in fact are neither spiritual, nor wise.³⁵ It is striking that Paul again quotes their 'Everything is permissible' (10:23a) in the context of his concluding remarks concerning idolatry and eating idol food. This confirms that such a mentality was not merely confined to one particular manifestation of supposed Corinthian spirituality, but was a phenomenon that touched many areas of their lives.

Paul counters with, 'but not everything is beneficial' (6:12b), 'knowledge puffs up, but love builds up' (8:1c) and 'but not everything is beneficial' (10:23b) aiming to anchor the Corinthians' existence in the present world (the present is still with them) showing that they have not yet reached the final goal (the future is still yet to come).

The Corinthian slogans will be important for our understanding of the environment in which the situation of chapter 7 arises, as each of them (we will later argue that this is also true of sex, marriage and celibacy) show cotextually that the Corinthian mentality with its false spirituality is clearly not in line with Paul's gospel.³⁶ This lends support to the hypothesis that the problems of sexual immorality, and idolatry for that matter, emanate from the larger, more global problem, of over-realized eschatology.³⁷

³⁵ See chapters 1-3, especially 1:18-31 and 3:1-3.

³⁶ These quotations show that Corinthian theory was far from Pauline practice.

³⁷ Barrett, *First Epistle*, 148. 'Only the future provides the argument that Paul needs.' The future is still future. Also, Thiselton, 'Realized,' 517. 'The whole argument of chapters v and vi depends not only on the notion of corporate solidarity with Christ, but also on the concept of eschatological *destiny*.' (*Italics his.*)

Paul now constructs his main arguments in 6:12-20 on 'the body' in verses 13, 15 - 20. In verse 13b he states: 'the body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord.'³⁸ Following the theological statement in verse 14 ('by his power God raised the Lord, and he will raise us also'), there are two rhetorical questions in verses 15 - 16 which build on it. The first question affirms that their bodies are members of Christ, and as such are not to be united to a prostitute. The second question speaks to their apparent lack of understanding regarding the body and sexual intercourse. To be united with a prostitute is to be one with her in body: 'The two will become one flesh.' These two unions cannot co-exist. For Paul, one cannot be united to Christ and to a prostitute.

Paul uses the present imperative in verse 18 to make his point: 'Flee sexual immorality.' In verse 19, with yet another rhetorical question, he argues that their bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit and that their actions are incompatible with those who are not their own. The whole argument concludes, affirming this, with yet another imperative in verse 20: 'You were bought at a price. Therefore honor God in your body.'

It is important, before going on to examine the structure of our chapter, to elucidate the previous section's linguistic and thematic connections directly related to

³⁸ B. S. Rosner, Paul, Scripture and Ethics, (Leiden, 1994), 136-145. Rosner views Paul as calling for, or affirming, the 'spiritual marriage' of the believer and Christ as a deterrent to sexual immorality. The important thing is that God is understood as the believer's husband. This does not seem an adequate perspective. Rather, Paul attempts, at this juncture, to point out the significance of the body in relationship to both the present and future. He aims to theologically affirm, on the basis of the cross and resurrection (not spiritual marriage), that the believer's body belongs to God. The spiritual significance of the physical body itself is at stake. The body is neither evil, nor is it irrelevant.

chapter 7. First, we have 'sexual immoralities' in verse 2. Second, there are two references, in verse 4, to 'one's own body' confirming the ongoing importance of the body in Paul's present discussion. Third, the mention of, 'your lack of self control' in verse 5, is likely to be referring to those going to prostitutes in 6:12-20. Fourth, in verse 23, we again have, 'you were bought at a price.' Fifth, in verses 29ff, there is an explicit discussion of eschatology, this time in reference to how to live in the present age.³⁹ This final connection, in our opinion, again affirms that whether Paul has been dealing with incest, seeking justice from outsiders, or going to prostitutes, the general problem in the Corinthian community is an over-realized eschatology.

4. The Structure of 1 Corinthians 7

There are numerous opinions concerning the structure of the chapter.⁴⁰ We have chosen to do a brief rhetorical analysis in order to establish the progression of Paul's argumentation and to demonstrate that he is not an anti-sex, anti-marriage, ascetic.

In this study, the term 'rhetoric' is not being used to identify a genre, but rather is understood as a critical tool to help us discover how Paul uses the art of

³⁹ For another analysis affirming the connection of 6:12 to what follows see A. Rakotoharintsifa, La Convivialité des forts et des faibles à Corinthe, (Diplôme de spécialisation en Nouveau Testament, Lausanne, 1992), 34; P. E.-B. Allo, St Paul Première Epître Aux Corinthiens, (EBib; Paris, 1934), 153. Allo disagrees with those who see an incoherence between 6:12-20 and chapter 7.

⁴⁰ For a diversity of opinions on the structure of the chapter. Barrett, First Epistle, 29; Allo, Saint Paul, 153; Robertson and Plummer, 1 Cor., 130; Senft, St Paul, 87; Conzelmann, 1 Cor., 114 and Héring, Saint Paul 50.

persuasive discourse to convince his audience.⁴¹ However, persuasive discourse is not art for art's sake,⁴² nor is it mere argument, it relates to an ability to persuade on the basis of criteria.⁴³

How then does Paul seek to persuade the Corinthians? The chapter begins with, 'Now concerning what you wrote,' in verse 1a and closes with 'and I think that I too have the Spirit of God' in verse 40b. In the opening, Paul establishes that his argument is based on something the Corinthians have proposed to him. He is giving his direct response to an actual historical situation and problem which has invited utterance.⁴⁴ In the conclusion, he is affirming that the Corinthians are not the only ones who are spiritual, while at the same time adding weight to his own thoughts on these matters.

We will argue, for the reasons stated in the following paragraphs, that verses 2 - 16 are addressed specifically to those who are or who have been married, and then generally by way of them, to the whole community. There are four sub-sections:

⁴¹ C. O. Schrag, Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity, (Bloomington, 1986), 180-181. 'Rhetoric as persuasive discourse is directed toward the other as reader and hearer.'

⁴² Ibid. 181-182.

⁴³ P. Ricoeur, The Rule of Metaphor, (Toronto, 1977), 28-29. 'The idea that there is a technique for producing discourse can lead to a sort of taxonomical project. Rhetoric cannot become an empty and formal technique.'; Also Schrag, Praxis, 182, 'To persuade someone through discourse presupposes a background of rationality, understanding, and discernment against which what is persuasive is articulated.'

⁴⁴ L. F. Bitzer, 'The Rhetorical Situation', Philosophy and Rhetoric 1, (1968), 1-14. We understand verse 1b as a Corinthian proposition that Paul is qualifying. Some in Corinth may have thought that a life without sexual relations was more spiritual or somehow superior to a

First, verses 2 - 7.⁴⁵ If there is a connection with [] in 6:12-20 and the [] in 7:2 the targeted audience here is both married men and women. Why is this likely to be the case? The context here makes it clear that some of the men involved in visiting and uniting themselves with prostitutes are married. However, in 7:5 it is not the men who are likely to have been depriving their wives of sex, just as certainly as it is not women who are going to prostitutes in 6:12-20. In verses 2 - 5 Paul speaks specifically and mutually to the married men engaging themselves with prostitutes and to the women who are denying their husbands sex.⁴⁶ This is made clear through the three balanced pairs of verses 2b - 4⁴⁷ with their

life with them. W. E. Phipps, 'Is Paul's Attitude Towards Sexual Relations Contained in 1 Cor. 7:1?' *NTS* 28, (1982) 125-131.

⁴⁵ Fee, *First Epistle*, 274-279. For the evidence that 'to touch' and 'to have a wife/husband' in 7:1b-2 are euphemisms - idioms for sexual intercourse.

⁴⁶ A. Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets*, (Philadelphia, 1990), 78-79. Whilst not endorsing Wire's whole thesis (she argues that Paul is proposing marriage as the solution to immorality whereas we would argue that he is persuading married women to resume sexual relations within their already existing marriages) we may endorse her points concerning the audience and Paul's rhetoric. In her discussion of 1 Cor 5-7. 'Paul's words would be most congenial to women who have used their freedom to live separately from men, although the next chapter (7) shows that he has no intention of ruling out sexual union for those in union with Christ. But his use of the Genesis quotation, "the two will become one flesh," to build the stark antithesis of two kinds of union appeals to those whose union with Christ replaces sexual union. It is the women rejecting sexual contact who must be persuaded.' (parenthesis mine)

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 79-80 speaks of this balance as Paul's 'rhetoric of equality.' Also Fee, *First Epistle*, 279. 'All three sentences belong together as a single, expanded qualification of their position. This also makes sense of the emphasis on mutuality: The way to correct an abuse of mutual

emphasis on full sexuality within marriage. Paul's rhetoric of equality in this context aims to point out that in marriage one is not free to do as they please with their body (neither the man who is visiting prostitutes nor the woman who is seeking a sexless marriage. The immoralities in question are at least partially the result of the latter). The two parties are joined in verse 5 with the imperative: 'Stop defrauding (same verb as in 6:7-8) one another.' This makes little sense if Paul was encouraging people to marry and not addressing the real problem of sexless marriages. The exception: 'in order that you may devote time to prayer' is targeted to the women (who were perhaps depriving their husbands of sex for precisely this reason), but the men are also being persuaded that abstinence for a time of prayer may be valid abstinence. The 'because of your lack of self-control' is targeted to the men⁴⁸ (who were visiting and uniting themselves with prostitutes), but the women are also being persuaded to resume sexual relations with their husbands. The exception in verse 5 is conceded, not commanded in verse 6 ('I say this as a concession, not as a command'). Paul then informs both parties, in verse 7, that for him, the celibate life is preferable, though it is not essential.⁴⁹

relations is not to make demands on the offending party only, but to emphasize the mutual responsibility of each.'

⁴⁸ Contra Rosner, Paul, 153. Paul's point is not an admiration of sexual self control per se. If we link verse 5c ' . . . ' to verse 2 ' . . . ' and verse 2 to 6:12-20 it is highly likely that this is a critique of the men who are visiting prostitutes.

⁴⁹ Verse 7b implies that both celibacy and marriage are gifts. Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, (New York, 1983), 223. 'Despite his preference for celibacy, however, Paul maintains that both marriage and freedom from marriage are callings and charisms from God.' Also Godet, La Première Epître aux Corinthiens, (Neuchâtel, 1886), 300. In response to the proposal that Paul is saying that the one who doesn't have the gift of celibacy is missing something, 'L'apôtre est

Second, verses 8 - 9. 'Now I say to the ⁵⁰and the widows' shows both the continuity with the previous verses and the new addressees. These verses address those who are not presently, but have been previously married.

innocent de cette conclusion erronée. Car il déclare qu'il y a non pas *un* don unique, mais *deux* dons différents. Si l'un est celui du célibat pour le règne de Dieu, l'autre est celui du mariage aussi pour le règne de Dieu.' (*Italics his*)

⁵⁰ Is to be rendered, 'Now I say to the unmarried (those never before married) and the widows' or 'Now I say to the widowers and the widows' (those who had been married, but who were not so presently)? The relevance of the translation pertains to the larger structural question of who Paul is addressing in the wider unit of verses 2 - 16. We would argue that the word ' ζ' in this context should be translated widowers. Contra Senft, St Paul, 91. "' : on a proposé la conjecture .veufs et veuves; pédanterie inutile: la veuve est traditionnellement (avec l'orphelin) la personne sans appui, naturellement désireuse d'une situation plus sûre.' See W. F. Orr and J. A. Walther, 1 Corinthians (AB 32; Garden City, 1976) 210. 'The word may indicate either one who has not been married or one who has been but is no longer married. The masculine noun . , counterpart to . "widow," is used in some Greek literature but never in the LXX or the New Testament. It is possible, then, to take . here to mean "widowers"; and it provides, in fact, a balance of expression and a particular point to this passage. In vs 11, moreover, the adjective form of this word is applied to a woman who has been married but is separated from her husband; and in Vs 34 the . woman is distinguished from the virgin. . , therefore are those who are "de-married," in this case "widowers."' Structurally, Paul has still not yet touched on the question of whether or not the never before married should marry. Furthermore, he is again addressing an actual situation in Corinth where some of the previously married are not practicing self-control. This position is supported by the meaning of the phrase, in verse 9a. This does not mean, 'if they

Third, verses 10 - 11. Married believers must not divorce. Paul uses 'not I, but the Lord' to re-inforce his argument. The fact that the wives are addressed first and that only they are granted the exception may indicate it is they who are initiating such actions.⁵¹

Fourth, verses 12 - 16. To the rest, this time 'I say, not the Lord' as the context shows, are the believing husband or wife married to an unbelieving wife or husband. Paul seeks, again through the rhetoric of equality, to persuade them to remain with their spouses.

cannot control themselves' (which gives the impression of a potential problem), but 'if they are not practicing continence' (' with the present indicative places the weight squarely on the actuality of such a problem) they should marry, for it is better to be married than to burn. Also see, M. L. Barré, 'To Marry or to Burn: . . . in 1 Cor 7:9,' CBQ 36/2 (1974), 193-202; Fee, First Epistle, 286-290.

⁵¹ Wire, Women, 84. 'Why is this remarkable exception to the Lord's command spoken to women only? Apparently he thinks that some women will leave their husbands even after being instructed by the Lord's word. The lack of a similar aside to the men does not mean that they are free to marry twice - how can they be if they are not free to divorce? - but it suggests that the men are not the problem to Paul on this front, the women are, and so a general prohibition suffices.'

The next major unit in the argument is verses 17 - 24. This unit is often understood as an excursus or a digression.⁵² We contend that it is neither. Whilst the vocabulary and syntax may appear to be incoherent in this context,⁵³ thematically and perhaps otherwise,⁵⁴ this unit can be seen as a central link⁵⁵ in Paul's strategy to persuade the Corinthians to heed his advice concerning their demands that one change (in the case of the married) or not change (in the case of the virgins) their socio-

⁵² Orr and Walther, 1 Corinthians, 216; Senft, St Paul, 95.

⁵³ Senft, St Paul, 95. 'Syntaxiquement ils sont (v.17-24) si peu ancrés dans le contexte, que leur disparition ne causerait aucune difficulté de lecture.' Syntactically they are (v.17-24) so vaguely anchored in the context that their disappearance would cause little difficulty for the reading. (My translation).

⁵⁴ Conzelmann, 1 Cor, 125. Conzelmann even argues for a more precise continuity. 'A link with the foregoing is provided by the allusion to v 7 and the taking up of the catchword . . . , "call," from v 15b.'

⁵⁵ G. W. Dawes, ' "But if you can gain your freedom" (1 Corinthians 7 : 17 - 24), ' CBO 52 (1990), 681-697. Dawes argues that it is possible to see this section as *digressio*. Our modern understanding of digression misses the point. He sees *digressio* as an ancient technique, 'not in the rather loose sense in which "digression" is used in modern languages (a "wandering - away" from the main theme), but in the more technical sense to be found, for instance, in the definition of Quintilian (IV 3:14): "*alienae rei, sed ad utilitatem causae pertinentis, extra ordinem excurrrens tractatio.*" ' In other words, the *digressio* is directly pertinent to the argument. Dawes argues (with which we concur) that what may seem to be a move away from the matter at hand turns out be nothing less than a central part of the argument. (*Italics his.*) Also, P. H. Menoud, 'Problèmes de théologie paulinienne,' Jésus Christ et la foi, (Neuchâtel, 1975), 22.

sexual status.⁵⁶ These types of demands are a further clue that an over-realized eschatology had infiltrated the community resulting in the excesses and extremes that Paul seeks to modify and correct.

Paul now theologially reframes the question putting it in focus. Social liberty, he argues, is based on God's grace as expressed in his call. The important thing is not whether one is married or single, but that one is to obey God's commands and remain as he had called them in recognition that it is he who had bought them at a price. Demands then regarding socio-sexual status (be they for a change or for no change) are simply out of the question. Into the Corinthian context where celibacy - singleness were thought to be most important regarding their newly found spiritual status, Paul mentions no less than three times in these eight verses that each one should remain as called.⁵⁷ As such, in Paul's overall argumentation these verses function as a transitional unit looking back to verses 1 - 16 and forward to verses 25 - 38. They aim to theologially anchor his position and to provide him with grounds from which to argue, both to the married and the non-married, that social status is irrelevant.⁵⁸ In addition to this, these verses provide the interchange from the primary audience of the married (2-16) to the primary audience of the not yet married (25-38).

⁵⁶ Wire, Women, 86. 'The rhetoric of equality is clear throughout - it is "each one" who is to remain as called. He (Paul) secures the argument by adding to his rhetoric of equality a pastoral address and the legitimating divine presence, "Each one in the state he or she was called, brethren, in that state let each remain with God."'

⁵⁷ Verses 17, 20, 24. The verb μείνειτε appears eight times; the noun καθὼς once.

⁵⁸ Murphy-O'Connor, 1 Corinthians, 1979, 68. 'The fact that God's call comes to individuals in all sorts of very different socio-legal situations shows such situations to be essentially irrelevant.'

Paul says, remain as you are, but now goes on to qualify this in relationship to the not yet married.

The final major unit is verses 25 - 40. It is our contention, for the following reasons, that it is now, for the first time, that Paul deals with the question of whether or not one ought to marry. The 'now about virgins' makes it likely that this is another question from the Corinthians and the beginning of a new unit in the flow of the argument. Paul spends more time on this group than any other in this chapter, but again, even though speaking directly about and to virgins, the audience of the whole community is certainly within earshot. The argument has three sub-sections:⁵⁹

First, verses 25 - 28. Paul introduces the new, but related subject. He acknowledges that he has no command from the Lord, but gives an opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. It is good, because of the present crisis, for a man to remain as he is. Was this a local crisis (to which 11:30 may refer) of which we are given little information? Or on the other hand, did Paul have in mind the larger more general type of sufferings or hardships that would be present in believers lives until the return of Christ?⁶⁰ Perhaps, both of these have some merit, but it is difficult to finally be certain what Paul is communicating in this phrase. We accept the latter (as long as these woes or hardships are seen to be realized and not

⁵⁹ Due to limitations of space, these notoriously difficult sections cannot be given a full analysis here. Fee, First Epistle, 324-357; Laughery, Paul: An Investigation into 1 Corinthians 7:1-40, Unpublished dissertation (Lausanne, 1994) offer a detailed exegesis.

⁶⁰ Barrett, First Epistle, 174-175, 'The *necessity* is probably to be interpreted in terms of verse 29 rather than verse 37; that is, Paul is thinking not of the inward urge that drives men into marriage (this operates in the opposite direction), nor of the troubles of the married woman (Gen. iii. 16), nor even of persecution as such, but of the eschatological woes that are impending over the world, and are already anticipated in the sufferings of Christ.' (*Italics his*)

exclusively future), while not seeing this to necessarily exclude the former. The 'present necessity' then probably means that because of the difficulties they are already experiencing as individuals in a Christian community the engaged couple(s) may not want to add marriage to an already precarious situation and thereby increase, for some reason, their burdens.

Singleness is the better option because of the present crisis, but it is not the only one as verse 28 ('But if you do marry you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries she has not sinned')⁶¹ makes clear. For Paul, it is good to remain single, but his reasons for this are personal (gift) and pastoral (to spare them), not ascetic.

Second, verses 29 - 35. The argument is in two parts.

(1) 'What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short.' In verses 29 - 31, Paul is seeking to persuade the community (the audience is explicitly broadened but includes 'virgins') to take on a radically new, yet different understanding of their present existence.⁶² In verse 31b, he clearly argues that 'the present form of this world is passing away.' The progressive present functions to both affirm that the future has broken into the present and to critique the Corinthians' view that it had already arrived in toto. In putting the argument this way Paul attempts to neutralize those who would argue that virgins should not marry because it is a sin or not spiritual (he agrees with singleness, but not for the same reasons) and at the same time brings

⁶¹ Wire, Women, 87. 'In this way Paul manages to incorporate the rhetoric of equality, although the woman is only talked about, not addressed.'

⁶² J. Moiser, 'A Reassessment of Paul's view of Marriage with Reference to 1 Cor. 7,' JSNT 18 (1983), 113. 'On the one hand, Paul can say that merely because the end is upon us we should not abandon all conventions and routine (something of this is certainly taking place at Corinth,) (parenthesis mine); on the other, because the end is near, and the form of the world is passing away, all bodily (non-spiritual) activities are destined to be transformed.'

a corrective to the community's idea of its 'present existence.' Marriage is passing away, but so is everything else, including asceticism.⁶³ These things, however, do not determine their existence, Christ does (1:30; 3:21; 4:1-5; 6:1-6,11).

(2) In verses 32 - 35. 'Now I would like you to be free from concern.' The argument once again centers on the virgins (the audience is narrowed, but includes the community). Whether one decides to marry or not, Paul would like their present existence, concerning this matter (and others as well), to be free from anxiety. Paul concludes the two strophes in verses 32b - 34 on the relationship of anxiety - concern to the married and unmarried in verse 35. The verse functions as a transition in closing verses 29 - 34 and opening verses 36 - 38.⁶⁴ He has said what he has said for their own advantage, not to restrict them. His key concern is expressed in verse 35b: 'but that you may live in a right way in unhindered devotion to the Lord.'⁶⁵

Third, verses 36 - 40. Paul completes the argument with a two part conclusion which brings the chapter to a close.

(1) Verses 36 - 38 flow out of the previous two sub-units; verses 25 - 28 and 29 - 35. Paul's explicit audience (though again he is seeking to persuade those who think marriage a sin or something less than spiritual) is the 'man' of verses 25 - 28. He re-affirms that marriage is not a sin and that he who marries does well. But from

⁶³ Fee, First Epistle, 342. 'Marriage thus belongs to the present scheme of things that is already on its way out. But so does their asceticism.'

⁶⁴ J. Héring, La Première Epître de saint Paul aux Corinthiens (CNT VII; Neuchâtel, 1949) 60.

⁶⁵ M. Y. MacDonald, 'Women Holy In Body And Spirit: The Social Setting of 1 Corinthians 7,' NTS 36 (1990), 175. 'He wishes to promote seemliness and desires that the Corinthians wait upon the Lord without hindrance. That "seemliness" is listed as a priority in the same breath as "undivided devotion to the Lord" points to the importance which Paul attaches to this quality.'

Paul's point of view, because of the present crisis, he who decides not to marry will do better. The one who decides the latter is subject to Paul's fourfold qualifier: 'he has settled the matter in his own mind'; 'is under no compulsion'; 'he has authority over his will'; and 'has made up his own mind.' This fourfold qualifier makes it all the more clear that Paul's persuasive strategy is indeed intended not only for the man in question, but also for the broader audience mentioned above. The 'so then' of verse 38 brings the argument to a close with a resumé of verses 36 - 37.

(2) Verses 39 - 40 address the women.⁶⁶ They function as a final word to both the married (1-24) and to those who will marry (36-38). What was previously said to the men in verses 36 - 38 now applies to the women concerning the possibility of re-marriage. Paul personally prefers celibacy, but does not exclude the validity of re-marriage.

5. Conclusion

The aim of our study was to examine the question of whether or not Paul was an ascetic who saw marriage and sex as ungodly evils. The pertinence of this chapter for such an inquiry is clear.

In our reconstruction of the situational context and the discourse context we have suggested that the root of the diverse problems (3:18-23; 4:14-21; 5:1-13; 6:12-20) in the Corinthian community was an over-realized eschatology. This spiritual enthusiasm led members of the community to attempt to ignore or make light of life in the present age. As a result some in Corinth claimed: 'It is good for a man not to touch a woman' (7:1b).

⁶⁶ Moiser, 'Reassessment' 116. 'In 37-38 Paul considers the obligations and conduct of the man; in verses 39-40, of the woman.'

To the Corinthian spiritualist and their negative perspective of marriage and sex as sin, Paul promotes a positive corrective (7:28, 36). He attempts to persuade the community that both have a legitimate place and context in the present age (7:2-5). The Corinthians have not yet arrived, the future is yet to come and life in the present age continues to affect their existence. They, however, are not to allow the things of this age to finally determine this existence (which for Paul has already been determined through God's call in Christ). Paul seeks to persuade them to see the eschatological significance of living as 'if not' in the midst of a world that is passing away (7:29-31).

There are many interpreters who adopt the position that Paul was an anti-marriage, anti-sex, ascetic. We have argued from both the context and structure of 7:1-40 attempting to strengthen and compliment a divergent interpretation of Paul. There is ample evidence to indicate, that while preferring celibacy,⁶⁷ Paul goes out of his way to affirm that marriage is a perfectly valid existence (7:2-5; 38) for the eschatological person in the present age.⁶⁸

Others have argued that the apostle was more positive toward marriage, but for the sole reason of preventing social chaos and immorality. While it is true that Paul's attitude to marriage is positive, we have found that his reasons for being so are not exclusively those put forward by such an argument. We have affirmed that in verses 1-7 (the main verses usually referred to in support of this interpretation) Paul

⁶⁷ The structure of the chapter demonstrates that Paul never turns this into law or a spiritual hierarchy, de-favorizing marriage.

⁶⁸ Murphy-O'Connor, *1 Corinthians*, 75. 'In the last analysis, therefore, it is very hard to accuse Paul of glorifying the single state. It was his own preference, and he thought it best, but he certainly did not make it mandatory for others.'

is addressing those who are already married,⁶⁹ therefore, his intent cannot be to offer marriage as a solution to a problem of this nature.

The significance of this chapter for Pauline theology is to be found in what we have termed the 'bi-directional transition' of 7:17-24. The centrality of these verses for Paul's argument must not be minimized. In this section we discover the heart of Pauline theology, which is really no different from that in the rest of the epistle (1:4-9, 18-31). The theological basis from which he operates is the radical redeeming activity of the God who calls people to salvation in Christ. It is on this basis that Paul attempts to persuade the Corinthians that either celibacy or marriage is acceptable.⁷⁰ He relativizes both, in terms of circumcision - non-circumcision (7:18-19), and slave - free (7:20-22). In establishing that it is God who had called them and bought them at a price (7:23), Paul can now theologially argue that any socio-sexual status that the Corinthians may have thought to be more spiritual than another or incumbent upon members of the community is extraneous. In the eyes of God such status is strictly a non-essential.

⁶⁹ See our discussion of this perspective above.

⁷⁰ Menoud, 'Problèmes' 22 offers a helpful insight. 'Le salut ne dépend pas de la condition civile du croyant, vu que le mariage n'est pas un péché et le célibat ne fait pas entrer dans une communion au Christ plus étroite que ne le fait la vie conjugale. Les célibataires et les gens mariés sont à égalité en face du salut. L'important n'est pas l'*état* de célibataire ou d'homme marié, mais la *condition* dans laquelle on vit cet état.' (*Italics his.*) Salvation does not depend on the civil condition of the believer. Marriage is not a sin and celibacy does not give entry into a deeper communion with Christ. The celibate and the married are equal in salvation. What's important is not the state of the celibate or the married, but the condition in which one is to live this state. (My translation).

Paul's view of marriage and sex is striking for two reasons: First, into a milieu where the woman was often seen as the possession of the man Paul not only denounces such a mentality, but he revolutionizes his society's comprehension of the role of the husband and wife. It is not merely the wife's body that belongs to her husband, but the husband's body also belongs to his wife (7:3-4). Second, in a society where women were envisioned to be wife, Mother, the producer of children, and 'la maitresse de la maison' Paul radically reconstitutes the position of a woman under the grace of God. She is free to remain single.

Paul's attempts to persuade his audience are not centered in a rhetoric of asceticism that demands one must be celibate at all costs. His rhetoric throughout the chapter is one of equality, attempting to convince the Corinthians that they are free to remain as they are. This rhetoric has not only been structurally related to persons, but also to the theme of marriage and celibacy. For Paul, the two are equal. His personal-pastoral preference is for the latter, but his rhetoric is always balanced and never prejudicial concerning the former.

Paul's concerns in addressing and responding to the Corinthian community are primarily theological, not ascetic. God's redeeming activity in Christ functions as the dynamic equalizer and is central to his position. He has given his opinion as one who is by the Lord's mercy trustworthy, and as one who has the Spirit of God (7:25, 40).

