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PAUL'S VIEW OF CELIBACY IN 1 CORINTHIANS 7:25-38

BY

NICK SYMON

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF

COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS IN EXEGETICAL THEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT OF
PAUL'S VIEW OF CELIBACY IN 1 CORINTHIANS 7:25-38

by Nick Symon

The aim of this thesis is to explore the theological foundations of Paul's counsel for celibacy in 1 Cor. 7 through a careful exegesis of 1 Cor. 7:25-38. Chapter 1 contains a brief historical background to the letter and the Corinthian situation. Chapter 2 presents an exegesis of 7:25-28, 36-38 and argues for the position that Paul is addressing guardians and their wards in this section of the text. Chapter 3 presents an exegesis of 7:29-35 that explores Paul's underlying theology for his counsel. I contend that two key eschatological beliefs shape Paul's counsel: (1) that in Christ, God has already ushered in the inauguration of his kingdom and consequently (2) the way of life of this world is passing away. These eschatological realities place believers in a particular posture towards the world that Paul describes as "as not." Chapter 4 addresses points of application from the text for the life of the contemporary Christian and church. I conclude that Paul's counsel for celibacy is still valid for our context, and that the church development scripts for those committed to celibacy today will strengthen our witness to the hope of the gospel in Christ.

Dedication

First of all, this thesis is dedicated to Christ Jesus our Lord.
My prayer and hope is that in some small measure these reflections
on Paul's words might bring glory to your name and encouragement to your church.

Secondly, I dedicate this thesis to my clients. Your courage to live life in light of the
gospel is a consistent witness to the reality of the work of Christ
and a great encouragement to me.

Thirdly, I dedicate this thesis to my friends and family.
You have walked beside me faithfully over these many months, in both highs and lows,
and I am forever grateful for you.

I am also greatly indebted to Dr. Brad Matthews
for his guidance and encouragement throughout this process.
Also to Dr. Hans Bayer for contributing his discerning eye to the draft of this work.
Thank you both for being guides along this path.

Soli Deo Gloria.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BDAG	Arndt, William, Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, and F. W. Gingrich. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3 rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
ESV	HOLY BIBLE: ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION, Copyright 2001, 2007 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers.
LXX	Septuagint; a translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek; compiled during the third and second centuries B.C.
NT	New Testament

Introduction

The genesis of this project was in my work as a counselor. I am invited into some of the highest and lowest parts of my client's stories. For those of my clients who are Christian, this includes asking the question of how the contours of their lives are being written and re-narrated into the larger narrative of God's redemption of the whole cosmos in Christ Jesus. For many the path of sanctification or growing into maturity in Christ begins to open up for them as they begin to see their stories as fitting in God's larger narrative. For others, this path is harder because they find no narrative or script to make sense of their experience with regards to God's story of redemption. This is especially true for my clients who identify as gay, or label their sexuality as exclusively homosexually oriented. It was for the sake of these clients that my studies took this direction.

In a very short essay entitled "Resisting Capitalism: On Marriage and Homosexuality," Stanley Hauerwas describes his participation in the deliberations of the Commission for the Study of Homosexuality in the Methodist church. In this essay, Hauerwas tries to shift the attention away from the question of whether homosexuality is a good or a bad thing in itself and rather to focus on understanding the church's position for the practices of marriage and singleness.¹ His suggestion is that by understanding why

¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2000), 48.

these practices are the ones that are supported in scripture, we will be more able to come to the question of homosexuality with a discerning and discriminating eye.² As the title of the essay suggests, Hauerwas believes that the deeper issue in this debate is the way in which the economic forces of capitalism have shaped our thinking about our bodies as only places of consumption rather than production.³ This in Hauerwas's eyes, is what the church needs to resist through the practices of marriage and celibacy.

For me, Hauerwas's cogent insight was the fact that what we call "sexuality" is necessarily embedded in a complex web of beliefs and practices that have emerged in modernity. If the church is to continue its faithful witness to Christ in this age, it must then not merely define itself by what it is against, but be able to give an account of what it is for. This insight provided me with a starting question for my work. What resources do we have to give an account of the Christian's life that includes our sexuality but does not reduce our identity to it? The practice of celibacy became the natural place to begin that exploration, and there is probably no place that makes many Christians as uncomfortable as Paul's words to the Corinthian church with regards to celibacy.

This aim of this thesis is, through a careful exegesis of 1 Cor. 7:25-38, to explore the theological foundations upon which Paul rests his counsel for celibacy. I will begin in chapter 1 with a brief background to the letter in order to contextualize chapter 7. Then in chapters 2 and 3 I will give an exegesis of the text. Finally in chapter 4 I will move to application of the text to the life of the contemporary Christian, returning to our original question of how this might contribute to the conversation in the church about sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular.

² Ibid., 49.

³ Ibid., 50.

Chapter 1

Introduction to Paul's Letter to the Corinthians as Context for 1 Cor. 7:25-38

Παῦλος is the identified author of the first epistle to the Corinthians,⁴ and there is little scholarly debate about the authenticity of this letter.⁵ The date of Paul's ministry in Corinth is one of the few relatively fixed points on the Pauline timeline due to our ability to match the extra-biblical historical evidence with the narrative of Acts.⁶ Acts 18 indicates that Paul traveled to Corinth after leaving Athens, and upon arriving there he met up with Aquila and his wife Priscilla who had recently come from Rome having been expelled by Claudius.⁷ Though the historical evidence isn't certain, most believe that Claudius did expel Jews from Rome and that the date of this expulsion was sometime around 49 or 50 AD.⁸ If that were the case, Paul would have arrived in Corinth around this time as well. We are told that Paul stays in Corinth preaching the gospel for 1

⁴ See 1 Cor. 1:1, 12.

⁵ D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 419.

⁶ Ben Witherington III, *Conflict & Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 71.

⁷ See Acts 18:1-2.

⁸ Witherington, *Conflict & Community*, 71.

months, at the directive of the Lord.⁹ Acts then attests to the Jews bringing Paul before the tribunal when Gallio was proconsul,¹⁰ with Paul leaving Corinth soon after. Archaeological evidence supports Gallio as proconsul sometime during 50-51 or 51-52 AD.¹¹ Paul then would not have written his letters to the Corinthian church until after 51 or 52 AD. Taking into account the time needed for Paul's travels and for the writing of his first letter to the Corinthians, Witherington dates the composition of what we know as 1 Corinthians in early 53 or 54 AD.¹² I find no reason to argue against this date for the composition of the letter.

While we can be reasonably certain about the authorship and date of 1 Corinthians, the circumstances in the Corinthian church that required Paul to write his letter are not as easily found out. First Corinthians is an occasional letter. In it Paul responds to the specific and nuanced situation occurring in the Corinthian church. Since we have no letters from the Corinthians to Paul,¹³ every attempt to reconstruct the situation through "mirror reading" must also take into account the problems inherent in this methodology.¹⁴ This does not mean we can know nothing about the situation "on the

⁹ See Acts 18:9-11.

¹⁰ See Acts 18:12-18.

¹¹ Witherington, *Conflict & Community*, 72.

¹² *Ibid.*, 73.

¹³ Excepting the times in Paul's letter that he quotes the Corinthians directly, such as in 1 Cor. 7:1. These however are brief references to the Corinthian's position, not fully outlined arguments.

¹⁴ John M.G. Barclay, "Mirror Reading a Polemical Letter: Galatians as a Test Case," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 31 (1987): 73-93. In this article, Barclay counsels us to avoid four common pitfalls when "mirror reading" a text: (1) undue selectivity, (2) over interpretation, (3) mishandling polemics, and (4) latching on to particular words and phrases. To do this he offers seven positive criteria one should consider when attempting a reconstruction from the data of the text: (1) type of utterance, (2) tone, (3) frequency, (4) clarity, (5) unfamiliarity, (6) consistency, and (7) historical plausibility.

ground” in Corinth, only that we must weigh the evidence carefully and take care not to overstate what can be shown or proven by it. My aim in this section of the essay is to use careful mirror reading, historical data, and sociological insights to develop a sense of what kind of situation could best account for the response Paul gives to the Corinthians in his letter.

Paul’s letter is addressed to the “church of God that is in Corinth,”¹⁵ so some consideration of the city of Corinth is needed. Geographically, the city held the prominent position of lying between two ports and served as a crossroads of trade from east to west.¹⁶ It was first an important Greek city until destroyed by Rome in 146 BC during a conflict between the Achaean League and Sparta, Rome’s ally.¹⁷ Nearly one hundred years later, Julius Caesar re-founded it as Roman colony in 44 BC, and it became more Roman in its governmental structure. It was settled by veterans of the Roman army, freedmen, and urban poor.¹⁸ Engels comments on the rationale behind Julius Caesar’s founding of this colony saying that:

“Caesar probably had many reasons to re-found [sic] Corinth... By removing part of these politically disaffected and volatile groups from Rome, he probably earned the gratitude of many in the capital. Since the land was not taken from Italian landowners, no doubt they were also appeased as well. In choosing a site where they would have excellent chance to prosper, he would increase the loyalty and devotion of these groups, and especially his veterans to himself.”¹⁹

¹⁵ See 1 Cor. 1:2.

¹⁶ Witherington, *Conflict & Community*, 9.

¹⁷ Donald Engels, *Roman Corinth: An Alternative Model for the Classical City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 14-16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

With regard to those who settled Roman Corinth, Engels also notes “the rapid economic growth that Roman Corinth experienced during the first two centuries of its existence was largely the consequence of the talent and creativity of its people.”²⁰ Along with these settlers, the new city also consisted of Greeks, Jews, Anatolians, and Phoenicians.²¹ For the next 100 years, Corinth would be rebuilt by these settlers, growing and taking on the character of the city that Paul visits in his ministry.

Corinth was a city in the process of remaking itself and with Witherington, we can imagine the kind of atmosphere this remade city of Corinth would have had during the time of Paul. He notes in the introduction of his commentary on the epistle that:

“As residents of a new city that was undergoing continual rebuilding and that was increasing in fame, the people of Corinth had both growing civic pride and individual pride...All sorts of Corinthians, even slaves, are mentioned in inscriptions...that describe their contributions to building projects or their status in clubs... Corinth was a city where public boasting and self-promotion had become an art form... The Corinthian people thus lived within an honor-shame cultural orientation, where public recognition was often more important than facts and where the worst thing that could happen was for one’s reputation to be publically tarnished. In such a culture a person’s sense of worth is based on recognition by others of one’s accomplishments, hence the self-promoting public inscriptions.”²²

This is the setting to which Paul brings the message of the gospel in the early 50s AD, and as Witherington goes on to note, this cultural climate can be felt throughout Paul’s letters to the Corinthians. Its Greek heritage combined with its new Roman social structure and prominent geographical location for commerce and trade meant that Corinth was one of the most important and diverse urban centers in the first century AD, and for

²⁰ Ibid., 66.

²¹ Ibid., 70.

²² Witherington, *Conflict & Community*, 8.

those who lived there, the opportunity for advancement was great. Yet, this environment was also the seedbed for the many issues that Paul addresses in his letters sent to the church after his ministry there.

It's clear from the tone and issues addressed in Paul's letter that the Corinthian church had significant internal problems. Paul addresses the Corinthians concerning divisions in the church over leadership,²³ issues of sexual immorality being ignored by the congregation,²⁴ lawsuits among believers that are going before public courts,²⁵ issues of the relationship between men and women in the public worship,²⁶ abuse of the celebration of the Lord's supper,²⁷ disorder in worship due to prominence of spiritual gifts,²⁸ along with Paul's apparent need to remind the Corinthians of the reality of the resurrection,²⁹ a key element of the gospel message. These issues are noted at even a surface level reading of the text. A closer reading would note a constellation of associated issues for each of these problems that Paul addresses. The problems are so numerous and so varied that the search for an underlying cause seems almost impossible. Are these just the problems to be expected from a diverse population both socially and ethnically who have been brought together by the gospel? The Corinthian church might have retained more of its pagan character than many of the other churches Paul founded due to its large

²³ See 1 Cor. 1:10-12.

²⁴ See 1 Cor. 5:1-2.

²⁵ See 1 Cor. 6:1.

²⁶ See 1 Cor. 11:3.

²⁷ See 1 Cor. 11:20-22.

²⁸ See 1 Cor. 14:27-28.

²⁹ See 1 Cor. 15:12.

population of pagan Gentiles.³⁰ From a sociological perspective, Witherington, comments as follows:

“The conversion of an adult to a new religion is a form of secondary socialization... Usually the values gained in primary socialization, that is, while growing up, remain throughout life. A dramatic *volte face* or change in life setting is usually necessary to redirect an adult’s life orientation and pattern. Paul’s converts remained where they were converted, e.g., in Corinth, and Paul encouraged them not to withdraw from the world totally. Deinculturation would have been difficult. Paul’s basic strategy in Corinth was to emphasize that eschatological events of the past, present, and future had relativized the present world order and that the schema of this world was passing away (1 Cor. 7:31).”³¹

In some ways then, these are the kinds of problems that are to be expected when the gospel is preached in a new environment. The creation of a gospel community within the broader culture, especially a largely pagan one, is a difficult sociological process. Also, Paul highlights throughout the letter that he refused to act or think that this process was dependent on him alone, but rather he emphasizes the power of the Spirit and the work of God.³² Even so, these problems are not to be solely attributed to the sociological difficulty of the new community of the people of God coming together in Christ in a pagan setting. There was also an issue of maturity for the Corinthian church – an inability to grow up in the faith. Paul says that he was unable to treat them as “spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not ready.”³³ As Witherington

³⁰ Engels, 110. Engels also notes that the mindset of the Corinthian Christian would have still been largely shaped by its traditional values.

³¹ Witherington, *Conflict & Community*, 9n21.

³² See 1 Cor. 2:1. It would seem that some in the Corinthian church might have wanted Paul to act more like it was dependent on his own power rather than the power of the gospel. Paul’s refusal to do so might be part of the underlying cause of division addressed in the first four chapters of the letter.

³³ See 1 Cor. 3:1-2.

suggests at the end of the above quoted section, Paul's labor for the Corinthian church's maturity had a particular eschatological emphasis. Thiselton also picks up on this theme and goes even further to argue that the theological problem³⁴ of the Corinthian church was that of an "over-realized eschatology."

By "over-realized eschatology" Thiselton means that the Corinthians had lost the inherent tension between the "already" and the "not yet" of the gospel proclamation. Thiselton, quoting C. K. Barrett, notes "the Corinthians were behaving 'as if the age to come were already consummated...For them there is no "not yet" to qualify the "already" of realized eschatology.'"³⁵ Thiselton argues that for each of the major issues discernable in the text, a preference for the "already" with its consequent spiritual enthusiasm provides sufficient grounds for the Corinthians problems. For the problem of division in the church over leadership for example,³⁶ Thiselton suggests that below the dispute about which leader one follows there lies a deeper eschatological misunderstanding. Looking more closely at the text, we can see that there are two sides to the debate. Some in the church had mistaken Greek wisdom and rhetoric for the wisdom of God in Christ and preferred some apostles over others because of this.³⁷ Yet in 1:12 we also see a party that says, "I follow Christ." Thiselton understands this to be a "spiritual enthusiast" party that has misunderstood Paul's teaching in the other direction. He argues that they have taken

³⁴ Not that any problem can be merely theological. Throughout the letter the problems are practical and concern the church's life together. Yet for Paul, these problems have theological roots.

³⁵ Anthony C. Thiselton, "Realized Eschatology at Corinth," *New Testament Studies* 24, no. 4 (1978): 510.

³⁶ See 1 Cor. 1-4.

³⁷ See 1 Cor. 2:1-5.

Paul's message in 2:15³⁸ – that the spiritual person judges all things – and have decided that they do not need apostles at all because they already possessed complete spiritual wisdom. They boasted in this, which ironically exposed the fact that they were still in the flesh.³⁹ Both positions are in the wrong, and Paul must re-frame the role of the apostleship and how the Corinthians are to understand their work in light of the “not yet” – the final judgment where all those who have built on the foundation of Christ will have their work tested by fire.⁴⁰ So the first party is wrong because they have failed to understand the message of the gospel, which is “folly to the Gentiles.”⁴¹ The second party is wrong because they have misunderstood what it means to be spiritual, to be “already” in Christ. For Thiselton, this is an example of how an over-realized eschatology can lead to the corresponding danger of spiritual enthusiasm. For all the issues Paul addresses in the letter, he must reframe the Corinthian preference for the present “already” with the reality of the future “not yet,” thereby giving proper direction to their spiritual enthusiasm and helping them to grow up into maturity.

This pattern of over-realized eschatology and spiritual enthusiasm is also seen in the first half 1 Cor. 7, immediately preceding our passage. Here Paul is responding to questions the Corinthians had written to him. It is clear from 7:17-24 that some in the church thought it necessary to change their marital status, or to forgo sexual intercourse in their marriages.⁴² While we do not know why the Corinthians thought this, we can at

³⁸ Thiselton, “Realized Eschatology,” 514. Thiselton sees this as Paul quoting the Corinthian position.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ See 1 Cor. 4:4-5.

⁴¹ See 1 Cor. 1:23.

⁴² See 1 Cor. 7:1, 10-11.

least assume that since Paul's argument, as we will see in the following exegetical treatment of this text, is rooted in an eschatological exhortation, it is likely that a misunderstanding here led to their faulty beliefs. Here again is the preference for the present "already" with an inadequate view of the "not yet." We will expand this further in the chapters to come. I agree then with Thiselton that an over-realized eschatology with its consequent spiritual enthusiasm does make for a plausible framework for the array of Corinthian problems Paul addresses in this letter, even if we cannot say confidently what was the source of this preference for the present over against the future realities of the kingdom.

What I have argued for in this part of the essay is two fold. First, that Corinth was a thoroughly pagan city whose brief history and shallow culture provided rocky soil at best for the cultivation of a gospel community. Secondly, within this setting there was a developmental problem in the Corinthian church that prevented them from reaching maturity in Christ. Leaning on Thiselton's insights, we see this inability to reach maturity manifested in two ways: first, an over-realized eschatology and secondly, its consequential spiritual enthusiasm. These are not just isolated occurrences in the letter, but appear throughout, whether the topic Paul is addressing is divisions in the church over the nature of leadership, how to think about marriage and celibacy, or how to approach particular gifts of the spirit in the context of the body of Christ.⁴³ Now we will turn our attention to the exegesis of our passage in light of this context.

⁴³ Thiselton, "Realized Eschatology," 525. The Corinthians, while having been given the gifts of the Spirit, lacked the correct understanding of their usage and purpose. Paul's argument throughout 1 Cor. 12-14 is about reframing the Corinthians understanding of these gifts. This reframing has both a present and a future emphasis. Paul has to remind the Corinthians that the gifts are meant for the building up of the body of the church, not for individual gain, and that when the end comes, many of the gifts will not longer be necessary. This dual aspect of Paul's argument highlights for us what Thiselton argues for throughout his

article, that “in every single section...there occurs evidence of both a realized eschatology *and* an enthusiastic theology of the Spirit on the part of the Corinthians. That these phenomena are causally related can hardly be doubted.”

Chapter 2

Exegesis of 1 Corinthians 7:25-28, 36-38

We often come to the biblical text with burning questions for our own lives. We long to open the text and hear from God what we should do, how we should live, or what we should believe. The main danger we fall into when we do this is that we tend to read into the text our current situation and jump over the 2,000 years that separate us from the original context the text was written in. Wouldn't it have been easier if Paul had written theological essays for us passed down through the centuries! While this might be our wish, especially when our concerns are particularly pressing or the text particularly opaque, this is not what Paul wrote (nor any of the other authors of the texts that make up our bible). Instead we have his letters - letters that are written to a particular people, in a particular place, and at a particular time. Having only one side of these 2000-year-old conversations, we are often left with more questions than answers about the occasion for Paul's response to his churches. Having looked briefly at the general historical and theological context above, we still admit that 1 Corinthians is one such occasional letter, and our particular text one such situation that we would wish we had more clarity about. While we may not be able to say definitively what was happening in the life of the church at Corinth that caused Paul's response in 7:25-38, we can read the text with sensitivity and reconstruct some plausible options.

Part of reading with sensitivity is looking at the broad literary context of 7:25-38 before we dive into a more detailed exegesis of our passage. Chapter 7 marks a significant turn in the letter. Paul has already addressed several significant issues present in the church in chapters 1-6. These were probably issues that were brought to his attention by the group identified as Chloe's people⁴⁴ when delivering the letter the Corinthians had written to him. With chapter 7, Paul turns his attention away from these reported issues to addressing various topics that the Corinthians have written to him about. This is signaled to us in the text when Paul begins this section with the phrase, *Περὶ δὲ ὧν ἐγράψατε*, "now concerning the matters about which you wrote."⁴⁵ The following line in the text has been identified as a quote from the Corinthian letter, "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."

It seems that some in the Corinthian church had taken an ascetic position, believing they should no longer have sex with their wives or husbands and also perhaps were putting pressure on others in the church to follow them in their asceticism.⁴⁶ Why would this "ascetic group" have thought this? One clue might lie in the fact that throughout this section Paul is very concerned with making sure he identifies what is in fact his counsel as an apostle, and what is a command from the Lord.⁴⁷ If we also consider what we already know about what was happening in the church, namely divisions in the church with regards to who they followed, it is possible that this ascetic group that has written to Paul might be taking Paul's own life as an example for theirs.

⁴⁴ See 1 Cor. 1:11.

⁴⁵ See 1 Cor. 7:1.

⁴⁶ Perhaps this group had begun labeling marriage a "sin."

⁴⁷ See 1 Cor. 7:6, 10, 12.

The problem is that this ascetic group had either taken Paul's position too far or had misunderstood the motivation for his teaching. Perhaps Paul had emphasized in his teaching while in Corinth the good that is celibacy, and the ascetic group took it a step further and decided that they should pursue asceticism in their marriages or divorce their spouses. If this was the case, Paul is providing a correction throughout the first half of chapter 7 to a misappropriation of his own teaching. In this way, we see why Paul stresses which aspects of his counsel are his and which are not. Paul's desire is for the church to be mature, not to merely follow Paul. While Paul might prefer celibacy he recognizes that each person has his or her own gift from God.⁴⁸ These gifts, as Paul will elaborate later in the letter,⁴⁹ are to be used for the building up of the church not the puffing up of the individual. This might also give us a framework for understanding why Paul says so few positive things about marriage in this chapter.⁵⁰ The issue is not so much a misunderstanding about marriage, but a misappropriation of Paul's teaching and the possibility of ensuing division this might create. While we can't say more than this about the origin of the ascetic group's beliefs, it fits within the "over-realized" eschatology motif discussed above.

So what counsel does Paul give in the first half of this chapter? All of Paul's counsel in 7:1-16 falls under the category of remaining in the situation in which you

⁴⁸ See 1 Cor. 7:6.

⁴⁹ See 1 Cor. 12ff.

⁵⁰ Some see Paul as damning marriage in this chapter through faint praise. It is true that Paul says little about marriage positively here; however, the primarily negative view on marriage that emerges in our contemporary translations comes from, in my opinion, an over-interpretation of 7:8 and 7:36-38. While the aims of this essay prevent giving a full argument for this, it will suffice to say that strong sexual desire and/or sexual impropriety are not the only options for understanding Paul's counsel. On 7:36-38, see below.

found yourself when called.⁵¹ If you are married, you should not seek a divorce or separation⁵² even if your spouse is an unbeliever.⁵³ Within your marriage, you should not stop having sex, unless for a brief time with conditions.⁵⁴ And, if you are unmarried, it is good for you to remain as you are, however, you can also remarry.⁵⁵ As Paul explains in 7:17-24, this does not mean that you must remain in these situations (excepting the command not to divorce which he attributes to the Lord), but merely that these situations have no bearing on one's position in relationship to Christ. To say otherwise, as it is possible that the ascetic group was doing, would be to become a slave to men rather than Christ.

With this issue addressed, Paul then moves on to the next topic that the Corinthians had written to him about.⁵⁶ While the topics are related, we need not look for more of a direct logical connection between 7:1-24 and 7:25ff than the fact that the Corinthians had written to Paul about both issues and that both issues are about marriage and celibacy. The exegesis of Paul's treatment of the next topic will be the subject matter of the remainder of this chapter and the following one. I will divide the exegesis of these verses into two chapters because of the structure of Paul's argument. The structure of this

⁵¹ See 1 Cor. 7:17-24.

⁵² See 1 Cor. 7:10-11.

⁵³ See 1 Cor. 7:12-16.

⁵⁴ See 1 Cor. 7:1-5.

⁵⁵ See 1 Cor. 7:8-9.

⁵⁶ The Greek phrase which begins 7:25 - Περὶ δε, or "now concerning" – is the same as that found at the beginning of 7:1 where he addressed the ascetic subgroup and in 8:1 where he addresses the situation of food sacrificed to idols. This could be seen as a continuation of the preceding section and not another issue the Corinthians have written about. However, if this is the case, I find it odd that Paul would devote so much space to subject that would have fallen under the general category of "those who are unmarried" that he has already addressed. This seemed to be an important issue that necessitated a lengthy response from Paul.

passage follows an A, B, A pattern. In 7:25-28, Paul introduces the topic with regards to the Corinthians situation and gives his initial counsel. Then, in 7:29-35, Paul gives the theological foundation for his counsel. Finally, in 7:36-38, Paul returns to the particular situation in the Corinthian church and gives his final advice. The remainder of this chapter will address the situation in Corinth and the counsel Paul gives for it (7:25-28, 36-38), and the next chapter will address Paul's theological foundation for the this counsel (7:29-35).

In 7:25, Paul is turning his attention to another situation that requires a particular pastoral response from him, and this issue concerns marriage and the *παρθένων*.⁵⁷ In many translations *παρθένων* is glossed at “the virgins,” or “the betrothed” as in the ESV, but to whom does this refer? Spicq notes that it “usually refers to a ‘young woman,’ who is not yet married, or a ‘virgin.’”⁵⁸ As word meaning is determined by usage, we will look at the usage of this word in the NT texts to help shed light on its meaning here. Outside of the six times that this word is used in our passage, *παρθενος* occurs nine other times in the NT.⁵⁹ Looking at these nine occurrences, we see both literal and figurative uses of the word. Paul, clearly addressing a concrete situation in the Corinthian church, is using the word literally so we will look more closely at the literal uses in the rest of the NT to get a better picture of the referent for this word. However, we'll first briefly look at the figurative uses.

⁵⁷ We must be careful not to assume that what Paul says here is his complete theological position on the broader topics addressed – namely marriage and celibacy.

⁵⁸ Ceslas Spicq, “*παρθεनिया, παρθενος*,” in *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, translated and edited by James D. Ernest (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 3:44.

⁵⁹ See Matthew 1:12; 25:1, 7, 11; Luke, 1:27; Acts 21:9; 2 Corinthians 11:2; Revelation 14:4.

The two figurative uses of the word occur in 2 Corinthians 11:2 and Revelation 14:4. In 2 Cor. 11, Paul is in the middle of pleading with the Corinthians about a group of “apostles” that have come into the church and have begun to undermine Paul’s work among them. Paul tells them that he has a “divine jealousy” for the church because he “betrothed them to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin (παρθένον αγνήν) to Christ.” In this context, Paul is using the image of Christ as the bridegroom and the church as his bride to describe his ministry as an apostle. His work is to labor to present the church as Christ’s pure παρθένον. The church as a whole is being described as a παρθένον. While this collective noun might include both men and women, it does so only because of the nature of metaphorical language. If we follow logic of the image, Christ is the male, the husband, and the church is the παρθένον, the female. Therefore, a παρθένον in this text is a woman.

The second figurative usage is found in Rev. 14:4. Again, we see the author of the text using the metaphor of a “virgin” to describe, in this case, the 144,000 who have been redeemed from mankind. These are described having not defiled themselves with women and are therefore παρθένοι. While it is possible to understand this as a literal usage of the word, it seems more likely that we should understand this as a spiritual “virginity” or purity due to the highly figurative nature of the text in general.⁶⁰ In either case, any argument for the referent of the word that rests on this passage is on shaky ground at best. I understand the usage to be figurative in this verse, and therefore not useful in helping us to determine Paul’s referent in 1 Cor. 7.

⁶⁰ Gerhard Delling, “παρθένος,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel, translated and edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967) 5:836; Moisés Silva, ed. “παρθένος,” in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014) 3:639.

Turning to the literal usage of *παρθενος*, we will look first at the gospels of Matthew and Luke and then at its usage in Acts. We will consider first the parable of the “virgins” in Matthew 25. In Jesus’ parable, the *παρθενοι* are the young women who are attendants of the bride. They go out to greet the bridegroom as he comes in for the wedding feast, yet end up having to wait for his appearance. Half are considered wise, for they brought oil enough for the wait, while the other half are considered foolish and had to leave to buy more oil. While these foolish virgins are gone, the bridegroom comes and the feast begins and they are locked out of the wedding celebration. These women are labeled *παρθένοι*, but we are given little else in the text itself to identify what might be in view besides their gender, marital status, and possibly their age.

Looking next at the usage in the birth narrative of Jesus in Luke 1:27, we see that Mary is described as a *παρθενον*. Here again, *παρθενος* is used in reference to a young unmarried woman. In this case, the gospel writer also indicates that she is betrothed to Joseph. So it is possible for a *παρθενος* to be a betrothed woman, but the fact that the gospel writer needed to indicate that Mary was also betrothed suggests that the concept of betrothal is not included in the meaning of the word. What seems to be in view then is gender, marital status, and again possibly age.⁶¹

The last literal usage in the NT comes in Acts 21:9. Here, Phillip’s daughters who prophesy are the ones in view and are described as *παρθενοι*. Once again, gender and marital status are in view, with perhaps age. As in Luke’s usage of the word with regards to Mary, literal virginity may also be implied.

⁶¹ Mary’s virginity would be implied here by the natural usage of the word.

From the above survey of its usage in the NT, we can say that when the word is used literally, it has as its referent an unmarried woman, usually of a young age. A gloss that translates this word as “the betrothed”⁶² without indicating that the woman is the one who is primarily in view here does not do justice to the way this word is used throughout the NT. While the context suggests that the *παρθενών* in view here are also engaged to be married,⁶³ we should still maintain the distinction in translation. We also cannot assume that Paul is using the plural in 7:25 to refer to both men and women. Women are exclusively in view in the usage of the NT with the exception of the highly figurative usage in Revelation 4. For this reason, I would translate *παρθενοῦς* as young, unmarried women.⁶⁴

There must have been something unique about the situation of the young, unmarried woman that was worth writing to Paul about. And it is to this specific situation that Paul is responding. The word by itself does not indicate whether the specific issue Paul is addressing is about engagement or some other situation having to do with the young unmarried women in the Corinthian church, though context does suggest that these women are either betrothed already, or that they are in the position to be soon betrothed.⁶⁵ As we will see as we move forward in the exegesis of the text, Paul uses this situation as

⁶² This is how it is translated in the ESV.

⁶³ See 1 Cor. 7:36-38.

⁶⁴ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 571. While the English “virgin” once overlapped more closely with the Greek *παρθενοῦς*, it is my judgment that today it refers too directly to whether or not one has had intercourse and is not the best choice for translation. Thiselton does hold that *παρθενοῦς* can also include men in its semantic range.

⁶⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Revised Edition, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 360; Thiselton, *The First Epistle*, 570. Both Fee and Thiselton note that this was the dominant way of understanding the text until modern times. I have followed this more traditional understanding of the situation and have sought to address the concerns with it below.

a chance to further emphasize the unique eschatological situation of the Christian life and the consequent unique character the Christian is to adopt. Why does Paul choose to expand this theological teaching here rather than earlier in the chapter? Any answer to that question can only be speculation, but perhaps it is because of the unique situation of these young, unmarried women. I will unfold this further below.

After referencing the specific situation in 7:25, Paul again qualifies his following judgment by saying that he has no command from the Lord, but gives his own judgment. That judgment is given in 7:26, and it coincides with what he has already said, that it is good to remain as one is. However, Paul adds one addition to the counsel to remain. Paul says, “because of the present distress (διὰ τὴν ἐνεστῶσαν ἀνάγκην).” What is Paul referring to here? Is this a general “present distress” of the end times or is there a more particular distress that Paul is referring to. Winter has argued through careful attention to the historic data that in Corinth there had been a string of famines during the late 40s and possibly early 50s AD.⁶⁶ It is possible that this “present distress” that Paul is referring to is either another famine, or just the fear that another famine could occur; however, the text gives no other indication of this. Even if this is the case, it is clear from the context of 7:29-35 that Paul is not advocating merely a cessation from pursuing marriage at this particular moment because of severe economic or social distress. If this were the case, Paul would not have needed to give the extensive theological argument for why he is counseling to remain as one is. He would merely have had to say, “Remain as you are until the present distress is over. You are then you are free to marry without the fear of trouble.”

⁶⁶ Bruce W. Winter, “Secular and Christian Responses to Corinthian Famines,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 48 (1989): 86-91.

Paul's argument is summed up in 7:28 as "those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that." If not the main cause of Paul's counsel, a famine or fear of famine would provide some context for Paul's position. In Paul's mind, the reality of famine, war, and natural disasters were all signs of the end of the age.⁶⁷ As we will argue in the next chapter, this doesn't mean that Paul is expecting an imminent return of Christ and end of the current world in a short amount of time. But that these events would be signs that the end of the age has come. Because of this, a certain urgency and stance towards engagement with the world must be taken by those who are Christ followers. It is this particular stance to which we will devote our attention to in the next chapter through our exegesis of 7:29-35.

After giving the theological core of his argument, Paul returns to the particular situation of the church and makes some final comments by way of conclusion in 7:36-38. It is in these verses that we must make the determination of which reconstruction of the Corinthian situation provides the better explanation of the textual data. There are two main positions in the argument over what situation Paul is responding to.⁶⁸ We will call the first the "fiancé view," and it holds that Paul is primarily responding to an engaged couple, and 7:36-38 is addressed to the fiancé in the couple. The second view we will label the "guardian view." This position holds that Paul is primarily addressing the fathers or guardians who have some kind of authority or responsibility for the *παρθένοι*

⁶⁷ See Mark 13:8 and parallels; also see Rom. 8:35.

⁶⁸ Fee, 361. As Fee notes, a third position has also been suggested. This "spiritual marriage view" reads the situation in 7:25ff as closely related to 7:1. It holds that there were in the Corinthian church some who sought to live in "spiritual marriages" with their spouses, abstaining from sex. This was a practice during later centuries of the early church, but there is no evidence for it in Corinth at this early of a period, and the position relies largely on reading a later development backward into the Corinthian situation.

in question. Which view we adopt is largely determined by how we make sense of the textual data, and it is to this that we now turn.

There are three interrelated exegetical questions that we must make sense of in these verses. 1) What is the relationship between the man – indicated by the pronoun *τις* in 7:36 – and his *παρθενος*, 2) how do we understand the word *ὑπέρακμος* used in the second conditional statement of 7:36, and 3) how do we make sense of Paul's change in verb usage in 7:38? How we answer these three questions will determine our understanding of 7:36-38 and the situation in the Corinthian church that required a response from Paul more generally. I will demonstrate below the ways in which both the fiancé view and the guardian view answer these questions. Then I will argue for why I believe the guardian view is the better view despite its difficulties.

In 7:35 Paul wraps up his theological argument for the preference of celibacy and is moving back into addressing the particular issue at hand in the Corinthian church. Verse 36 presents us with a very difficult conditional sentence.⁶⁹ Here we will outline the conditional sentence for clarity in the argument that follows:

The Greek Sentence

Protasis 1: Εἰ δέ τις ἀσχημονεῖν ἐπὶ τὴν παρθένον αὐτοῦ νομίζει,

Protasis 2: ἐὰν ᾗ ὑπέρακμος καὶ οὕτως ὀφείλει γίνεσθαι,

Apodasis: ὃ θέλει ποιείτω,

Explanatory Addition: οὐχ ἁμαρτάνει, γαμείτωσαν.

The Fiancé View

Protasis 1: If anyone thinks he is behaving improperly towards his betrothed...

⁶⁹ Fee, 386. As Fee notes, and we will use a modified version of his diagram of the sentence to help visualize the problems.

Protasis 2: and if his passion is strong, and in this way he ought to be...

Apodasis: Let him do as he wills,

Explanatory Addition: He does not sin, let them marry.

The Guardian View

Protasis 1: If anyone thinks he is behaving improperly towards his unmarried daughter or ward...

Protasis 2: and if she is past puberty, and in this way she ought to be...

Apodasis: Let him do as he wills,

Explanatory Addition: He does not sin, let them marry.

As noted above, the issue is three fold: First, Paul uses the pronoun *τις* – anyone – in 7:36, and the referent of this pronoun is indeterminate, and therefore could refer to either the fiancé or the guardian of the *παρθενοῦς*. The reason for letting them marry is that this person, whoever he is, believes he is acting inappropriately (*ἀσχημονεῖν*) towards his *παρθενοῦς*. What might this mean in both of our reconstructions and how does that shape our understanding of the second conditional?

If we understand the man in these statements to be the fiancé of the *παρθενοῦς*, what improper behavior would warrant marriage in a context where Paul is clearly in favor of celibacy? Those holding this position usually see some kind of sexual impropriety as the issue by coming to a conclusion about the meaning of *ὑπέρακμος* in the second conditional statement and reading this back into the first conditional.

However, Paul has already addressed an issue similar to this in 7:8-9.⁷⁰ Why would he need to repeat himself and with such different language again? This also makes the man's sexual desire the central issue in the engagement, when the issue as introduced in 7:25 is one that is primarily about the unmarried women. Also, the meaning of ὑπέρακμος as referring to the man's undue sexual desire is also questionable.

Looking at the second conditional clause of this sentence, we must deal with a very rare word ὑπέρακμος.⁷¹ Because of the rarity of the word, some try to understand its usage in this sentence by breaking it down into its constituent parts. This methodology suggests the word means being beyond (ὑπέρ) a certain point (ακμος). This hardly solves any problems for us, but merely pushes the question a little further down the road. We must then ask what point is in view? While typically the Greek word ακμος has a temporal span in view,⁷² some argue for a more figurative understanding of the word, meaning "passions beyond appropriate limit."⁷³ Along with the issues around the meaning of the word, we also do not know to whom the word refers to. Is this referring to the man, as would be grammatically customary for the first and second clause to have the same subject, or is this referring to the woman? This would be grammatically unusual, but the complexity of the sentence, and also the fact that Paul is addressing the man, but

⁷⁰ Though, it is doubtful that strong sexual passion is in view in these verses. In the Greek, the sentence reads κρείττον γάρ ἐστὶν γαμῆσαι ἢ πυροῦσθαι. The question becomes what is in view by Paul's usage of the verb πυρόω – a verb which in and of itself does not suggest merely sexual desire.

⁷¹ Moisés Silva ed., "ὑπέρακμος," In *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 2nd ed., 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 556. This is its only occurrence in the NT. Silvia also notes that it does not occur in the LXX or in other Jewish literature.

⁷² Silva, "ὑπέρακμος," 556.

⁷³ Thiselton, *The First Epistle*, 595; Will Deming, *Paul on Marriage & Celibacy: The Hellenistic Background of 1 Corinthians 7* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 202.

the central concern is with the woman wouldn't make the switch in subject impossible. In the fiancé view, if this word is referring to the man, the figurative meaning is preferred to suggest that the man has overly strong sexual passion. If referring to the women, some argue that the usage suggests she is past her prime in terms of marriageable age. However, in one 1st century medicinal text this word has been found to refer to a woman who has reached the age of puberty.⁷⁴ This requires no figurative interpretation and allows for a more natural reading of the word as being “past a certain point” meaning the point of puberty. Those adopting the fiancé view usually rule this out based on context.

These conclusions about the text come together in the fiancé view to give an interpretation of 7:36-38 as follows: “So if anyone thinks he is behaving inappropriately towards his betrothed, if his sexual desire is unduly strong, and in this way it ought to be, let him do as he wills, he does not sin, let them marry.” Or, if the second conditional refers to the woman, “If anyone thinks that he is behaving inappropriately towards his betrothed, and she is past her prime, and in this way she ought to be, let him do as he wills, he does not sin, let them marry.”

While this is one plausible way to make sense of the data, it provides for an odd situation for Paul to devote so much space in his letter to. A man is betrothed to his fiancé, yet because of pressure from the ascetic group indicated in 7:1, or another reason, he has not gone through with the engagement. As he waits, he begins to think that he is acting inappropriately towards his betrothed because of his strong sexual passion,⁷⁵ though presumably he was not sinning overtly because Paul would have condemned this.

⁷⁴ Bruce W. Winter, “Puberty or Passion? The Referent of ὙΠΕΡΑΚΜΟΣ in 1 Corinthians 7:36,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 49.1 (1998): 75; Silva, “ὕπερακμος,” 556. This is found in the late 1st century work *Gynaecology* by Soranus.

⁷⁵ Or, if the variant reading is adopted, because his fiancée has past her “prime.”

Paul then, because of this, essentially repeats his counsel already stated in 7:8-9 to this particular situation. It is better to marry than to burn with passion.

Some issues arise if this view is taken. First, as noted above, this shifts the focus from the unmarried woman to the man. If we accept that in 7:25 *παρθενων* refers both to men and women, this can be understood. However, as I have argued above, a non-figurative usage of *παρθενος* always has a woman in view, even if she is betrothed. Furthermore, we would have to assume that Paul refers to the engaged coupled with the plural form, and then switches and only refers to the woman with this word throughout the rest of the passage. An odd change at best, with no signal to his hearers that there are two referents in view.

Secondly, it is understandable for “engaged couples” to be another topic in this chapter on marriage, but if Paul’s counsel is to be essentially the same that he gives in 7:8-9, why devote some much space to developing his argument. However, if this is essentially a different issue than marriage and remarriage that has been treated in the first half of the chapter, it does make more sense for Paul to spend a considerable amount of time setting up his counsel. The second possible reconstruction, that of the guardian view provides such a different context and would warrant the extensive development that Paul gives to this issue. To that view and how it makes sense of the textual data we now turn.

Marriage in the ancient world had a very different place in the social and economic structure of life than it does for us today in the 21st century West. To be married was to enter into an entire web of responsibilities and obligations in both civic and private life. Marriages were not pursued primarily out of mutual affection, but were

often about the security and stability and continuation of households.⁷⁶ The topic of marriage was something that was debated among the philosophers with its merits and demerits explored. As we noted in the first chapter of this essay, Corinth was an important newly founded Roman colony and had a long Greek heritage. It would not be surprising then for some of the popular discourse on marriage to be familiar in the church.⁷⁷ It would make sense that the Corinthians would have questions about how Paul's gospel proclamation influenced how they thought about their marriages (the first half of 1 Cor. 7). The issue of how fathers or guardians of young unmarried women should think about their wards with regards to marriage would be a natural extension of the previous issue.⁷⁸ This issue would involve less practical counsel about how one was to behave with regards to their marriages, and would provide more of an opportunity for Paul to expand the more foundational theological beliefs. It is for this reason, and the way it makes sense of the following textual data that I prefer the guardian view over the fiancé view.

How does the guardian view make sense of the textual data? Looking back at 7:36 again, we return to the issue of what might be in view in the inappropriate behavior mentioned in the first conditional with regards to the guardians. In the Greek, the word is

⁷⁶ Something very closely connected to the continuation of the *polis* in Greek thought. Throughout this paragraph I am dependent on Deming for his work on the understanding of marriage in the Greco-Roman moral tradition.

⁷⁷ Deming's monograph traces the influence of the Stoic/Cynic debate on marriage through 1 Cor. 7 arguing that we can discern by the nature of Paul's argument that he was familiar with the Stoic/Cynic debate, even though his counsel diverges from it.

⁷⁸ Although we cannot be certain, I believe that it is possible that there was a very strong Stoic worldview present in the Corinthian church. Stoic thought, being primarily a pantheistic worldview, mingled with the gospel proclamation could have led to the "spiritual" group in Corinth, those Thiselton identifies as having an "over-realized" eschatology.

ἀσχημονέω which has at its root the noun σχῆμα. Earlier in our text, this is the word that Paul uses to refer to the present form of this world - τὸ σχῆμα τοῦ κόσμου τούτου – saying that it is passing away. The word with the alpha prefix in itself just means contrary to a pattern or form.⁷⁹ The sense of shame that the fiancé view reads into the word is usually inferred from the context such as in Romans 1:27.⁸⁰ The word can carry this meaning, but it is also possible for it to mean contrary to an established pattern without the sense of shame or guilt. Seeing as how “the pattern of this world” is something that Paul is addressing directly in this section from an eschatological perspective, and also taking into account the pains he takes throughout the chapter to communicate that both marriage and celibacy are morally permissible routes for the Christian, it is reasonable to translate this word as “acting against the accepted pattern” without the connotation of shame and impropriety that is communicated with the fiancé view and most modern translations. In this way, Paul is addressing the guardians and saying something to the effect, “Even with all that I’ve said, if anyone thinks that he is acting out of accordance with the established patterns which are passing away (and is presumably not settled about this, see v. 37) with regards to his unmarried daughter or ward...”

Moving on to consider the second conditional, the guardian view understands this to be referring to the παρθενος. As she is the one who is the topic of concern, the shift in subject is not hard to explain.⁸¹ Paul has an additional consideration that she be

⁷⁹ BDAG, 147.

⁸⁰ Winter, “Puberty or Passion?” 80.

⁸¹ See argument above.

ὑπέρακμος. As noted above, this is a difficult word to understand. It is possible that we can understand this to mean “past her prime” as the variant of the fiancé view takes it to mean. However, as also noted above, there is evidence from a 1st century text that this word can be used to refer to a woman who has reached the age of puberty. This requires no figurative interpretation and allows for a more natural reading of the word as being “past a certain point” meaning the point of puberty.⁸² Paul would then be giving a practical addendum to his counsel, advising the guardians not to give their wards away in marriage at too young of an age, “as she ought to be.” Paul then concludes by giving the apodosis of “let him do as he wills, he does not sin, let them marry.”⁸³

Looking ahead to 7:38, we need to consider one additional point of data that lends itself to the guardian view. Throughout chapter 7, when Paul is discussing marriage, he uses the intransitive verb γαμεω. However, in 7:38, Paul switches to the transitive verb γαμιζω. The latter verb meaning to “give in marriage” rather than “to marry.” In the fiancé view, this shift is accounted for through a lexical argument that says the verbs can essentially mean the same thing.⁸⁴ However, Paul has been using one form of the verb throughout, and it would seem that unless there is a strong argument for why he would change his usage to refer to the same act of marrying, we should take the shift as intentional. Reading γαμιζω with its typical meaning of “to give in marriage” fits well with the guardian view, and it does not require us to explain away Paul’s shift in verb usage. This is the strongest datum from the text supporting the guardian view.

⁸² Winter, “Puberty or Passion?” 75. Winter states as much, though still disagrees with the position.

⁸³ This also has the benefit of explaining the shift to the third plural in γαμείτωσαν.

⁸⁴ Thiselton, *The First Epistle*, 596-97.

If it is the case that the guardian view makes better sense of the data, why do most modern interpreters resist it? Garland gives multiple reasons,⁸⁵ but one seems to carry the most weight to us as modern interpreters of the text. If the guardian view is correct, doesn't this mean that Paul is justifying a tyrannical relationship in which the father or guardian is forcing celibacy on a young woman who has no choice or consideration in the matter? Furthermore, why would Paul praise the man for a decision which costs him nothing and in which the daughter bears the full weight of the sacrifice? This is a persuasive counter argument to the view and when backed up with alternative stances on the more ambiguous elements of the textual data, might make the guardian view less appealing to adopt. Let's take each point at a time.

To the first point – that Paul is justifying a tyrannical relationship between guardian and ward – we must not forget that Paul is *not* prohibiting the marriage of the young woman. In fact he is telling the guardian that he is not sinning if he does give his ward away. The suggestion that it would be a sin to give his ward away in marriage seems to have come from the ascetic party in Corinth. The situation on the ground was already one in which asceticism was labeled “good” and marriage as “sin.” Paul is arguing that both are “good.” Also, it is possible that part of the guardian's hesitation and therefore the reason for the inclusion of this in the letter to Paul was due to the fact that the guardian was considering the desires, emotions, and general hardship a celibate life might cause his ward. If understood this way, Paul is advocating not a tyrannical relationship, but allowing for the guardian to take into consideration all sides of the issue

⁸⁵ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 337-38.

and not to feel pressured from the ascetic group who would tell him it was a “sin” to give his ward in marriage.

Now to the second point of how Paul could praise the man for the sacrifice that he does not bear. We have to consider why Paul is advocating celibacy in this passage. It is not because celibacy was a spiritually superior position, nor is it because of a negative view of sex and marriage (in fact many confuse Paul’s advocating for celibacy in this passage as supporting asceticism and belying a negative understanding of the body and of sex when this is what he is arguing against). Paul is advocating for celibacy because of the nature of the time. The man is not doing “better” by not giving his daughter in marriage in the sense that this option is more advantageous in some spiritual sense. Nor does Paul think this is the best option because of some economic or social difficulty. It is better because to be celibate means that there is no division of devotion in one’s life. Paul is advocating for the lordship of Christ to relativize both marriage and celibacy, and in this regard is the celibate position more advantageous.

With those objections addressed, we now turn to 7:37. Here Paul gives a description of the stance the man should have if he is to “keep his own virgin.” In the fiancé position, these conditions are all about the man being sure that he has the fortitude to commit to the celibate life. This however runs into multiple problems, not the least of which is what would mean for the fiancé to “keep his own virgin,” with some commentators landing on something like that suggested by Thiselton as “respect her virginity.”⁸⁶ In the view I have adopted, these qualities refer to the guardian. While Fee adopts the fiancé view, his summary of this list of conditions can also be applied to the

⁸⁶ Thiselton, *The First Epistle*, 601.

guardian. In summary Fee states that, “In no less than four different ways he repeats that such a man must be fully convinced in his own mind...This verbal tour de force strongly suggests that outside influences might lead him to take such an action, but *against* his own will.”⁸⁷ Deming also sees in the verse the same language used by the Stoic philosophers to describe the wise man.⁸⁸ Therefore, we should understand Paul to be communicating that if the guardian is to keep his ward unmarried, he is to do so not because of the outside influence of the ascetic party but because he has weighed the issue in his own heart as one who is wise.

At the end of the day, does it matter which interpretation we accept? As argued above, both interpretations are plausible reconstructions of the situation even if leading to different interpretations of 7:36-38. Neither is without problems for the interpreter. However, I believe adopting the fiancé view introduces a possible unwanted consequence of interpreting Paul’s view of marriage more negatively than is warranted. I have argued that the guardian view stretches the text less than the fiancé view, and maintains the generally neutral stance Paul has taken towards marriage throughout the chapter. Our cultural unease with the implied patriarchal setting should not bias us against this reading. With this construction in mind, we can now look at the heart of Paul’s counsel in this section – 7:29-25.

⁸⁷ Fee, 389.

⁸⁸ Deming, 202-3.

Chapter Three

Exegesis of 1 Corinthians 7:29-35

Paul is not a pragmatist;⁸⁹ his desire is not for mere church peace or church growth for its own sake, but for the church to be united in Christ and grow into maturity. So, even when Paul is addressing very contextual issues such as ones of marriage and remarriage and the issue of *παρθένων* in 1 Cor. 7, there is still a strong theological emphasis. This theological core of Paul's argument in 7:29-35 is what we can now attend to having looked at the historical context of the Corinthian church, and having explored a plausible reconstruction of the particular situation that contextualized Paul's counsel.

For context, I will briefly retrace Paul's initial argument up to 7:29. Paul turns his attention to the issue of the *παρθένων* in 7:25, making sure that his hearers understand his words not as a command from the Lord but as Paul's counsel.⁹⁰ In 7:26-27, before moving into the theological core of the argument, Paul roots his comments in what he has already stated – that it is good for one to remain as he is.⁹¹ 1 Cor. 7:17-24 is a complex section in itself and the aim of this essay prevents a detailed analysis here. However, I agree with Thiselton's summary of Paul's argument in 7:17-24 when he says that:

⁸⁹ See 1 Cor. 2:1.

⁹⁰ This does not mean that his counsel holds no authority; Paul says his judgment is trustworthy.

⁹¹ See above for comments on the "present distress."

“...neither freedom in the new creation nor obedient response to divine call can be compromised by the constraints of a person’s circumstantial situation or status in everyday life. A Christian does not have to seek ‘the right situation’ in order to enjoy Christian freedom or to serve God effectively.”⁹²

This would have been in contrast to what the ascetic group believed – that marriage was a compromising constraint. Furthermore, Thiselton continues elsewhere:

“To *remain* Jewish or non-Jewish does not spring from general indifference, but from its *salvific* irrelevance. As in the case of gender, such distinctions are not abrogated wholesale: whether for friendship or for the witness of the gospel there need to be Christian Jews, Christian gentiles, Christian singles, and Christian married. The new creation transforms and relativizes such distinctions, but they have a place. Certainly the Christian is not to seek change merely to gratify ambition or to be a “better” Christian.”⁹³

For Paul, this is his rule in all the churches and applies to a variety of social makers – circumcision/uncircumcision, male/female, slave/free. It is the unique situation for the guardians having the prospect of marriage lying before their wards that provides Paul the warrant for expanding on this general principle with regards to the *παρθένων*. This expansion should be understood as helping them grow in their wisdom with regards to the situation.⁹⁴

Paul’s counsel begins with the general principle that has controlled his argument in the entire chapter, namely that his hearers should remain in the situations that they find themselves and feel no pressure to change one’s status. In 7:28 however we see that, if one is in the position to change one’s marital status, it is an issue of moral indifference or

⁹² Thiselton, *The First Epistle*, 545.

⁹³ Thiselton, *The First Epistle*, 551.

⁹⁴ See above on the wisdom language of 7:37.

adiaphora. If you do chose to marry, you have not sinned. Based on what Paul has said in 7:17-24, this new situation should be understood as the same as the last in that you are to live in obedience to the Lord. Even still, Paul’s desire is for his hearers to be spared of *θλιψιν δὲ τῇ σαρκί*, and this is what in Paul’s view, those who marry will have. It is the unfolding of what this “trouble of the flesh”⁹⁵ means that leads Paul into the theology that serves as the foundation for his counsel. If we look at the structure of the argument in 7:29-35, we see it breaks into two sections. First, in 7:29-31 Paul addresses the eschatological reality in which the believer lives and the corresponding response this reality necessitates. Secondly, in 7:32-35, Paul applies this to the state of marriage.

Turning now to 7:29, it begins - *Τοῦτο δέ φημι, ἀδελφοί*, - “this is what I mean brothers,” indicating that what follows should be understood as an expansion of Paul’s meaning on the troubles of the flesh that those who are married will have. Careful attention then to these verses should primarily control our understanding of the Paul’s meaning of *θλιψιν δὲ τῇ σαρκί*. This trouble is closely related to the eschatological reality ushered in by the death and resurrection of Christ – the focus of Paul’s gospel. Paul’s explanation begins and ends with two eschatological statements: “the appointed time has grown very short” and “the present form of this world is passing away.”⁹⁶ These eschatological bookends must first be understood if we are to rightly understand Paul’s meaning in the “as not” statements they bracket.

⁹⁵ Thiselton, *The First Epistle*, 578. The fact that it is a singular idea – trouble or distress of the flesh – and not a plural “troubles,” lends itself to the argument that this is more than just the socio-economic hardship that a famine might present. Trouble of the flesh seems to be a broader category for Paul. Thiselton suggests in his translation that “*pressures* anticipate very appropriately what Paul will say about undue spread of interests and energies” in the coming verses.

⁹⁶ Both ESV.

In 7:29 Paul says ὁ καιρὸς συνεσταλμένος ἐστίν. Both the subject and the predicate of this sentence must be looked at closely. The first question we must ask is what kind of time did Paul have in view. We use the English word “time” in a variety of ways. We use it to refer to the abstraction of time as minutes and hours when we ask, “What time is it?” We use it in a chronological sense when we say, “Hurry up! We are running out of time.” We use it to refer to specific moments as well, as in “It is time for a change.” Similarly, the word καιρὸς is one of many words used in the NT to talk about time,⁹⁷ and usually refers to a distinct moment or period of time with reference to specific content.⁹⁸ In a passage like the parable of the tenants in Matthew 21, this is how it is used: “When the season [ὁ καιρὸς] for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit.” Here καιρὸς refers to the time when the fruit was ready to be harvested. The distinct period is the harvest season, and the content of that period is the work of the harvest, and more specifically the time in which the owner of the vineyard would send his servants to collect the fruit. While Jesus is using the parable to communicate truths about the kingdom, the word itself in this context has no particular theological meaning. However, καιρὸς often does occur in more direct theological contexts and thereby takes on a more specific theological or eschatological meaning as well.

To categorize and explore all occurrences of when καιρὸς is used in this kind of discourse is beyond the scope of this essay. Paul uses καιρὸς 30x in his writings alone, and 5 out of the 6 occurrences in his letter to the Romans are in direct theological

⁹⁷ Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964), 38.

⁹⁸ Gerhard Delling, “καιρός, ἄκαιρος, ἀκαιρεω, εὐκαιρος, εὐκαιρία, πρόσκαιρος,” In *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel, translated and edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), 3:460. As Delling defines it, “the specific and decisive point, especially as regards its content.”

discourse.⁹⁹ Looking only at 1 Corinthians, we see that Paul uses *καὶρὸς* two other times besides our passage. In 7:5, Paul uses it in a more general way when he advises those who are married to “not deprive one another, except for perhaps a limited time [*πρὸς καιρόν*] that you may devote yourselves to prayer.” Also, in 4:5 Paul says “do not pronounce judgment before the time [*πρὸ καιροῦ*], before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.” This occurrence, like the occurrence in our passage is in reference to a particular *καὶρὸς* of eschatological import. So we see that Paul is able to use the word in multiple ways even within a single letter.

At this point, I am not arguing for the content or nature of the *καὶρὸς* in view here in 7:29. I desire only to demonstrate that chronological time is not what is in view when Paul uses the word *καὶρὸς*. Instead, what is in view is a particular moment or duration of time with reference to its specific content. I also wanted to indicate that context of its usage shows us this was an eschatologically significant term for Paul. Paul does not indicate here what moment of time he is referring to, and his failure to explain must be because the Corinthians would have been familiar with Paul’s teaching so that no further explanation would be warranted. Even so, Paul makes clear in 1 Cor. 15 that it is the death and resurrection of Christ that has brought about this change.¹⁰⁰

The predicate of the sentence is also important to note. The verb from which the participle is formed is rare and only occurs one other time in the NT, in Acts 5:6. In that

⁹⁹ See Romans 3:26, 5:6, 8:18, 11:5, 13:11.

¹⁰⁰ Cullmann, 139-143. Cullmann understands that the work of Christ makes the “when” of the future eschatological drama not longer something essential theologically. He notes that, “The important Pauline discussion concerning the resurrection in I Cor., ch. 15, develops precisely this central theme, that all hope of the still future resurrection of the body rests solely and alone upon the already completed resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

narrative, Ananais has died and afterwards “The young men rose and wrapped [συνέστειλαν] him up and carried him out and buried him.” The verb is usually taken to mean that the body was wrapped in a shroud. BDAG gives as its first entry “to draw together so as to be less extended.”¹⁰¹ Fee suggests that the word means to “reduce, restrain, or limit in some way” depending on the context and therefore opts for “compress” in this passage.¹⁰² The sense then is that the *καιρὸς* is being limited in some way. The passive voice of the participle is usually explained as the usage of the divine passive. It is God who is doing the limiting of the *καιρὸς*.¹⁰³ Paul’s use of the perfect tense suggests an action in the past that has continued effects into the present. Taking this lexical data into account, a more dynamic translation that captures the sense of the participle could be “God has already begun to draw together the time.”

In this way, I would argue that Paul is not suggesting that the time before the end is shortened in the chronological sense, i.e. that there is little time left. Instead, he is suggesting that this particular moment of time, this season of redemptive history God has already begun to “wrap up.” The emphasis is not the amount of time left, but the reality that the nature of the time is temporary because of the work that God has already done in Christ. Paul expects an end to this particular *καιρὸς*, but the *when* of the end is not in view. Having prefaced his comments with this eschatological truth, Paul then turns his attention to the response of the believer in the next verse. Before looking at that response however we will look at the closing bookend of 7:31.

¹⁰¹ BDAG, 978.

¹⁰² Fee, 374.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

The closing bookend is linked to the preceding with the explanatory conjunction γὰρ, pointing backwards to the appropriate stance of the believer and forward to Paul's further justification for this position. In this final statement, Paul says that τὸ σχῆμα τοῦ κόσμου τούτου, "the present form of this world" is παράγει, "is passing away." A more literal translation might read, "the scheme of this world is passing by." There are two exegetical questions to address. First, what does Paul mean in this context by σχῆμα τοῦ κόσμου, and secondly, what would it mean for that to be passing by.

The Greek σχῆμα usually refers to the outward appearance of something.¹⁰⁴ When referencing a person, it refers to their demeanor or outward posture. This is the case in its usage in Is. 3:17 in the LXX. Here it is said that κύριος ἀποκαλύψει τὸ σχῆμα αὐτῶν, "the lord will reveal their form." This is explained further in the following verses. The outward forms of beauty and position and pride are taken away, and these outward displays of pride are referred to as the σχῆμα. The word also occurs in Philippians when Jesus is described as being "found in human form," – καὶ σχήματι εὑρεθεὶς ὡς ἄνθρωπος. Therefore, when used as an aspect of "this world" it is referring to the outward patterns or outward displays of the world. It would include the aspects of the world that Paul mentions in the preceding verses – marriage, economics, etc. Wimbush defines it as "the distinctive manifestations – institutions, morals, ideals – that characterize the κόσμος."¹⁰⁵ We might also call it the way of life of the world.

¹⁰⁴ Johannes Schneider, "σχῆμα, μετασχηματίζω," In *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel, Translated and edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), 7:954.

¹⁰⁵ Vincent L. Wimbush, *Paul the Worldly Ascetic: Response to the World and Self-Understanding according to 1 Corinthians 7* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 34.

Paul says that it is these aspects of the world that are *παράγει*. In context this verb is highlighting not the transience of the physical world, but the temporary nature of these outward forms or this way of life. They are passing away. This is the same language that John uses to talk about the darkness passing away in 1 John 2:8. Furthermore, the verb is in the present tense, indicating this passing away is already currently happening, not something that will happen in the future.

Taking both eschatological bookends together, Paul is saying that this time that the Corinthian believers find themselves inhabiting,¹⁰⁶ God has already begun to draw to a close. Along with this, the way of life that characterizes this world is passing away. These two eschatological truths necessitate a particular posture or stance of the believer – a way of life that stands over against the transient way of life in the world. This posture is characterized by relating to the world “as not.” What Paul means by this stance is what we now turn to.

The *ὡς μὴ* statements of vv. 29-31 describe the kind of stance that Paul believes is congruent with the eschatological reality of the time. The rhetoric of the text however, does not give us much information as to what Paul means by living “as not.” There is a parallelism of form in these five statements that differ only in the final two. Looking at Paul’s language in these two statements might give us an idea as to what this idea of living “as not” might mean.

The first is *οἱ ἀγοράζοντες ὡς μὴ κατέχοντες*. The ESV renders this as “those who buy as though they had no goods.” The first participle is formed from the verb *ἀγοράζω*, meaning “to buy” and is found in passages such as Matt. 14:15 to refer to

¹⁰⁶ Here, though Paul does not use the language of “ages” we can see the theological concept of the overlap of the ages.

the exchange of money for food. Earlier in this letter Paul uses it to refer to the redemption of the Corinthians by Christ.¹⁰⁷ The second participle is formed from the verb *κατέχω* which can mean to hold or keep or restrain. Paul uses this verb two more times in the letter. In 11:2, when commending the Corinthians for holding or maintaining the traditions, and in 15:2 in holding fast to the word Paul preached – two things that Paul would not have wanted his hearers to have let go of. So then there is a sense of holding tightly implied. The goal or purpose of buying and selling would be to acquire wealth. In a *κόσμος* that has permanence, it would make sense to hold fast or hold tightly to this wealth. Why else would one pursue buying and selling if not to acquire. To live “as not” with relation to buying and selling would be to buy and sell with something akin to loose hands. The purpose of buying and selling is not to gain possession, to hold fast to that which you have acquired. In a world that is passing away, that purpose makes no sense. It should also be noted that Paul does not say that one should not participate in buying. It is implied that one is. It is not about the practice itself, it is about a different disposition that flows out of a different *telos*.

The last statement also breaks the parallelism seen in the first three. It reads οἱ χρώμενοι τὸν κόσμον ὡς μὴ καταχρώμενοι, rendered in the ESV as “those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it.” The Greek *χράομαι* is a difficult word because its usage is largely determined by its context.¹⁰⁸ The word usually means “to make use of,”¹⁰⁹ but it is unclear due to the rhetorical nature of this section, what Paul

¹⁰⁷ See 1 Cor. 6:20, 7:23.

¹⁰⁸ Thiselton, *The First Epistle*, 584. Thiselton notes that this is “what philosophers of language term a ‘polymorphous concept.’ In many contexts it means *to use*; but in some contexts, the context itself defines the content of what it is to use something.”

¹⁰⁹ BDAG, 1087.

means by “using the world.” The second participle of this statement is also difficult due to the ambiguity of the first. This is the same language that Paul uses later in 1 Cor. 9 when talking about his rights as an apostle. In 9:12 and 9:15 of the chapter he says that he did not *make use of* [χράομαι] his rights as an apostle to earn a living from his proclamation, even though he was entitled to it. Instead, he chose to not put any stumbling block between the gospel and the Corinthians. Then in 9:18 Paul says his reward for preaching the gospel lies in that fact that he can present it free of charge, and in that way “not make full use of”¹¹⁰ [μὴ καταχρήσασθαι] his rights. BDAG notes that the preposition added to the simple word usually gives a “special coloring”¹¹¹ and this coloring in 9:18 is highlighting Paul’s restraint. Thiselton chooses to interpret this additional element by translating the word as “gratuitously foregoing” his rights. Fee, however, takes a different route in his understanding of Paul’s use of the word in 9:18 saying, “in this context [it] most likely has the negative connotation of ‘abuse’ or ‘misuse.’”¹¹² What is clear in this passage is that Paul could use his rights as an apostle, yet because of his desire to offer the gospel freely without obstacle he does not act on his rights, whether in the sense of using them fully or abusing. The difference between the two words then is understood to be the “use of” versus “using to its fullest extent,” or “to use up.”¹¹³ Wimbush goes on in his comments on this statement to say, “The primary concern is not about the ethics and morality of dealings in the world, but about general

¹¹⁰ ESV.

¹¹¹ BDAG, 530.

¹¹² Fee, 465.

¹¹³ Wimbush, 30.

attitude toward, and involvement in, the world itself, that is, concern about the world's power to entangle and disarm, to make one less ready for the imminent End."¹¹⁴ Looking back then to the fifth ὥς μὴ statement, Paul is saying that those who make use of the world should do so as those who recognize its transitory nature. A more dynamic translation of this statement might be "and those who make use of the world should not do so as if the world is all there is."

The ὥς μὴ statements are highly rhetorical, and we should take Fee's caution of not reading them literally.¹¹⁵ The paradox is part of the point. There is a tension Paul is not interested in taking away from his hearers. That tension is not between the present and the future, but between competing visions for the Corinthians posture towards the world in the καὶ πρὸς between what God has already begun to do and the point in which he brings it to a close. From the analysis of the final two ὥς μὴ statements we can see that for Paul, to live "as not" meant not disengagement from the world, but engagement with a new perspective. This ὥς μὴ stance is one in which the eschatological realities shift one's purpose or goal. To live ὥς μὴ is to live in the world, but without playing by its rules. It is consistent with the view taken throughout the NT by various authors of the texts. They are to be married, but to not see marriage as the goal or become to caught up in the worldly pressures of marriage as to lose sight of God's redemptive timeline.¹¹⁶ They are to mourn but not as those without hope.¹¹⁷ They are to rejoice, but not as if the

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 31. Though Wimbush prefers the position that Paul has in view here a shortened time before the Parousia, his comments are still helpful in understanding what is in view in the ὥς μὴ statements.

¹¹⁵ Fee, 375.

¹¹⁶ This is resonant with Jesus' teaching on the family in places such as Luke 14:25ff.

¹¹⁷ See 1 Thes. 4:13.

present joy is all there is.¹¹⁸ They are to participate in the economic realm, but realizing that the acquisition of wealth is not the goal.¹¹⁹ They are to use the world, but not love it.¹²⁰

Under the relativizing influence of these eschatological realities, neither celibacy nor marriage in and of themselves was the goal. Both needed to come under the eschatological reality of the time. In both cases Paul desires his hearers to have a different perspective. Yet, Paul still prefers celibacy to marriage. On what grounds does Paul argue for celibacy, having already established the appropriate posture the Corinthian believes were to take with regards to the world? Celibacy becomes the “better” option solely on the grounds that it offers one the ability to be without distraction in his or her devotion to the Lord. This is the connection between 7:29-31 and 7:32-35, and it is to these verses that we will now turn.

In 7:32, Paul expresses his desire that the Corinthians would be ἀμερίμνους, “free from anxiety” in the ESV. Paul’s desire that the Corinthians be ἀμερίμνους is an interpretation and application of the ὥς μη statements with regard to the particular topic of marriage. As I have argued, Paul is emphasizing two eschatological truths that must ground the Corinthians posture towards the world: that God has already begun to wrap up this time in the death and resurrection of Christ, and therefore this present way of life that characterizes this world is already passing away. There becomes then a tension for the Christian of knowing how to live life “as not.” This is an issue not of disengagement but engagement with the appropriate perspective. There are two exegetical questions to

¹¹⁸ See Rom. 5:2.

¹¹⁹ See Mark 10:17ff.

¹²⁰ See 1 John 2:15.

address in 7:32-35. First, what does Paul mean when he uses the word ἀμερίμνους, and how does it relate to the usage of the verb μεριμνάω? Secondly, what is in view when Paul equates being concerned with something [μεριμνῶ] with “how one might please [ἀρέσῃ]” someone?

First, what does Paul have in mind when he uses the word ἀμερίμνους in 7:32? The Greek ἀμερίμνους is glossed in BDAG as “free from care,”¹²¹ and for Paul this would seem to be a positive quality because he desires it for all the Corinthians. It stands at the beginning of the very rhetorically parallel argument that follows. One place that the parallelism of the argument is broken is in 7:34 and this gives us a clue as to what it is that Paul is concerned with here. In this verse, in summary of the preceding description of the married man, Paul says that this man “is divided” [μεμέρισται]. This highlights the difference between the married man and the unmarried man. The unmarried man does not have this division of concern, while the married man does. This is further supported in the way that Paul summarizes the argument of this section in 7:35. There he says that this counsel is “to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.” We can say then that Paul is not arguing for a posture of not being concerned for anything when he uses the word ἀμερίμνους, but being without divided concern.

This fits with Paul’s neutral usage of the verb μεριμνάω. In BDAG, μεριμνάω is glossed as “to be anxious or unduly concerned,”¹²² and it can be used with this more negative connotation. This is how it is used in the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the

¹²¹ BDAG, 53.

¹²² BDAG, 632.

Mount when he says, “do not be anxious about your life.”¹²³ However, the word can also be used in a more neutral sense as “having concern for,” and this seems to be what is in view in this passage, as Fee notes.¹²⁴ Once again, the existence of the concern is not what is in view here; it is the division between the spheres of concern that Paul has in mind. Being concerned for the things of the world [τὰ τοῦ κόσμου] or the things of the Lord [τὰ τοῦ κυρίου]. From the preceding section we have already seen what the things of the world are. They are the social and economic patterns of life that are passing away. In marriage, one is divided in one’s concerns between that which doesn’t pass away (the things of the Lord) and that which does (the things of the world). And when this is heightened by the “present distress” the division can become all the greater. The question that rises then is how does this need to ἀρέσῃ one’s husband or wife divide one’s concern?

First we must ask what is in view in the usage of ἀρέσῃ “to please” one’s husband or wife. To a modern ear this might sound like “to make happy,” as if Paul has in mind some kind of psychological state of pleasure or feeling good. However, as BDAG notes, this is a favored term in the reciprocity-conscious world of the Mediterranean.¹²⁵ “To please” someone falls more into the realm of honoring obligations than it does in the realm of the emotions.¹²⁶

¹²³ See Matthew 6:25ff.

¹²⁴ Fee, 380. Here Fee notes that, “It is possible to read both verbs positively, meaning to “care for”... and to view them both as legitimate activities...In this case the usage of the verb is something of a play on the adjective in the preceding sentence (v. 32a): ‘I want you to be without ‘concern,’ even as you must ‘concern yourselves’ with life in the present age.’”

¹²⁵ BDAG, 129.

¹²⁶ This is not to say that the emotions are not involved in the fulfillment or maintaining of proper loyalty.

We see the sense of this word in its usage elsewhere in the Pauline corpus. In 2 Tim. 2:4, Paul urges Timothy, as a soldier of Christ, not to get entangled in civilian affairs” but to rather make his aim to please [ἀρέσῃ] the one who enlisted him, i.e. Christ. The emphasis is on loyalty and obligation. Likewise in Rom. 15:1 there is a tension between pleasing the self and others when Paul says, “We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please [ἀρέσκειν] ourselves.” In this way the opposite of pleasing oneself is identified as denying oneself as Forrester notes.¹²⁷ Also we can see in multiple places that there is the tension of pleasing men or pleasing Christ for Paul.¹²⁸ So in 7:32-34, we see that for Paul, marriage can bring with it a conflict of obligation and this obligation can cause one to be divided in loyalty.

Paul then wraps up the theological section with a reiteration that this counsel is for the Corinthians own good. His desire is not to lay some kind of restraint on them like the rein of a horse.¹²⁹ This is what the ascetic group in Corinth had been laying on them by saying that to marry was a sin. Paul instead is explaining how his counsel was designed to free them up to be fully devoted and presentable to the Lord without distraction.¹³⁰ In this way, 7:35 is a summary of what Paul has just argued in the

¹²⁷ Werner Foerster, “ἀρέσκω, ἀνθρωπάρεσκος, ἀρεσκεία, ἀρεστός, εὐάρεστος, εὐαρεστέω,” In *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel, Translated and edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 1:455.

¹²⁸ See Gal. 1:10 and 1 Thes. 2:4. Though outside of the aims of this essay, if we look at all these passages together, a hierarchy of obligation emerges in Paul’s thought. First, there is a primary obligation to please God. The tension here is between pleasing God or being in the flesh. With this primary obligation in the right place, Paul then notes the obligation to please others, particularly those in the faith who are weak and the neighbor. In this way we follow the pattern of Christ and see that the opposite of pleasing ourselves is denying ourselves.

¹²⁹ Thiselton, *The First Epistle*, 592.

¹³⁰ As noted above, it is possible that the ascetic group in Corinth arrived at their position through a misappropriation of Paul’s own position on celibacy. If this was the case, Paul emphasis on his preference

preceding verses. His counsel serves his desires that they not be divided in their loyalty and therefore concern before the Lord.

Why would it be the case that marriage would be a place of divided obligation? Looking at 7:12-16 it is clear that marriage between a believer and an unbeliever was something that was happening in the church at Corinth, and this clearly would provide a cause for divided loyalty. However, Paul gives the counsel to not seek separation from an unbelieving spouse but to remain. Other suggestions look back towards the “present distress” Paul references in 7:26 seeing in Paul’s comments a nod to some form or current tribulation that would make the commitments of family life particularly difficult. Yet, no other support for that is found in the text. Perhaps marriage in general during this time meant greater participation in the social and economic structures of the world and in this way it also provided a place of division of obligation. This would certainly fit with the way Paul argues in 7:29-32 and with the Stoic/Cynic debate of marriage some see underlying Paul’s counsel here. Deming has the following to say about the philosophical debate over marriage present in the culture:

“The starting point...was the recognition of a basic datum of free Greek society: marriage involved a man in weighty responsibilities. Marriage joined a man socially and financially to another human being, his wife. To a greater or lesser extent her cares and concerns now became his as well. But marriages also meant accepting the responsibilities of a father, a householder, and a citizen. This is because marriage in the ancient world almost always resulted in the birth of children. In marrying, a man thus obligated himself to providing for a family. He would need to raise and educate children; he would need to establish a household, a financial endeavor that was the ancient world’s idea of a small business; and he would need to become active in the social, political, and economic life of his hometown, since a household could not survive without the political protection and economic environment provided by the Greek city-state. The effect was cumulative: through marriage a man left the freedom on his

for celibacy can better be understood as a correction of the ascetic groups misunderstanding rather than a strong recommendation that all those who can, should remain celibate.

bachelor days behind and began the settled life of a responsible citizen with all its cares and concerns.”¹³¹ (49-50)

From this we can see that marriage was much more of a structural institution in the Greek mind than in our contemporary understanding of it. In my estimation this is the best solution to the question of why marriage provided the opportunity for divided loyalty. It tied one to more aspects of the way of life of the world. For Paul, these were to be held loosely, acknowledging their transience.

In the end, many have found Paul’s counsel hard to hear, and I also must also confess that I find myself wishing for a fuller explanation from Paul. I believe much of our own dislike of Paul’s counsel stems from the fact that in our culture, marriage has been reduced almost entirely to an expression of the emotional reality between partners. When Paul counsels celibacy as a good, it sounds to our ears as if he is condemning the love and connection between spouses and the joys of family life. I hope that I have shown in the argument above that this is not the case. I believe Paul would label these things as goods that can be freely pursued by the Christian, as long as one’s proper allegiance remains not to the things of the world but to Christ. In the next chapter I will address this more fully as I turn to points of application for us today.

¹³¹ Deming, 49-50.

Chapter Four

Application and Conclusion

Based on the above exegesis, what can then be said by way of application of this passage to the life of the believer in the 21st century? As we saw in the structure of Paul's argument, his preference for celibacy is rooted in the context of the particular time of the redemptive narrative he and his hearers inhabited.¹³² We can't reduce this aspect of Paul's teaching to "theology" in the abstract. For Paul, the believer's *telos* is in Christ, and any attempt at appropriating Paul's counsel without also imbibing this understanding will be an inadequate approach. The first point of application is to make sure that we understand ourselves in the same story as Paul understood himself to be; we live in the particular time of redemptive history bound on one end by the death and resurrection of Jesus and on the other end by his second coming. Only then can we move on to the secondary and consequential task of asking what Paul's counsel means for how the believer should think about marriage and celibacy today.

What matters primarily for Paul is not whether the believers in the Corinthian church married or remained single; instead, his desire was that they have the appropriate understanding of the nature of the story of redemption. It becomes evident later in th

¹³² See the above argument on 7:29 and 7:31.

letter that this is something that they lacked.¹³³ The believer is to recognize that through the death and resurrection of Christ, God has already begun the work of wrapping a death shroud around this current age. The way of life that characterizes this world is passing away in Paul's view, including the social and economic realities of which marriage would have been a part. Although 2,000 years of history stand between Paul's day and our own, we still inhabit the same moment in redemptive history that the Corinthian believers did. We stand in what has been called the overlap of the ages. In this overlap, our lives are defined by two fixed points – the death and resurrection of Jesus and his eventual return that brings the fullness of the age to come. We lay hold of the first through faith and the second through hope and are called to love as we wait.¹³⁴ These eschatological truths must be rooted in the mind of the believer and central in the teaching of the church both at a corporate and an individual level first and foremost.

With that reality comes a new posture to the things that belong to that which is passing away – a ὥς μὴ or “as not” posture.¹³⁵ As I argued in the exegesis of the text, this “as not” posture is one that is characterized not by lack of engagement with the things of the world, but engagement with the proper devotion.¹³⁶ This primary devotion and loyalty is first and foremost to the Lord. The “as not” posture is what the Corinthians were

¹³³ Paul's extensive corrective teaching on the resurrection in 1 Cor. 15 demonstrates this. Also Paul's argument in chapters 12-14, with its climax in chapter 13 has an important eschatological element as well. The gifts that the Corinthian believers were so eager to have were ones that in the new age would not longer be of any use. Faith, hope, and love are that which abide.

¹³⁴ Again, chapter 13 of this letter comes to mind.

¹³⁵ Characterized by Paul's teaching in 7:29-30.

¹³⁶ See 1 Cor. 5:9-10. Earlier in the letter Paul says as much when he addresses the issue of sexual immorality in the church saying, “I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people – not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.” Paul assumes that the Corinthians would remain engaged in the world around them, but now with a different posture.

lacking. Instead of living in the world “as not,” they were living in the world “as if” – as if the fullness of redemption and the new life had already come to them.

With those points made, we must also stress that this passage is not a full Pauline theological treatise on Christian marriage. Paul was responding to questions the Corinthian believers wrote to him about. However, that reality doesn’t mean we can write off Paul’s advice as merely a pragmatic solution to specific problem happening in the Corinthian church with no relevance outside of its original context. What it does mean is that we need to exercise discernment in our appropriation of Paul’s counsel. With that goal in mind, we should briefly note Paul’s words on marriage in Ephesians 5.¹³⁷

If all we had to understand Paul’s view on marriage was 1 Corinthians 7, we might be led to think that Paul had a predominantly negative view.¹³⁸ However, Ephesians 5 provides such a stark counterpoint to what seems to be a damning of the institution of marriage with faint praise in 1 Cor. 7 that we must make some comments on how we might harmonize Paul’s seemingly very different stance here. In Ephesians 5, Paul compares the relationship between a man and woman in marriage to the relationship of Christ and the church. While a full exegesis of this text is beyond this scope of this essay, there are a couple of important aspects of the text to note in comparison with 1 Cor. 7.

As we have seen, one of the core misunderstandings of the Corinthian believers was what Thiselton has called an “over-realized eschatology.” This misunderstanding of

¹³⁷ I understand Ephesians to be an authentic Pauline letter and therefore data that needs to be harmonized with his words on marriage in 1 Cor. 7 if we want to understand Paul’s full counsel on marriage and the believer.

¹³⁸ Paul’s preference for celibacy evident in his argument in 1 Cor. 7 does not equal a negative view of marriage, nor should we mistake his position on celibacy for asceticism.

the times led to an ascetic group in the church that thought it “good not to touch a woman.”¹³⁹ While Paul didn’t disagree celibacy per se, he did have issue with their motivation for celibacy being rooted in a belief that marriage was a sin.¹⁴⁰ It is towards this misunderstanding that he primary directs the theological teaching of 7:29-35. Paul reminded the Corinthians that God had already begun the process of bringing to a close the *καὶρὸς*, and that the pattern of life in of the world was already passing away. This had implications for the Corinthians stance towards the world. But it was not a stance of disengagement that Paul was advocating for, but a stance of continued engagement with the correct devotion to the Lord. This is Paul’s theological message in 1 Cor. 7.

This does not seem to be a problem for the believers in Ephesus. Paul is not so much concerned with correcting a faulty eschatology that had led to wrong practices¹⁴¹ as he was in encouraging the Ephesians to continue walking in the faith that they had already begun. Paul’s tone is primarily a positive one towards the Ephesian church. What is at stake for the Ephesians is the faithfulness and continued witness of the Ephesian church to the world that they have been called out of.¹⁴²

We have a tendency to give a very thin description of marriage when we come to the texts, as if all that is in view is the union of two people legally. This is a very modern way of thinking – i.e. we “divorce” marriage from the web of meaning it is always embedded in and try to define it abstractly. However, Paul sees the practice of marriage

¹³⁹ See 1 Cor. 7:1.

¹⁴⁰ See 1 Cor. 7:17-24. Paul’s counsel to them was not to seek to change their state, but to remain as they were called, but with the Lord.

¹⁴¹ See 1 Cor. 15. I understand Paul as doing more than correcting an intellectual problem for the Corinthian believers; he is correcting an underlying misunderstanding of the redemptive story because they had forgotten the last chapter.

¹⁴² See Eph. 2:1-10.

as always being interwoven and embedded with these thick meanings and into the fabric of the culture. A distinctly Christian marriage, then, is not just two believers getting married, but the practice of marriage itself is also reinterpreted through the lens of the watershed moment of the death and resurrection of Christ. In this way, marriage becomes a sign of redemption of Christ and his church. The two views of marriage that Paul seems to display in 1 Cor. 7 and Eph. 5 are not contradictory; they are merely a difference in Paul's response to two different situations in the churches. For the Corinthians, they had broken with the world too much because of their misunderstanding of the gospel, and therefore a word that encourages them to remain as they are is needed along with re-emphasizing the eschatological truths of the gospel.¹⁴³ For the Ephesians, they were already walking maturely in the faith, and needed only encouragement in how their walk was to continue to be a witness as they wait eagerly for the Lord. Having now seen Paul's positive argument for marriage, we can return to 1 Cor. 7 with a more discerning eye. This is not Paul's full explanation of the role of marriage for the believer, but this is Paul's teaching on marriage and celibacy to an immature church who had not fully understood the implications of the gospel for the way in which they interacted with the world.

With this perspective, we see that for the believer marriage and celibacy are things that fall into the category of *adiaphora*. Paul goes to great lengths to stress this again and again in the text in the way he introduces his counsel,¹⁴⁴ his repeated

¹⁴³ See 1 Cor. 3:1. Paul's words in 1 Cor. 3 are evidence of this failure to mature as believers, "But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ."

¹⁴⁴ See 1 Cor. 7:25. "Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy."

affirmation that if one decides to marry, one does not sin,¹⁴⁵ and his description those who continue in marriage as doing well.¹⁴⁶ Looking outside of the particulars of our passage, this is also the testimony of chapter 7 as a whole. Even though Paul prefers celibacy and his counsel is for the Corinthian believer to remain as one is, he does not take a negative attitude towards marriage.¹⁴⁷ Neither marriage nor celibacy in and of itself is a moral issue for Paul, and the believer is free to pursue or not to pursue marriage if they are unmarried.¹⁴⁸ In fact, it is because some in the church had made the issue one of moral necessity rather than morally indifferent that Paul had to write this section of the letter. This in no way should soften Paul's preference for celibacy, but Paul recognizes that not all will have the "gift" for it.¹⁴⁹ Paul's preference for celibacy comes from the concern he has that those who are married will have difficulty. Ben Witherington sums up this concern best:

"Paul shows no bitterness towards those married or contemplating marriage, but he does show concern about their having to face troubles and distractions that might make difficult full devotion to the things of the Lord...marriage for Paul must be seen within the perspective of the priorities of faith and must be lived out bearing in mind that the Christ-event has begun the process of eschatological change... This is why Paul can say on the one hand, 'the one who marries his virgin does well,' and on the other hand, 'the one not doing so does better.'"¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁵ See 1 Cor. 7:28, 36.

¹⁴⁶ See 1 Cor. 7:38. "So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better."

¹⁴⁷ This is in part why I rejected a reading of 7:36 that would translate the Greek, ὑπέρακμος as oversexed or overly passionate. The idea that Paul would counsel marriage only as an outlet for undue sexual energy does not do justice to Paul's generally neutral view of marriage throughout the chapter.

¹⁴⁸ See 1 Cor. 7:9, 38, 39.

¹⁴⁹ See 1 Cor. 7:7.

¹⁵⁰ Ben Witherington III, *Women and the Genesis of Christianity*, edited by Ann Witherington (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 137-38.

The believer today then should feel no guilt or shame due to marital status from the standpoint of his or her stance before God. Marriage is not a blessing from God that he bestows on those faithful enough, and celibacy is not a curse given to those who are not. Nor does God withhold marriage from someone because of prior sin, sexual or otherwise. This kind of thinking is nowhere found in this text. Consequently, the church should not implicitly or explicitly communicate that one's marital status has any bearing on one's salvation or faith. Furthermore, neither marriage nor celibacy prevent one from living a life of faithfulness to the Lord. This is the point of Paul's argument in 7:17-24 and why his counsel in all his churches is to remain in the condition in which you found yourself when you were called by God. Both marriage and celibacy are open options for the believer, and the church should be as diligent in supporting those who have chosen celibacy – or for whom celibacy is a reality of their lives temporarily or permanently because of other reasons – as it is in supporting those who have pursued marriage. As noted above, a hierarchy of worth based on marital status was in fact part of the reason Paul needed to respond to the Corinthian's questions in the way that he did. There is much damage done to the faith and the hearts of those who are celibate and seeking to faithfully live a life of obedience to the Lord when the narrative of faithful living is only told through the lens of marriage and the family. The gospel narrative is much bigger than that, and the church must learn to provide celibacy scripts that can counter the cultural scripts of singleness. For Paul, the gospel narrative has the power not only to bring together those who are married and those who are celibate, but Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free.¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ See 1 Cor. 7:17-24.

In the church today, we often find the implicit idea that one is either married and fulfilled or celibate and lonely. In reality, many are married and lonely or celibate and fulfilled. The presence of this idea has more to do with the cultural idol of the romantic relationship than with the actual realities of marriage and celibacy. We must find ways in the church to push back on this idea. With that said, there is the reality that in our culture, to be single does often mean to be alone. What would it look like for the church to support and encourage open homes where those who are married are encouraged to give hospitality to those who struggle with loneliness? What would it look like for the church to support alternative living situations where those who are celibate could live together in homes without having to bear the stigma of this being a temporary situation “until marriage.” There are many creative ways to meet the challenges of celibacy that open up when we begin to give a biblical counter script for the role of celibacy in the Christian life. This is a great pastoral need for those who are celibate.

How might a church validate the legitimate calling of celibacy? First, more celibate members should be pursued and pursue positions of leadership in the local body. If we take seriously Paul’s words that celibacy does indeed provide one with the opportunity for undivided devotion to the Lord, then the celibate Christian is in the unique position of being able to offer that undivided devotion in the structures of leadership of the church. Consequently, we need to push back on the cultural script that a single man is dangerous because he is sexually unfulfilled, or that a single woman is dangerous because of her sexuality. This kind of view of singles in the church has, in my mind, more to do with a cultural script filling the vacuum of silence created by the church’s failure to give powerful counter scripts for celibacy than anything else. The

ability for the church to narrate appealing scripts for celibacy and to provide the structural support to those who are pursuing a life of celibacy has great potential to offer a fresh and compelling witness to Christ and the reality of the hope of the gospel in a culture that has traded the transcendent for the immanent.

1 Cor. 13 is perhaps one of the most well known sections of the Pauline letters, and it is an appropriate place to look at the end of this thesis. Here Paul reminds the Corinthians of the primacy of love over all other things. Whatever gifts one has, they are all worthless without love guiding them to their proper end – the mutual building up of the body of Christ. The “clanging cymbal” principle is applicable not only to spiritual gifts, but any condition we find ourselves in, including marriage or celibacy. If we have it all, but not love we gain nothing. My hope is that this thesis will provide space for new conversations and spur us, married or celibate, towards greater love and understanding towards one another. For those who identify as homosexually oriented and desire to live out a biblical sexual ethic, I hope that this thesis provides a legitimating voice to your experience and expresses a desire to meet you in that calling. *Soli Deo Gloria*.

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