

III. Reported Concerns – A Letter from the Corinthian Church

Paul began his letter by addressing with the Corinthians his own concerns – concerns arising at least in part from news brought to him by individuals associated with the Corinthian church (ref. again 1:10-11, 16:17-18). The remainder of the epistle addresses a variety of questions and issues, most of which appear to have been raised by the Corinthians themselves in a letter to him, probably brought by Stephanus, Fortunatus and Achaicus. One of the characteristic features of this section – and the one which demarcates Paul’s treatment of the Corinthians’ questions – is the introductory phrase, “*now concerning...*” (ref. 7:1, 7:25, 8:1, 12:1, 16:1).

It’s notable that Paul didn’t respond to the Corinthians’ inquiries until he’d first addressed the issues he was concerned about, and commentators have proposed different explanations for this. The easiest and most obvious answer is the natural human practice of giving pride of place to one’s own priorities and concerns: Paul penned his letter with the intention of answering the issues raised by the Corinthians, but those matters were going to have to wait until he’d spoken his mind regarding the things that were of first importance to him. This explanation is plausible, but doesn’t fit Paul’s personal character and ministry orientation. He was too conscientious and purposeful to let selfish concerns drive the form of his letters. But more than that, Paul was the quintessential servant of Christ, His gospel and His Church. Whatever his personal issues with the Corinthians, they reflected his abiding concern for them and their growth and well-being.

Thus a better explanation for Paul’s structural arrangement in this epistle is that he recognized that genuinely addressing the Corinthians’ questions and concerns required that he first construct the proper foundation for his instruction. Instruction that isn’t solidly grounded in the pertinent overarching principles is analogous to a text without a context: Both are left open to whatever interpretation and application the hearer chooses. Paul was committed to answering the Corinthians’ concerns, but that meant first grounding and framing their perspective and thinking.

A. The Matter of Male-Female Relationships (7:1-40)

The Corinthians’ letter evidently raised the issue of male-female relationships and Paul chose to speak to them first. Paul’s response indicates that they were concerned with how Christians ought to approach their sexuality. In particular, it seems at least some at Corinth were convinced that believers should adopt a celibate lifestyle. (Christian sexuality may have been one of the factionalizing issues in the Corinthian church; ref. again 6:12ff). This is evident from Paul’s opening statement as well as his subsequent treatment of marriage, divorce and singleness.

1. Paul prefaced his discussion with the assertion, “*It is good for a man not to touch a woman*” (7:1), and this statement serves as the foundation and springboard for all of his subsequent discussion in this context. But how, exactly, is it to be viewed? Did the Corinthians make this assertion in their letter or was Paul proposing it himself? If the former, then he was repeating back to them their own words as the prelude to responding to them: “*As to the things you wrote to me, specifically the contention that it is good for a man not to touch a woman...*” If the latter, then Paul was saying something like this: “*As to the things you wrote to me concerning Christian sexuality, let me say first of all that it is good for a man not to touch a woman.*”

The first option is preferable, but in the end it really doesn't matter; *what matters is that Paul was in agreement with this proposition*, whether it originated with himself or the Corinthians: His starting point for his treatment of marital issues is the premise that there is a manner of goodness in men and women not "touching" each another. This expression is a euphemism for sexual activity, but in context the issue is sexual involvement within the marital relationship. It seems the Corinthians were querying Paul about the virtue of Christians remaining celibate – even within their marriages (and therefore also refusing to marry and perhaps even abandoning the marriages they had). Paul began his treatment by affirming that there is indeed goodness in celibacy, but not in the way the Corinthians were apparently thinking; celibacy is preferable, but within the realm of singleness. Like everything pertaining to the Christian life, sexuality must be assessed and approached from the vantage point of *principles* rather than hard and fast *prescriptions*.

2. Celibacy is good, but it must be considered within the larger question of marriage and singleness. And answering that question is itself a matter of principled deliberation. Paul's basic thesis was this: *Celibacy is preferable for Christians, but not for those Christians who are married*. But married or single, all Christians are obligated to live wisely, employing the mind of Christ in all their judgments and decisions. And judging the marital question with the mind of Christ means discerning the truth, not only of what marriage entails and demands, but of *oneself* as a unique individual.

- a. Paul believed that celibacy – and so singleness – is preferable for Christians, but he also recognized that the issue is more complex than it may appear. As a first consideration, there is the way in which God created human beings as male and female: *The "goodness" in a man not touching a woman must be assessed alongside the principle that it isn't good for man to be alone* (Genesis 2:18ff). God created His image-bearers as man and woman such that they complement and complete one another. And this being the case, Paul could not prescribe singleness without denying and violating the created order God put in place.

Male and female are complementary, and together they are to fulfill their created design to administer God's dominion in the earth as His vice-regents. The creation command to Adam and Eve was to *"be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it"* (Genesis 1:28), and this implicates the marital union and its sexual expression. How can human beings fulfill their created destiny and role of lordship if the race is extinguished through the absence of procreation?

God created and ordained sexuality as necessary to His purposes, and Paul recognized that to insist upon singleness is to deny both the institution of marriage and the sexual union of man and woman, both of which are God's good gifts. Sexuality is a fact of human existence and it is both foolish and wrong to deny or decry it; rather, it is to be appraised and approached with the mind of Christ. *Each Christian must consider his own sexuality in terms of his true freedom in Christ*: He must not be enslaved by anything, including his passions; where immorality is a concern, the single person ought to marry (7:7-9); for those who are married, they are to give themselves to sexual intimacy with their spouse (7:2).

- b. Marriage and marital intimacy serve the believer's good and his freedom in Christ by, among other things, providing a hedge against sexual impurity, but this benefit comes at a cost. *Men and women incur a sober obligation to their spouses when they choose to marry* (7:3-5). The marital obligation obviously embodies numerous components and aspects, but Paul's concern here was with the sexual relationship between husband and wife and he focused his attention accordingly.

The first aspect of the sexual obligation reflects the fact that the marital union is a *union of love*, and therefore one of self-giving. Though a Christian man (and perhaps a woman) may be primarily concerned with his own sexual passions and purity in seeking a spouse, he must understand that the marital union imposes upon him a sexual obligation to his wife as much it obligates her to him; he must fulfill his duty to her even as she must to him (7:3). In this way Paul stood against the predominant patriarchy in ancient (and some contemporary) cultures in which wives were regarded as servants of their husband's wishes and pleasures. Echoing the creation pattern of male and female as equal sharers in the divine image and the human calling of vice-regency (Genesis 1:26-28), Paul insisted – probably to the amazement of some of his readers – that the Christian husband has the *same* sexual obligation to his wife that she has to him. She isn't bound over to the gratification of his sexual pleasure, but they are to be mutually the eager servants of each other's sexual joy and fulfillment in the bonds of self-giving love.

Paul clarified this obligation by considering it in terms of the fact that the marital union is a *one-flesh union*. In marriage, the husband and wife become one flesh, and this means that their bodies belong to one another – not merely as a matter of devotion, but of authority: The wife has authority over her husband's body even as he has authority over hers (7:4). Again, this notion was utterly foreign in the world the Corinthians inhabited. Husbands had unqualified authority over their wives and their bodies, but to claim the opposite was shocking and scandalous.

Finally, Paul explained that the sexual obligation incurred in marriage must be understood in terms of the fact that the marital union is a *spiritual union*. This does not deny that the marriage relationship ends at death; neither does it imply that marriage is a feature of the everlasting kingdom (cf. 7:39 with Romans 7:1-3 and Matthew 22:23-30). But it does recognize that the marital union functions within the Christian's union with Christ. The married Christian is first and foremost a *Christian*, and this means that every aspect and dynamic of his marital union – including his sexual relationship with his spouse – must be perceived and approached from the standpoint of his essential union with Jesus Christ.

This truth has sweeping implications, but Paul was here concerned to apply it to the particular issue raised by the Corinthians. Again, Paul's opening statement (together with the larger context) indicates that some of them had concluded that celibacy in their marriages was the best course to adopt in light of their new lives in Christ. This conclusion may appear strange to the modern reader, but it was entirely reasonable given the world the Corinthians knew and lived in.

Sexuality was woven into the very fabric of Corinth's social and religious life. Men were free (and even expected), as a matter of mere recreation, to engage in every sort of sexual practice, and prostitution and other forms of sanctioned sex filled the city's temples as well as its bathhouses. Sex was everywhere in Corinth, and the Corinthian Christians understandably struggled to maintain a godly view of sexuality in the face of their culture's profligacy. They couldn't help but think of sexual activity when they considered their former lives and the world they'd inhabited. They left those lives behind when they came to Christ; wasn't it appropriate, then, to forsake all sexual involvement? (Even some of Corinth's pagan philosophers would have joined hands with them in that conviction.)

But as with marriage itself, Paul insisted that the Corinthians view their marital sexuality with the mind of Christ. Not only was there no value in them embracing celibacy, it would actually undermine the integrity of their marriages and rob them of a critical aspect of the blessing God intended for their "one-flesh" union. Far from being unholy or unclean, sexual expression within marriage is as much a component of the Christian's holiness as are his explicitly spiritual exercises. The Corinthians needed to understand that there is no sacred and secular for those in Christ; all of life is *Christified* and therefore "holy to the Lord." Intimacy between Christian husbands and wives doesn't diminish or deprecate their holiness; it expresses and exalts their holiness when they regard and treat it – like every aspect of their day-to-day lives – as an act of worship in praise and thanksgiving (cf. 10:31 with Titus 1:15; Colossians 2:20-23, 3:17-19; 1 Timothy 4:1-5).

Thus Paul granted that Christian couples may refrain from sexual intimacy for the sake of seasons of focused intimacy with their Lord (7:5a), but not as an ongoing disposition within their marriages. Withholding themselves from one another for any other purpose – even apparently godly reasons – is of no positive value and is ultimately dangerous and detrimental. Celibacy will not enhance their godliness; to the contrary, it will undermine it by subjecting them to satanic deception. Paul understood this deception to be two-fold: First, it pertains to the temptation to a fleshly (natural-minded) view of sexuality (here, celibacy within marriage); second, to the temptation to fleshliness in succumbing to sexual impurity (7:5b).

3. In verse 6 Paul further qualified his instruction by noting that he provided it as a matter of concession rather than command; his words gave room for individual judgment and freedom of conscience. But what exactly was Paul making allowance for? What did he mean by "*this I say...*"? The closest referent is his comments regarding marital abstinence for Christian couples (v. 5), and that instruction certainly fits the criterion of that which is advisory rather than compulsory. But it's likely Paul was speaking more broadly. His counsel regarding marital abstinence was clearly concessional, but the context supports the conclusion that Paul was referring to the whole idea of believers marrying: He was upholding the propriety of Christian marriage, but as a matter of concession. He was neither commanding nor forbidding it (let alone calling for Christians to abandon their marriages), but he was insisting that believers enter marriage wisely, recognizing the cost to their freedom as Christ's servants (7:1, 7, 32-35).