

6. Paul's final section in this context addresses questions pertaining to virgins in the church at Corinth. It seems from his transitional statement that the Corinthians had also raised this issue in their letter, probably in connection with the question of celibacy (cf. 7:1, 25). Paul's terminology leaves no doubt that he was speaking in this passage of virgins – females with no sexual experience, but the exact referent is disputed by scholars. Was Paul referring to all women who've never been married (which is implied by their designation as virgins)? If so, why treat this group separately? Didn't he already address the issue of singleness? What led him to distinguish this class of women from widows and divorcees? Clearly Paul regarded them as subject to the same ethic (ref. 7:25-26).

The best answer seems to be that Paul was here addressing the question of women (and, by implication, men) who were engaged to be married (note that the ESV embraces this interpretation). The reason such individuals required separate treatment is that Paul's ethic becomes ambiguous in their case: His counsel to Christians is that they remain as they are, *but what does this require of those who are betrothed?* In one sense, they are still single; in another, they are already bound to a spouse. For a betrothal was a formal arrangement – one that, in Jewish culture at least, rendered the engaged person legally bound to a marital contract, though the union was yet to be consummated. (So, for instance, Joseph was obligated to formally “put away” Mary when he discovered her to be pregnant; he couldn't simply call off their engagement; Matthew 1:18-19). This created a perplexing ambiguity for the Christian desirous of honoring Paul's instruction: Did “remaining in the condition in which she was called” require a betrothed virgin to consummate her marriage or remain a virgin, and therefore end her engagement?

The first thing Paul did was qualify his instruction as expressing his personal judgment and opinion. In this instance, too, he had no direction or command from the Lord; his counsel was his own, and he wanted the Corinthians to understand that. At the same time, Paul knew his counsel to be trustworthy. He was fully confident in his judgment and he hoped the Corinthians would embrace his advice with the same confidence.

Having clarified the source of his instruction, Paul proceeded to speak to the question of betrothed individuals. Here, too, he followed his characteristic approach of addressing the specific concern in terms of the larger principle governing it. His uniform ethic holds for the situation of betrothal: It is good for a man (or woman) to remain as he is, but subject to the obligation of conformity to the truth. Thus Paul answered the question of following through with one's engagement by speaking to the larger issue of the believer's life in Christ and how that impacts – and is impacted by – life as a married person (7:27-35).

- a. Perhaps the most challenging part of this passage is Paul's mention of the “*present distress*” (NASB) as ground for his conviction that Christians should continue in their current condition (7:26-27). The difficulty resides primarily in the indefiniteness of the expression. Paul's modifier indicates this circumstance as already present in some sense, but it's unclear what is “present”: The rendering “*distress*” is an interpretive decision; the noun denotes a compelling/constraining force or necessity and has no inherent negative connotation (cf. v. 37, 9:16). Thus it's no surprise that commentators differ widely respecting Paul's meaning.

One view is that this phrase denotes physical hardships the Church was facing. Some believe Paul was referring to increasing opposition and persecution; others think he was alluding to the massive famine which affected much of the Roman world during the reign of Claudius (41-54 A.D.; ref. Acts 11:27ff). Typical of famines, this particular one was a protracted period of widespread food shortages resulting from several years of drought and poor harvests.

Other scholars believe Paul was speaking of the troubles inherent in married life, and they point to his overall contextual argument to justify their conclusion (cf. vv. 28, 32-35). In somewhat related fashion, there are others who maintain that the “present compulsion” Paul was referring to was either the innate pressure on engaged couples to follow through with their marriage or the sexual pressure experienced by many single persons.

A third view is that Paul was speaking eschatologically with respect to circumstances which will herald the Lord’s Parousia and the end of the age. This view obviously implies two things: that Paul believed Christ’s return was imminent, and that His Parousia would be preceded by difficult times for His Church (ref. 7:28-31; cf. Acts 14:21-22; 1 Corinthians 15:51-52; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17; 2 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 2:11-13).

Others hold a composite view which combines the first and third views. That is, they argue that the various hardships being experienced by the first-century Church were symbolic signifiers of eschatological upheaval and tribulation associated with the Parousia and its judgment (cf. Matthew 10:16-23 with 24:1-14 and 24:15-31 with Luke 21:1-28; also John 15:18-21; 1 Peter 4:12-19; 2 Peter 3:1ff; 1 John 2:18-29; note esp. the Book of Revelation).

All things considered, the correct view is probably a blending of the above. Paul clearly had in mind the transience of the present interadvental age (ref. v. 31), but he also recognized this age as uniquely characterized by the presence and interaction of two “worlds”: the form of this present world (7:31; cf. Romans 8:18ff) and the new order that is the new creation in Christ. Paul’s phrase must be interpreted in the light of this framework, which suggests that “present distress” embodies all the troubles and hardships that are inherent in the present world, *but that are also experienced in unique and especially intense ways by those who are sharers in the new creation.*

Paul recognized the transience of the present order, but also apparently believed its passing was imminent (cf. v. 31 with v. 29). This troubles some who feel that ascribing this view to Paul implicitly challenges the inspiration of his letters. But this inference reflects a wrong notion of inspiration and the way it operates within the dynamics of human authorship. Inspiration isn’t undermined by the subjectivity, limitations and fallibility of the human author of the text or a character within the text. Satan is the “father of lies,” and yet his false words are part of the inspired text, as are the untrue notions and words of human beings.

Recognizing this fact, some argue that erroneous words and ideas are “inspired” in the sense that the biblical writer recorded them accurately. But while inspiration *does* demand an accurate textual record, such accuracy is only a requirement for an inspired text, not the essence of it. Inspiration concerns truth, but in the sense of **meaning**, not mere factuality. *God’s concern in the notion of inspiration is not an accurate text as such, but the communication to men of the truth of Himself as He stands in relation to His creation and His design for it (centered in man).* That all-encompassing truth is organic and bound up in Jesus Christ and is communicated by the Spirit. Thus, every portion of Scripture – including the kinds of textual “untruths” identified above – is inspired, not because it is recorded accurately, but in the sense that it contributes organically, by divine design, to the overall meaning of the text centered in Jesus Christ.

So it is that Paul’s personal expectation regarding the Parousia might have been incorrect, and yet his instruction to the Corinthians was “inspired” in that it expressed the mind of God respecting how His people are to think and order their lives in this world in view of who they are and what they are a part of. This – not his conviction on the exact timing of the Parousia – was what Paul wanted the Corinthians to take from his words as one who was trustworthy (vv. 27-35).

- b. Paul began his response to the question of virgins by reiterating his general ethic (which, again, applies to every life circumstance): Whether married or unmarried, the Christian is to be content to remain as he is (7:27). But again, this ethic is subject to the law of freedom which demands that Christ’s people discern and conform to the truth of who they are in Him. Continuance in one’s present condition is recommended, but not prescribed; in the case of some, their freedom calls them to embrace marriage over their present singleness. So for those who are betrothed, they are not in sin if they choose to marry, but they must do so wisely, recognizing and accepting the challenges and difficulties it will bring (7:28).
- c. Paul recognized that marriage makes its own contribution to the inherent troubles of life, and, as a loving father desirous of his children’s happiness, he wanted to see the Corinthians (and all Christians) spared of them. But he also understood that all of life’s troubles – of which marital ones are a subset – reflect and must be viewed and treated within the present reality of *already-but-not-yet* (7:29-35).

Starting from the widest vantage point (7:29-31), Paul reminded the Corinthians that the form of this world is passing away. Like all Christians, they were constrained to live their lives in the context of the present, penultimate form of the kingdom. God has inaugurated His everlasting kingdom of the new creation, but it hasn’t yet taken everything into its transforming grasp. The old order exists together with the new order in inseparable fashion and Christians are obligated to interact with both. *To fail to do so is to deny the truth and so move away from true freedom:* The believer who lives as if the present order has passed away is just as bound in falseness as the person who lives in denial of the truth of new creation.

- The Christian's life is Christ's life lived out in him; thus he transcends this present world (Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 4:17-5:8; Colossians 3:1-4).
- At the same time, his existence is woven into this world. He must live his life in it though he dwells in the heavenlies (cf. John 15:19, 17:11-24).

Unlike the rest of mankind, Christians must live in two radically different worlds – one that is tangible and the other intangible; one that is transient and the other ultimate and everlasting; one that is broken and groaning under the curse and the other glorious in unspotted perfection. This is the frame of reference for Paul's instruction; without it, his words are confusing and even contradictory:

“...from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none; and those who weep, as though they did not weep; and those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice; and those who buy, as though they did not possess; and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it...” (vv. 29-31)

Throughout the context Paul has insisted that married Christians are to “remain as they are” and devote themselves to their marital obligations and responsibilities; now he was exhorting the Corinthians that those having spouses were to, in some sense at least, live as if that weren't the case. But far from contradicting himself, Paul was speaking with perfect consistency, directing his readers to regard and conduct their lives within the creational reality of already-but-not-yet. If this is unclear from his marital example, those that follow illumine his meaning. And what they show is that the Christian who would conform himself to the truth – and thereby live into true freedom – must engage and appropriate the particulars of life in this world, but with the recognition that those particulars, like the present order itself, are passing away. This is just as true for the believer who dies before the Parousia as for those who live to witness it: *Christ's return brings an **absolute** end to the present world; death ends it **personally** for the one who dies.*

- Christians are to make use of the features and things of this world; this is God's design and they have no choice. But they are to do so in terms of sustenance rather than satisfaction; as enjoyment rather than ownership; as instruments unto an end rather than an end in themselves. The Christian isn't to deny or forsake this world, but to regard and embrace it according to the truth. This orientation was a central feature of Jesus' kingdom ethic (Matthew 6:24-34) and is thus at the very heart of the mind of Christ.
- And where the believer regards and engages the world in this way, he will rejoice and mourn *in* this world, but as one who inhabits a realm which *transcends* this world. He will mourn as not mourning and rejoice as not rejoicing – which is to say, as one not bound over to this world and the passions and responses suited to it. *He will live in this world as one who engages and utilizes it and its particulars, but as a discerning “lord” who transcends it rather than as a person determined by it and enslaved to it.*

Thus the resolution to Paul's apparent self-contradiction: The Christian who is married is to give himself sincerely and completely to his spouse and the marital relationship. He must conform to the truth of marriage and his participation in it, *but in conformity to the truth that it, like the world it's a part of, is passing away.*

Paul instructed married Christians to "remain as they are" and commit themselves to fulfilling the truth of their marital union by giving themselves wholeheartedly to their marriages. But there are cares and concerns that are inherent in being joined to a spouse, so that conforming to the truth of marriage requires that couples discern and respond properly to them. *And at the heart of those cares is the fact that marriage imposes upon spouses a divided allegiance (7:32-35).*

One may well argue that this isn't necessarily the case. A married Christian isn't absolutely constrained to divide his loyalties and energies between God and his spouse; like the single person, he can choose to devote himself entirely to the Lord. This is certainly true, but only where the married believer renounces the truth of his marriage, and Paul didn't acknowledge that as a possibility.

Given his premise that Christians must conform to the truth of their persons, situation and circumstance, the only authentic "reality" for married believers is a divided devotion, and this is why Paul makes no exceptions: *The one who is married is necessarily concerned about pleasing his or her spouse; only the single person is able to be single-minded in regard to pleasing the Lord.*

- Again one may argue that, if Paul's ethic is indeed God's ethic, then serving one's spouse in conformity to the truth of marriage is *itself* pleasing to the Lord. Why, then, would Paul insist that the single person is free to please the Lord while the married person is obligated to please his spouse (in contradistinction to fully pleasing the Lord – vv. 32-34)?
- The answer is that, kept within Paul's argument, both assertions are true: The married Christian pleases the Lord by being concerned about his spouse; at the same time, his proper marital concern limits his freedom to please God in undivided devotion. The only way for a Christian to "please" the Lord with that sort of devotion is for him to remain single.

Thus marriage in conformity to the truth imposes a burden of *privation* on both spouses: Both are deprived of the freedom to serve God without qualification. But it also imposes a burden of *addition* in that it demands of both spouses that they serve one another and bear with one another's frailties, flaws and failures.

- d. Paul's desire in his instruction was to spare Christ's saints undue trouble and pain in this life. Thus he began by emphasizing that marriage complicates life and its difficulties and can even exacerbate its problems. Only then did he turn to the question at hand (7:36-38). These verses have two primary interpretations driven by how one understands Paul's two terms, *virgin* and *man*.

As noted earlier, some believe Paul was using term *virgin* in the broadest sense of young Christian women at Corinth who'd never been married (but were evidently contemplating it). Others interpret the term more narrowly as referring to young women who were already engaged to be married. In this case, the question at hand was whether or not they should follow through with their marriage.

So also there are two possible meanings for the term *man*. Perhaps the more common view is that Paul was referring to the fathers of these young women. This meaning is best supported when "virgin" is interpreted as referring to young women of a marriageable age still living under their father's oversight. The second option corresponds to the view that "virgin" denotes a betrothed woman and holds that the term "man" refers to her male counterpart.

In the case of the first view, Paul was addressing the question of how fathers should regard and decide the issue of giving their daughters in marriage. Recall again that at least some at Corinth were arguing that celibacy is preferable for all Christians. The Corinthians sought Paul's input (better, his affirmation) on that matter, including the sticky question of fathers refusing to allow their daughters to marry for the sake of the "better way" of a celibate life in Christ's service. Though widely held, this view has significant contextual and linguistic problems.

Interpreted according to the second view, Paul was speaking to the issue of betrothed couples breaking off their engagement for the sake of celibacy and the corollary advantage of undistracted devotion to God ("*consecration in body and spirit*" – v. 34b). This interpretation is preferable for several reasons and overcomes the problems with its counterpart. At bottom, it assigns the most natural meaning to Paul's language (so, for instance, his statement: "*the one marrying his virgin does well and the one not marrying does better*" – v. 38) and better suits the larger context in which Paul makes the decision to marry or remain single dependent upon the believer's "gift" and mastery over his passions (cf. vv. 7-9 with v. 37: "*the one who stands steadfast in his heart, having no inward compulsion, but having authority over his own desires...*").

- e. Paul concluded his discussion of the Corinthians' questions regarding celibacy and marriage by briefly addressing the issue of remarriage (7:39-40). His position reiterates the same ethic of freedom, but adds a stipulation to it: Christians who decide to remarry following the death of their spouse (having faithfully appraised themselves and their life situation with the mind of Christ as Paul required), are free to do so. *However, they are to remarry "only in the Lord."*

Paul didn't explain his limitation and its meaning; he obviously believed he didn't need to. The marriage question – as every issue in the Christian's life – is answered by the principle of freedom. All things are permissible for those in Christ, but *freedom*, not permissibility, is determinative. Marriage imposes cares and concerns, yet the married believer can find the freedom available in the married state when he conforms to the truth of marriage as the Lord designed it.