



# A Study of Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians

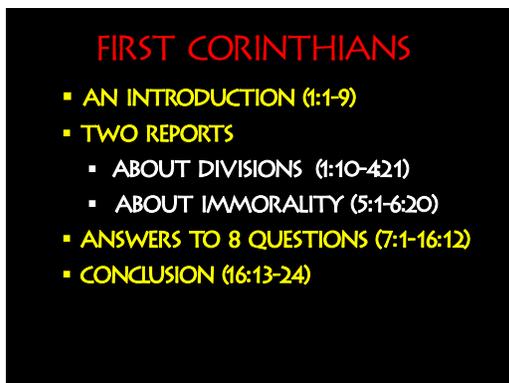
## Lesson 12: As Things Are, Stay As You Are... 1 Corinthians 7:8-40

Now I mentioned last week in our study of the opening part of 1 Corinthians 7...a section that focuses on the importance of maintaining a healthy, sexual relationship in Christian marriage<sup>1</sup>...that there was an important overarching idea or concept behind Paul's instruction in chapter 7...an idea or concept that influenced not only what he said to married believers at the beginning of chapter but that also influenced everything else said in chapter 7. Now the idea was important enough to Paul that he repeated it at least fourteen times in chapter 7...alluding to the idea even a few more times beyond that.

IN CHAPTER 7 PAUL REPEATS AN IDEA  
FOURTEEN TIMES...  
FOURTEEN TIMES...

Now, think of that. The fact that the idea is repeated so many times ought, I think, to get our attention. Whenever Paul or any other biblical writer repeats something fourteen times, within the confines of a single chapter, I think you have to assume that whatever it is they are repeating is quite important to them and to their overall argument or purpose. Because of that, I don't want to be coy about telling what that idea or concept is. That idea...that instruction from Paul to the Corinthians centered on one important, central tenet...and that tenet is that Paul wanted the Corinthians, as much as they were able, to stay in whatever state of life they were in when they came to faith.

Now I want to work through that idea right away this morning but before I do, I really think that I ought to take just a minute or two to review what we have covered so far...just in case there is someone here who has not been here right along...so that they might catch up with Paul's thought so far so that that they might be able to follow the thought in the section we are looking at today.



What we have learned so far is that Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians is made up of four sections...an introduction, a section regarding a couple of reports that Paul had received, a section in which Paul answers eight questions the Corinthians

had posed to him in a letter and last of all a conclusion with all of the normal sort of greetings and salutations.

Now apparently the way the First Letter to the Corinthians came together is that Paul had written a letter to the Corinthians (a letter by the way that we do not possess) in which he had given them instruction about a number of topics. Now you have to keep in mind that Paul was an Apostle personally chosen by the Lord Jesus and granted all the authority he needed to represent Jesus both to the world and to the church as an ambassador of Christ with a special giftedness endued by the Spirit of God.

Paul was also the founding missionary pastor of the Church at Corinth. He had founded the church and had lived in Corinth for eighteen months working as a tentmaker, working with hands, even as he proclaimed the gospel and shepherded the fledgling church there.

After Paul left Corinth, a number of ambitious men came in to replace him and began to offer the Corinthians a “more spiritual way”...a way that brought them into direct conflict with Paul and that simultaneously fractured the church into a number of “preacher parties”...which pitted the various members of the church against one another.

Apparently, the church at Corinth decided to respond to Paul’s letter by asking a number of follow-up questions to Paul’s letter...questions that may have been framed in such a way as to denigrate Paul, his ministry and his authority. Now Paul was apparently either answering or about to answer their letter when he received a number of first-hand reports from a few of the members of the church at

Corinth...reports that explained the deep divisions at Corinth and that talked about some serious of the sexual sin going on there as well.

In the first six chapters of First Corinthians, Paul deals with the various reports...the first four chapters with the issue of divisions among the Corinthians and chapters 5 and 6 deal with the issues of sexual immorality and with lawsuits. And then starting in chapter 7, he begins to answer the questions that they had posed in their letter. He starts by answering the question of whether it would be better for married couples to abstain from sexual relations and then he expands that answer by suggesting the general idea that it would be better for the Corinthians to stay in whatever way of life they were in when they were called.

Now it is easy to see how that principle or idea would flow out of his recommendation that married couples ought to continue to have physical relations with one another. You see some of the Corinthians apparently thought they since they had become believers and had been gifted by the Spirit of God that they were too spiritual to continue to have sexual relationships...even though they were lawfully married...it was as if they thought that their conversion had transformed them into something they had not been previously...that they had already become like the angels in heaven to whom physical needs and desires no longer mattered. But Paul rushed to explain to them that that was certainly not the case...that they had come to faith as married people and that they were still married people and that they still had all of the same obligations to each other that they had had prior to their conversion.

You can see, I think, what I mean. They had been married and they were obligated, even though converted, to still fulfill their marital obligations. They were to stay as

they had been...at least in terms of their responsibilities to their mates...they had been redeemed from sin and they had been gifted by the Spirit of God...they had been transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light...but that did not mean that they were already in heaven...no, they were still very much in the world...and they were to live in light of their redemption...but that did not mean that their bodies were an impediment. Their bodies were the vehicle God had given them to serve Him...and they were to use them as intended by Him in righteousness.

Now all of that having been said, let's turn at last to our passage and Paul's principle that it would be best for the Corinthians to remain in whatever state they were in when they were called.

I would like to start in chapter seven, verse eight.

The thing I want you to notice as we go through the verse is that Paul's basic instruction is that it might be good for them to stay as they are. Now in this particular verse he is speaking believing widows... perhaps believing singles and widows depending on how you understand one particular word. Now let me read verse 8.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Corinthians 7:8**...To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am.

Now in this particular case, the group Paul is speaking to is defined by how you understand the word "**unmarried.**" In Greek the word happens to be a masculine plural word...the word ἀγάμοις. Now the word usually means "**unmarried**" or

“single” but it can also mean **“widowers”** in the modern sense of the word...that is, it can mean a man whose wife has died. The problem is that in Koine Greek of Paul’s day, there was no word for widower. So the word can be understood as “widower” and if that was the case then Paul would have been saying...**“Now to you widowers and widows I say: ‘It is good for them to stay as I am.’”**

Now that would mean with a measure of certainty that Paul would have once been married and had become a widower.

On the other hand, if you take the word **“unmarried”** in a general sense...in its usual sense, it would mean that Paul was talking to both single people and widows and that he may or may not have married.

In that case, Paul would have been saying, **“Now to you people that were single or widowed when you came to faith, it would be a good thing if you remained single just as I am.”**

Now in verse nine, he is going to grant an exception to that general rule and he gives the reason for the exception.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Corinthians 7:9**...But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

Now his point is that if they are not controlling themselves, that is, if they are not living celibate lives, they would be better off not to stay as they are but to go ahead and make a change and get married.<sup>3</sup> The Greek is wonderfully clear here...better it is to marry than burn...that is, to burn with passion. I would like to make it clear as well that the what the text says is, **“If you are not controlling yourself”**...not **“if**

**you are struggling to control yourself but are doing it.”** The idea is, **“If you are sinning...stop it and get married.”**

Now in verse 10, he turns from believing unmarried people and widows...or perhaps better believing widowers and widows to believing married couples...and his advice is pretty much the same...stay as you are.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Corinthians 7:10**...To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband <sup>11</sup> (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.

Now I think you can see his point. If you are married...stay married if you possibly can...if you can't separate but don't get remarried...in other words stay as you are...leaving room for reconciliation.

Now in verse 12, Paul turns from believing widowers and widows and believing couples to mixed couples and by that I mean couples where one person is a believer and one person is not and his advice is exactly the same...as best as you are able stay as you are. Look at verse 12.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Corinthians 7:12**...To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. <sup>13</sup> If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.

Do you see what he is saying? He is saying, **“If possible, stay as you are.”**

Now in verse 14 he begins to give the reasons why it would be better to do so.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Corinthians 7:14**...For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise

your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. <sup>15</sup> But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. <sup>16</sup> For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

You see his point is that staying together in such a marriage has benefit to the children and potential benefit to the unbelieving spouse. In those days, when couples divorced the husband generally got the kids because he was the one who could financially support them and of course that makes Paul's argument all the more weighty...a wife has an influence on the kids and can raise them to be covenantally united to God only when she has influence and contact with them. In the same way, a wife might eventually be used as an instrument to win her unbelieving husband to the faith.

Now in verse 17, Paul summarizes his argument by repeating the principle that he has been arguing since verse 8.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Corinthians 7:17**...Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches.

YOU DO NOT HAVE CHANGE YOUR STATION IN LIFE WHEN YOU ARE CONVERTED...

THAT IS, IF YOU ARE MARRIED YOU DON'T HAVE TO START ACTING LIKE YOU ARE SINGLE. IF YOU ARE WIDOWED YOU DON'T HAVE TO GET MARRIED.

IF YOU ARE MARRIED TO AN UNBELIEVER YOU DON'T HAVE TO GET A DIVORCE...

YOU DON'T HAVE TO TURN YOUR WORLD UPSIDE DOWN...GOD HAS CALLED YOU TO PEACE AND HE INTENDS THAT YOU SHOULD IMPACT THE WORLD IN WHICH YOU LIVE...BY STAYING THERE'

Do you see what he is saying? He is saying to the Corinthians, **“You do not have change you station in life when you are converted...that is, if you are married you don’t have to start acting like you are single. If you are widowed you don’t have to get married. If you are married to an unbeliever you don’t have to get a divorce...you don’t have to turn your world upside down...God has called you to peace and he intends that you should impact the world in which you live...by staying there.”**

Now in verse 18-24, Paul illustrates what he means by giving the Corinthians some concrete examples. He does that first by addressing the issue of circumcision. Look what he says in verse 18.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Corinthians 7:18**...Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. <sup>19</sup> For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. <sup>20</sup> Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called.

Now I don’t think it is all that extraordinary that a man might have wanted to become circumcised as an adult...I can see how reading the Old Testament a man might want to identify with the covenant sign of the Old Testament but I do think it is extraordinary that some men, almost certainly Jews, that had converted to Christianity, might have actually wanted to mask their circumcision by having an operation...and yes, there really was a surgical procedure in Paul’s day to do that. But Paul says, **“None of that matters”** and he proceeds to lay down the same principle that he had referred to earlier, **“Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when he was called by God.”**

Now in verse 21, he broadens the principle to apply it to slaves. Now I want you to notice that while he repeats the same general principle for slaves that he has for believing widowers and widows, for believing married people and even for believers married to unbelievers...he adds instruction to believing slaves that seems a bit more flexible. Look at verse 21.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Corinthians 7:21**...Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) <sup>22</sup> For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ. <sup>23</sup> You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. <sup>24</sup> So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with

Now, do you see what I mean about being a bit more flexible in his instruction to those members of the church at Corinth that were slaves? Now in saying that I should tell you that most of the slaves at Corinth would have been house slaves. That does not mean that they were not sometimes treated unfairly or even harshly but you ought not to have in mind the same sort of injustice that was suffered by slaves in the American plantation system before the Civil War.<sup>4</sup> Still, Paul thought that if they could free they ought to get free. I make that point because his overall argument has to be tempered by a measure of common sense...Paul would not have advocated a woman staying in an abusive relationship with an unbeliever. Nor does he advocate a slave staying a slave if he can get free. Do you see what I mean? He is not speaking to every situation with finality. Rather he is posing a general overall view that suggests a person remain in whatever state they were in when they were called. Now I want you to keep that point in mind because it will be important as we strive to make some sort of relevant application.

Now in verse 25, Paul turns the conversation to address virgins in the church...and by that he means exactly what we think he means...young, unmarried women. Now what is interesting about that is that as he addresses them he turns a corner in his argument and begins to summarize and repeat everything he has said earlier...and as he does he gives an overarching reason for his general viewpoint and instruction. See if you can catch it in verses 25 and 26.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Corinthians 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. <sup>26</sup> I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as

Now do you see what he is saying? He is saying that he had not had any special revelation from God regarding whether virgins should get married or not but in his view, a view that had been informed by the Holy Spirit and had been proven in the Lord's mercy time and time again to be more than trustworthy, Paul thought the Corinthians needed to stay as they were...and the reason he thought that they ought to stay as they were was because of the **"present crisis."**

Now the question is, of course, what does Paul mean when he refers to the **"present crisis?"**

...PAUL IS NOT THINKING OF THE INWARD URGE THAT DRIVES MEN INTO MARRIAGE (THIS OPERATES IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION), NOR OF THE TROUBLES OF A MARRIED WOMAN (GEN. III. X6), NOR EVEN OF PERSECUTION AS SUCH, BUT OF THE ESCHATOLOGICAL WOES THAT ARE IMPENDING OVER THE WORLD, AND ARE ALREADY ANTICIPATED IN THE SUFFERINGS OF CHRISTIANS. IN VIEW OF THESE, MEN HAVE ALREADY TROUBLES ENOUGH, AND WILL HAVE MORE, WITHOUT ALLOWING THEMSELVES TO ENTER INTO DOMESTIC TANGLES OF ONE KIND OR ANOTHER.

C.K. Barrett, an outstanding English commentator, thinks that Paul is referring to the terrible events that are to occur right before the Second Coming of Christ. Now I ought to tell you that that view is probably the most common view held by commentators...and they argue almost to a man that verse 29 lends additional support to that view...because verse 29 refers to the **"shortness of the time."** Listen to what Barrett writes:

...Paul is not thinking of the inward urge that drives men into marriage (this operates in the opposite direction), nor of the troubles of a married woman (Gen. iii. x6), nor even of persecution as such, but of the eschatological woes that are impending over the world, and are already anticipated in the sufferings of Christians. In view of these, men have already troubles enough, and will have more, without allowing themselves to enter into domestic tangles of one kind or another.<sup>5</sup>

Now I admit that that certainly could be what Paul was referring to...but that idea causes me a problem and the problem is that you have to change the words **"present distress"** into something like **"impending disaster."** I am not sure that that Paul wanted the Corinthians to radically change their lives simply because he thought the return of the Lord was near.<sup>6</sup> As a matter of fact, it seems to me that the point he makes more often is that we are to live quiet, peaceful lives...taking care of our families and of the poor and working out our salvation in light of the time in which we live. I think Paul generally tends to view preparation for the return of Christ to a thoughtful, reflective, consistent long-term radical approach to living...rather than something so dramatic and short-sighted. Rather Paul's approach is more like the apocryphal story told about Martin Luther who when asked what he would do if the world were about to end replied, **"I would go out and plant a tree."**<sup>7</sup>

IT IS COMMONLY ARGUED, OR ASSUMED, THAT PAUL IS URGING THEM TO STAY SINGLE IN LIGHT OF THE IMMINENT RETURN OF CHRIST, WHICH WILL BE ACCOMPANIED BY A TIME OF GREAT WOE. BUT THAT SEEMS TO MISS PAUL' OWN ESCHATOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE BOTH IN VV. 29-31 AND ELSEWHERE. IN 2 THESSALONIANS 3:6-15 HE SPECIFICALLY URGED EXACTLY THE OPPOSITE WITH REGARD TO WORK, IN A CONTEXT WHERE THE ALLEGED COMING OF THE DAY OF THE LORD (2:2) HAD CAUSED SOME TO CEASE WORKING. BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY, IN PAUL'S VIEW THE END HAS ALREADY BEGUN; THE FORM OF THIS WORLD IS ALREADY PASSING AWAY (V. 31). CHRISTIANS DO NOT THEREBY ABANDON THE WORLD; THEY ARE SIMPLY NOT TO LET THIS AGE DICTATE THEIR PRESENT EXISTENCE.

Listen to how Gordon Fee puts it:

It is commonly argued, or assumed, that Paul is urging them to stay single in light of the imminent return of Christ, which will be accompanied by a time of great woe. But that seems to miss Paul' own eschatological perspective both in vv. 29-31 and elsewhere. In 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 he specifically urged exactly the opposite with regard to work, in a context where the alleged coming of the Day of the Lord (2:2) had caused some to cease working. But more importantly, in Paul's view the End has already begun; the form of this world is already passing away (v. 31). Christians do not thereby abandon the world; they are simply not to let this age dictate their present existence.

THEY ARE ALREADY MARKED FOR ETERNITY—IN THE WORLD BUT NOT OF IT. ON THE OTHER HAND, UNTIL THE FINAL CONSUMMATION THEY ALSO MAY EXPECT “**DISTRESS**” AND “**TROUBLE**” TO BE THEIR COMMON LOT. THUS THEIR PRESENT ESCHATOLOGICAL EXISTENCE SHOULD INDEED HAVE BEARING ON THE QUESTION AT HAND. BUT IT IS NOT BECAUSE THEY ARE ALREADY SPIRITUAL SO THAT AS THE ANGELS THEY NEITHER MARRY NOR GIVE IN MARRIAGE. RATHER, IT IS BECAUSE THEY MUST YET LIVE OUT THEIR LIVES “**IN THE PRESENT DISTRESS**.” IN LIGHT OF OUR PRESENT EXISTENCE, WITH ITS SUFFERING AND TROUBLE, AND IN LIGHT OF THE INCREASED TROUBLES THAT WILL TEND TO BEFALL THE MARRIED (V. 28) THE SINGLE PERSON WILL DO WELL TO REMAIN THAT WAY.

They are already marked for eternity—in the world but not of it. On the other hand, until the final consummation they also may expect “**distress**” and “**trouble**” to be their common lot (I Thessalonians 3:3-4). Thus their present eschatological existence should indeed have bearing on the question at hand. But it is not because they are already spiritual so that as the angels they neither marry nor give in marriage. Rather, it is because they must yet live out their lives “**in the present distress.**” In light of our present existence, with its suffering and trouble, and in

light of the increased troubles that will tend to befall the married (v. 28) the single person will do well to remain that way.

Now I think that is an important point and I think it has a lot to do with how Paul understood the end times. You see Paul understood that before the return of Christ evil would wax greater and greater. I also think that he understood that the nation of Israel would undergo some sort of spiritual resurgence before Christ returned. I think his point then was not so much that the end might occur today or tomorrow but rather that it was not necessary to change one's situation in order to be spiritually prepared for Christ's coming. In other words, married people did not have separate to prepare to better serve Christ. Single people did not have to get married to better serve Christ. Believing spouses did not have to separate from their unbelieving mates in order to better serve Christ. Slaves did not have to get free to better serve Christ. No...all of them were perfectly able to serve Christ as they were. I think you could even say that Paul was urging them to **"bloom where they were planted."**<sup>8</sup> In other words, Paul was saying to them indirectly...**"You do not have to take on a whole new life to start serving Christ...in fact, stop thinking that if this were different...that is, If I could just get single...or that were different...that is, if I could just get married or get free...that you could finally get down to serious business. Instead, start thinking, Christ purchased me where I am...I will serve Him where I am."**<sup>9</sup>

Now you have to have a measure of common sense in applying this particular principle. I know a brother who witnessed to a couple and led them to the Lord only to find out the woman was an exotic dancer. Now the man did not tell her to stop...but continued to disciple them both...in a matter of weeks she came to a decision that she was not honoring God with her body and quit the job and she

was right to do so...she ought to have remained as she was. What Paul is talking about is something closer to this.

I was originally licensed as a Baptist minister some thirty-three years ago in 1985...that was before I realized that there were Presbyterian churches that still believed the Bible. I served there under Larry Danner as the Associate Pastor in a little church named Bible Chapel. In 1988, while we were both on staff at this little Baptist Church, a very popular book came out written by a man named Edgar Whisenant. The book was entitled, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Could Be in 1988*.<sup>10</sup>

It was an enormous seller and it convinced many people that the Rapture was going to occur in 1988. In the book, Whisenant predicted that Christ was going to return on Rosh Hashanah sometime between Tuesday, September 13 and Thursday, September 15, 1988. He was supported by a number of very popular ministries including the Trinity Broadcasting Network which had decided to run taped programs during that period of three days as the on air personalities thought it wise to take off in preparation for the Rapture.

Sometime on Thursday evening September the 8<sup>th</sup>, I received a call from a very sweet, Charismatic lady that was in a state of complete hysteria. She said that in view of the imminent return of Christ she wanted me to baptize her son, who was a toddler. I asked her why she didn't speak to her own pastor and she told me that she had spoken to him but that he refused to do it because he didn't believe in infant baptism. I asked if she believed in infant baptism...and she said, **"No, no I don't."** I then asked her if she realized that I was a Baptist minister and she said, **"Yes but I thought perhaps...I hoped perhaps...that you would make an exception."** I then asked her why it was so important for her to have her son

baptized ...especially when she didn't even believe in covenantal baptism in the first place.

I don't think I will ever forget what she said. She said, **"You know I just know that as things are right now...that my son will be provided for after the Rapture...so I thought it was important to change something...to change anything to make things better."**

You see that is the sort of thing that was going on in Corinth. Men were thinking they ought to leave their wives...some were thinking that their marriages ought to be maintained but dramatically changed so that they no longer participated in sexual intimacy. Others thought they ought to hurry and get married. Some were thinking that their unbelieving mates were a problem...to all of that Paul says, **"Slow down...take a deep breath...stay as you are. It is not near as important what relationships you are in or have as it is that you be a certain kind of person in that relationship."**

THROUGHOUT THIS LETTER PAUL TRIES TO INCUPLICATE IN THE CORINTHIANS A SENSE OF WHAT IT MEANS TO LIVE IN THE ESCHATOLOGICAL AGE. PAUL BELIEVES CHRISTIANS ARE ALREADY LIVING IN THAT AGE BEGUN BY CHRIST'S DEATH AND RESURRECTION, AND SO ARE LIVING ON BORROWED TIME. THE PAST ESCHATOLOGICAL EVENTS ARE THE DOMINANT FORCE CREATING THE RELATIVIZING **"AS IF NOT"** ADVICE. THE NEARNESS OF THE END IS ONLY A POSSIBILITY IN PAUL'S MIND, AND IT IS NOT THE SOLE DRIVING FORCE BEHIND HIS COUNSEL. THE TANDEM OF THE *CERTAINTY* OF THE ALREADY OF CHRIST'S DEATH AND RESURRECTION AND THE *POSSIBILITY* OF THE NEARNESS OF THE NOT-YET IS THE REASON FOR THIS ADVICE.

FOR PAUL, THE ONE THING OF ETERNAL SIGNIFICANCE THAT HUMANS CAN DO IN THIS WORLD IS SERVE THE LORD, PROCLAIMING THE GOOD NEWS OF ETERNAL SALVATION AVAILABLE THROUGH THE CRUCIFIED MESSIAH JESUS. PAUL IS NOT SO NARROW-MINDED THAT HE THINKS ALL MUST BECOME FULL-TIME MISSIONARIES LIKE HIMSELF BUT HE DOES BELIEVE THAT ALL MUST BEAR WITNESS IN WHATEVER SOCIAL SITUATION THEY FIND THEMSELVES WITH THEIR LIVES AND THEIR WORDS. THIS IS ONE REASON THAT HE ENCOURAGES CHRISTIANS TO REMAIN IN THEIR CURRENT STATE.

Listen to how Ben Witherington puts it:

Throughout this letter Paul tries to inculcate in the Corinthians a sense of what it means to live in the eschatological age. Paul believes Christians are already living

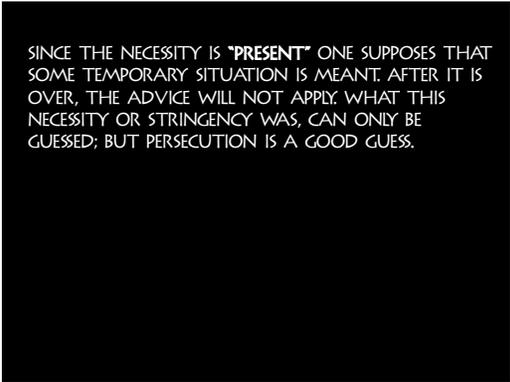
in that age begun by Christ's death and resurrection, and so are living on borrowed time. The past eschatological events are the dominant force creating the relativizing "as if not" advice. The nearness of the end is only a possibility in Paul's mind, and it is not the sole driving force behind his counsel. The tandem of the *certainty* of the already of Christ's death and resurrection and the *possibility* of the nearness of the not-yet is the reason for this advice.

For Paul, the one thing of eternal significance that humans can do in this world is serve the lord, proclaiming the good news of eternal salvation available through the crucified Messiah Jesus. Paul is not so narrow-minded that he thinks all must become full-time missionaries like himself but he does believe that all must bear witness in whatever social situation they find themselves with their lives and their words. This is one reason that he encourages Christians to remain in their current state.<sup>11</sup>

Still other really good men...men like Charles Hodge and Gordon Clark...see the issue as specifically related to the time in which the Corinthians lived.

Hodge, the great Presbyterian commentator believed that Paul was not referring specifically to the second coming of Christ...but rather to the extraordinary Satanic opposition against the early advance of the gospel.<sup>12</sup>

Gordon Fee believes that the "present distress" was really "present" persecution and suffering.<sup>13</sup>

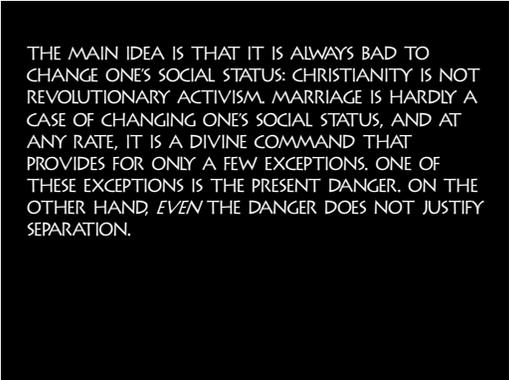


SINCE THE NECESSITY IS "PRESENT" ONE SUPPOSES THAT SOME TEMPORARY SITUATION IS MEANT. AFTER IT IS OVER, THE ADVICE WILL NOT APPLY. WHAT THIS NECESSITY OR STRINGENCY WAS, CAN ONLY BE GUESSED; BUT PERSECUTION IS A GOOD GUESS.

Gordon Clark thinks the same and writes this:

Since the necessity is “**present**” one supposes that some temporary situation is meant. After it is over, the advice will not apply. What this necessity or stringency was, can only be guessed; but persecution is a good guess.<sup>14</sup>

Now if you press the point both Hodge and Clark are making is that this particular passage really has nothing to say to us today...at least not directly. What they are arguing is that the situation of the Corinthians was particular to the Corinthians and that what it has to teach us must be by implication. Listen again to Gordon Clark.



THE MAIN IDEA IS THAT IT IS ALWAYS BAD TO CHANGE ONE'S SOCIAL STATUS: CHRISTIANITY IS NOT REVOLUTIONARY ACTIVISM. MARRIAGE IS HARDLY A CASE OF CHANGING ONE'S SOCIAL STATUS, AND AT ANY RATE, IT IS A DIVINE COMMAND THAT PROVIDES FOR ONLY A FEW EXCEPTIONS. ONE OF THESE EXCEPTIONS IS THE PRESENT DANGER. ON THE OTHER HAND, *EVEN* THE DANGER DOES NOT JUSTIFY SEPARATION.

The main idea is that it is always bad to change one's social status: Christianity is not revolutionary activism. Marriage is hardly a case of changing one's social status, and at any rate, it is a divine command that provides for only a few exceptions. One of these exceptions is the present danger. On the other hand, *even* the danger does not justify separation.<sup>15</sup>

Now I think that some of that is right...that the passage may not necessarily be applied to believers today in the same way that it was to the Corinthians. I mean think about it. They were first generation believers. The gospel in the pagan world was a new thing and they were susceptible and subject to extraordinary

persecution and grief. We are not...at least, not right at the moment. Still, I do think the passage has relevance for us today but before we talk about that let's read the rest of the chapter.

**ESV 1 Corinthians 7:27**...Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. <sup>28</sup> But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that. <sup>29</sup> This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, <sup>30</sup> and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, <sup>31</sup> and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

In verse 32, Paul begins to explain why such things are true.

**ESV 1 Corinthians 7:32**...I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. <sup>33</sup> But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, <sup>34</sup> and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. <sup>35</sup> I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord. <sup>36</sup> If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry--it is no sin. <sup>37</sup> But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. <sup>38</sup> So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better. <sup>39</sup> A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. <sup>40</sup> Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

Now in closing, I would like to make just a couple of applications.

We have a great deal of liberty in how we live out our Christian lives...but we are not autocrats. We have been bought with a price...the precious blood of Christ...which means that while we have a great deal of freedom...we cannot do whatever we please. The reason for that is because the Lord Himself is interested in the kind of people we are...more interested in the kind of people we are than in where we are.

That means we do not have to change the situation in which we find ourselves to live in a way that is pleasing to him. We don't have to move to please him...we don't have to have some sort of radical break with our situation in life. If we are married, we ought to strive to live as married people and to please him. If we are single, we ought to strive to please him...knowing that we have the freedom to marry or not to marry...and that whether we do so or not is not going to make us any more precious in His sight.

Finally, to those of you who are single...I would say, **“Relax...take a deep breath...and know that if you are single...you are in a remarkable position to do a great deal in Christ's kingdom without having many of the distractions that those of us that are married have. That means you are not second class citizens...you are not in anyway inferior...you are under no compulsion to change your way of life to make a difference.”**

And because that is true...you are free...free to serve him...free to do works of mercy...free to visit...free to study...to pray...to read...to comfort...free to give...free to go on short-term mission's trips...free to mold yourself into the kind of person that will make a good mate if God in His sovereign design intends or free to make an extraordinary difference where you are if He does not.

Oh the wondrous mercy of our God.

Let's pray.

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Martin, *First Corinthians* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1989), 72. Martin summarizes the issue very well. He writes, "The notion of ascetics—that married people ought to live as though they were unmarried (thus somehow presuming to be purer and holier)—is contrary to scripture and is, in fact, a flagrant disobedience to this text. The real author of this false philosophy is named in verse 5. The married person who does not find sexual satisfaction with his or her spouse, as God intended, will be much more likely to sin in this vital area. The deeply satisfying climax and release in which the sexual aspect of marriage reflects the total spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and physical union appointed and approved by God emphasizes our heavenly Father's gracious provisions for mankind. God's instruction to the married partners is that they are not to deprive one another, certainly not on a unilateral basis. By mutual agreement they may refrain from the normal sexual relationship, but only for a limited time to be devoted to spiritual purposes ("fasting and prayer"). Prolonged abstinence may lead to marital problems.

Too many Christians seem to think that sex was created by the devil—an obvious lie. Certainly the devil has done and will do what he can to twist and pervert God's handiwork. Selfish exploitation of one's spouse for one's own pleasure, without regard for the spouse's welfare, is a perversion of what God intended. In this, as in other areas of life, true giving of self in love approaches the realization of the heavenly Father's ideal. The Song of Songs celebrates true marriage as it pictures the bridegroom and the bride in loving, happy contemplation of each other, each discovering the deepest pleasure in giving pleasure to the other.

It is a sad and ironic misreading of history to blame the Puritan ethic as the cause of unhappiness and gloom in marriage. No doubt many Puritans were culpable, but it has been the libertines who have mistaken hedonism for real and lasting pleasure..."

<sup>2</sup> F. W. Grosheide, *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), 161. Grosheide argues that the "unmarried" referred to in verse 8 are men (the word is masculine)...while the widows are women. But that seems to me to leave out two important groups that is, unmarried women...and widowed men. Better I think to see the phrase "unmarried" as widowers...which is what most modern commentators do.

<sup>3</sup> Grosheide, 161.

<sup>4</sup> Craig S. Keener, *1 & 2 Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 66. Keener writes, "Paul urged them to be content about something beyond their control. In urging contentment, Paul offers a limited analogy with slavery, relevant because Greek terms for "marriage" and "divorce" involved being "bound" or "freed" (7:15, 27). When Paul calls on slaves to be content with a situation they cannot control we should keep in mind the form of slavery he addresses. In urban Corinth he addresses neither the most repressed slaves in mines, gladiatorial shows, or to a lesser extent, in the fields, but household slaves. Many household slaves enjoyed economic and social conditions superior to peasants (who constituted the majority of the Empire's

free population, although “free” must be used loosely with regard to those working feudal estates). A small minority who worked *for* powerful people even wielded more wealth and power than most aristocrats; some noble women married into slavery to improve their social station. Such observations are not intended to condone slavery of any sort, nor to deny its frequent dramatic abuse (e.g., beatings), especially for women (see comment on 6:12–21). But it is important for modern readers to understand that, on average, Roman household slavery proved quite different from slavery, even household slavery, in the Americas.”

<sup>5</sup> C.K. Barrett, *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968), 175.

<sup>6</sup> David W. Kuck, “The Freedom of Being in the World ‘As If Not’” in *Currents in Theology and Mission* 28.06, 588.

<sup>7</sup> Almost certainly never actually occurred.

<sup>8</sup> See the sermon by Bob Deffinbaugh, “Spirituality and the Status Quo” at bible.org. The full internet address is [http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page\\_id=793](http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=793).

<sup>9</sup> William F. Orr and James A. Walther, *1 Corinthians in the Anchor Bible Series* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1976), 216. “This passage appears to be a digression. Perhaps the material is meant as a commentary upon *in peace* (vs. 15). Reflections on circumcision and slavery are added to show that the *conduct of life* for the Christian is not determined by his physical or social situation but rather by divine “assignment” and “call.” The change of social status or physical condition, therefore, are not to *bother* the Christian brothers (again, in a milieu where male domination was assumed...circumcision being evidential). And Paul assured the Corinthians that his instruction in this matter was not *ad hoc* because of the particular scandals in their church: it was part of his *direction to all the churches*.

*The calling in which he was called* bears a double significance of the term “call.” *The calling* in which one is to *remain* must refer to what one was doing occupationally at the time of conversion.”

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.isitso.org/guide/whise.html>

<sup>11</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 178-9. He also writes: “Is Paul’s advice to remain as you are” and then live as if not’ a baptizing of a fragile status quo in the wake of a larger ascetic trend? One key to understanding Paul’s somewhat puzzling advice is to realize that he is reacting against men and women who are trying to “depart:” that is, abandon their pagan families. **To** them, Paul wishes to make clear that they are not defiled by such a relationship. Indeed, they have an opportunity to be a sanctifying influence in the situation, and this is one reason for his advice to “remain?” He believes that it is possible to have worldly relationships without being stained by the world. It is also correct to say, with Wimbush, that...

‘remain’ was *not* intended to support the status quo; it was designed only to *relativize the importance of all worldly conditions and relationships*. Yet more important, even he remaining’ is relativized: those who are afforded the opportunity (for example slaves, vs. 21) or those who experience the pressure

of temptation can change their social condition status without having their status with God affected.

The reason for this relativization is not some ascetic streak in Paul but his eschatology. He believes that the form or pattern (schema) of the world is passing away and this includes the institution of marriage, which is a this-worldly phenomenon.

And there is another reason. The Corinthians were very status-conscious people. As part of his argument against divisions and factions created by status stratification, Paul injects a dose of eschatology, which relativizes the importance of social status. What is really important is not ones social position but ones soteriological condition. Even a slave can be the Lord's freedman."

<sup>12</sup> Charles Hodge, *Commentary of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 1994), 127-8. Hodge writes, "Paul here expressly states the ground of his opinion that it was inexpedient for his readers to marry. It was on account of the *present distress*, the distress standing near, whether actually present, or impending, depends on the context, Luke 21:23; 2 Corinthians 6:4; 10:12; 1 Thessalonians 3:7. In the present case it was probably not so much the troubles in which Christians were then actually involved, as those which the apostle saw to be hanging over them, which he refers to. The Scriptures clearly predicted that the coming of Christ was to be preceded and attended by great commotions and calamities. These predictions had reference both to his first and second advent. The insight even of inspired men into the future was very imperfect. The ancient prophets searched diligently into the meaning of their own predictions, 1 Peter 1:10-12, and the apostles knew little of the times and seasons, Acts 1:7. They knew that great calamities were to come on the earth, but how or when it was not given to them clearly to see. The awful desolation which was soon to fall upon Jerusalem and on the whole Jewish race, and which could not but involve more or less the Christians also, and the inevitable struggles and persecution which, according to our Lord's predictions, his followers were to encounter, were surely enough to create a deep impression on the apostle's mind, and to make him solicitous to prepare his brethren for the coming storm. It is not necessary, therefore, to assume, as is so often done, that the apostle anticipated the second advent of Christ during that generation, and that he refers to the calamities which were to precede that event. Such expectation would not, indeed, be incompatible with his inspiration. It was revealed to him that Christ was to come the second time; and that he was to come as a thief in the night. He might, therefore, naturally look for it at any time. We know, however, that in the case of Paul at least, it was revealed, that the second advent was not to occur before the national conversion of the Jews, Romans 11:25; or before the great apostasy and rise of the man of sin, 2 Thessalonians 2:2, 3. Still, he knew not when those events might occur, and therefore he knew not when Christ would come. It was not, however, to the calamities which are to precede the second advent, to which Paul here refers, but rather to those which it was predicted should attend the introduction of the gospel."

<sup>13</sup> Fee, 333. "What does seem certain is that this is nor a reference to eschatological woes as such, but to real affliction in the present life, probably enhanced by the ordeal that they are currently experiencing."

<sup>14</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *1 Corinthians: A Contemporary Commentary* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1975), 116.

<sup>15</sup> Clark, 116.