

1 Corinthians 7:1-16

Introduction

We come to a new section in 1 Corinthians. Chapters 7-15 give Paul's answers to questions raised by the Christians in Corinth in a letter to him. "Now, concerning..." marriage, virginity, food offered to idols, spiritual gifts, collection for the church at Jerusalem, Apollus.. (1 Corinthians 7:1,25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1,12). Probably their letter was open in front of him as he writes.

The first issue is marriage. Corinth was an immoral city with a terrible reputation. This stemmed partly from the attitude of the Greeks to the body. They regarded the body as evil, with its instincts. Some repressed it, treated it roughly, or kept it firmly under control. Others felt that if it was evil anyway, they could do nothing about it, and might as well let it have its fling.

Both of these tendencies were present in the church at Corinth. Some were ashamed of the body and its instincts, so they never gratified or pleased it. Others found it hard to give up the promiscuous life they had before conversion. Paul steers a middle course. Whilst we are not to be ashamed of the body and its desires and instincts, they have to be expressed within the context of marriage – life long commitment of one man and one woman.

It is sometimes said that Paul had a low view of marriage. But it is important to realize he was dealing with a particular situation – there are other aspects of his teaching on marriage to be found in Ephesians and Colossians. The church here was going through a particular trial. Hence he wishes they were like him, i.e. single at this point. It saves heartbreak. Had he ever been married? Almost certainly. A Rabbi was always married; it was an obligation, usually about the age of 18. He was also a member of the Jewish Council, the Sanhedrin (Acts 26:10), and they were normally married men, for married men were more merciful than single ones. Was he later widowed? Or deserted by his wife when he became a Christian? Was she his "thorn in the flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:9)?

So Paul deals with their questions. He deals very frankly with the intimacies of marriage in even this very open letter. He takes nothing for granted, but spells out clearly the Christian position. In view of ignorance and peculiar ideas of some Christians down through the centuries, to say nothing of the fact that we are living in a society where marriage is under attack, it is good to take a look at the Christian's and Biblical position.

The nature of the institution of marriage

God's norm is for all of creation, and not just the church. Men and women were made for each other, to be in a lifelong permanent commitment of one man and one woman. And, within that context, to unashamedly express their sexuality which God has given them. To leave their parents, and cleave to each other, becoming one flesh.

To be unmarried requires a gift from God, and is not given to all men and women. It is wrong to be unmarried if it brings stress and turmoil because of the pressures of a passionate nature. Better to marry than burn with passion. Furthermore, living in Corinth where temptation was at every street corner making self-control very difficult, marriage was essential for most.

Do not adopt a single lifestyle when unfitted. Do not subject body to unnatural way of life and make temptation harder to repulse. Do not put body and instincts under unnecessary strain. This sounds like a low view of marriage – just to prevent immorality. But Paul is being very practical and honest here, facing the facts.

Within marriage relationship, each partner has obligations to love and care for the other. Neither is to say his body is his own, but it belongs to the other partner. Equality and sensitivity in man was unknown in the Greek's day, which was so male dominated. The norm in marriage is sexual union that is not granting a favour but payment of debt. Refusal is an act of fraud. To suspend physical relationships must only be temporary, agreed by both parties, and then to be resumed lest tempted by Satan. How frankly and honestly the Bible teaches these things, but with relevance and delicacy – unlike the world, with its bawdy humour and salaciousness.

Paul is answering some Christians who think the body and its instincts are evil. There has always been that strain even in Christian thinking - that it is something tainted, a concession to the weak-willed, not the ideal, a tendency to see virginity as superior, c.f. Roman Catholicism with its monasticism. This view was rampant in the early church because of heathen philosophy. Tertulian took the view, "marriage is a voluptuous disgrace", "frivolous and impure". This attitude is still heard occasionally. But this is not the Bible view.

The body and sexual instincts are not impure. They are God-given. But they are to be expressed within the lifelong union of man and wife. The Bible totally rules out fornication – sex before marriage, and adultery – sex outside of marriage. How much misery and lawlessness and unhappiness there is in the world because of the instability of relationships, and rejection of God's plan.

Let us remind ourselves of the purpose in marriage, as it was instituted by God and commanded in Scripture. Absolutely honourable and not inferior to virginity. Ordained for the hallowing of union between a man and a woman. For the increase of mankind. Children to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord. For companionship, help and comfort of the partners. For the welfare of human society which is strong and happy only where marriage bond is held in honour.

The permanence of the marriage relationship between Christian believers

To those who are married – remember marriage is a permanent relationship. This is not personal opinion, but the Lord's own teaching. The wife is to remain with the husband. If they separate, however, they must remain unmarried. The only alternative is to return and be reconciled with the husband. The same applies to the husband. There is no ground for divorce, just because you cannot agree or get on with each other. Must uphold marriage vows and remember the marriage is still in being, and not to be ended.

This is the ideal, but supposing the Christian who left the marital home falls away so badly that they enter a relationship with someone else, and commit adultery? Then presumably, in the light of Christ's teaching in Matthew (Matthew 5:32; 19:9), divorce is permissible, and then the right to remarriage. Adultery violates the one flesh principle. It brings the marriage covenant to an end. They have entered the one flesh relationship with someone else. Even then, though divorce is permitted, it is not commanded. That is the only exception to this principle about the permanence of marriage between Christians

The problems of mixed marriage of Christian with non-Christian

Now to the rest, i.e. those involved in mixed marriage of Christian with non-Christian. Paul not encouraging marriage of Christian with non-Christian. Marriage to be "only in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 7:39). Envisages situation where two non-Christians get married, and then one is converted (2 Corinthians 6:14). Or Christian enters marriage and later on realizes or learns about the Bible teaching on this. Also applies to case where one partner thought they were Christian but never really so and yet married to genuine Christian. Or Christian is deceived into thinking other is a Christian at time of marriage, but now knows this is not so.

Paul says he has no specific teaching on this from the Lord. Yet he believes he has guidance of the Holy Spirit in this (1 Corinthians 7:40). Paul says this marriage must continue and every effort be made by the Christian to make it work. It is a valid marriage. The unbelieving partner is sanctified by the Christian. Not converted, but certain blessings are enjoyed by the non-Christian and children from the Christian, under gracious and godly influences.

But if unbeliever decides to leave the home – reluctantly no doubt – the believer must let them go. The Christian is not under bondage in these things. When one partner is converted during marriage, the affect can be traumatic. When a South African brain surgeon was asked about the problems caused by his wife's newfound faith, his reply was, "She is no longer the person I had fallen in love with and whom I wanted to marry." Another man, whose wife had always referred every decision to him, and consulted him for advice, on becoming a Christian, this changed. He commented, "I am no longer boss in my own house. She gives orders and sets the pace." Her faith created a barrier between himself and his wife, and he was no longer in charge of his own home.

Understandable that unbeliever now feels he is in an entirely different situation. Cannot stand it. Never bargained for it. Totally alienated. Getting out. Paul says Christian is not to be the first to leave, but if the non-Christian packs his bags and goes, let him. Not to try to hang on if other party is determined to leave. Guiding light is peace in all. Not disturb your peace by trying to get divorce in the first place. Nor go through turmoil of hanging on to failed marriage against the will of the non-Christian that is determined to leave. Accept the situation. Not upset self trying to change situation which is not going to be changed. Not get embroiled in tension and frustration. Not bound or in bondage in such circumstances.

Most commentators say that phrase in 1 Corinthians 7:15 indicates that wilful desertion by the unbeliever (even if no adultery) because of the Christian standing of the Christian (not for every reason) is ground to get divorce and right of remarriage. I.e. desertion on grounds of the Christian faith of the Christian liberates the Christian from contract. This was the view of Martin Luther and most protestant scholars since.

If so, Bible indicates two grounds for divorce and remarriage by Christian. It is permissible, but not mandatory, if (1) there is sexual immorality by a partner, and (2) desertion by unbelieving partner on grounds of Christian's religious convictions and standing. But the first move in ending the marriage is not by the believer. Keep it going as long as possible. But the guiding principle is peace. Follow the line which leads to peace. Not to say, "I am a Christian now, all is new, and so I am not bound by the promises made earlier."

Wonder if Paul was writing out of his own bitter experience. Was he writing out of the trauma of his own experience? Was his wife a Jewess who wanted nothing to do with Christ or His followers, and least of all a Christian apostle and leader? This insistence on permanence of marriage and the Christian never taking the first step in divorce is answer to some Christians who say they made mistake in getting married or would be more effective in the Lord's service without the responsibilities of marriage. Therefore use current easy divorce facilities to escape difficult marriage.

The answer – work at the marriage in God's strength all you can. Trust Him to make something good and rich out of an empty shell. Keep your promises. Ensure you are not the one to take first step in dissolution. Work at it and ask God to make it new and vital.

Teach children the Christian position because of the difficult world they are growing up in. Teach them the relevance of Gospel in forgiveness, compassion, unselfishness, sanctity, highest loyalty, Christ the head of the house.

Conclusion

Need to be reminded of Christian standards. Under attack. Some expect marriage to be abolished within a few years. Certainly many live and think as though it does not exist. Christian standards are not just violated secretly, but openly and unashamedly. Disastrous consequences in the nation because of the state of marriages and homes. Be grateful for a happy marriage. Never take it for granted. Show compassion, and not condemnation, for those who have experienced failure. Witness to Christ's standards and live by them.