

PAUL AND THE PERMANENCE OF MARRIAGE IN 1 CORINTHIANS 7

J. Carl Laney*

Much of the recent debate regarding divorce and remarriage has centered on the teachings of Jesus (Matt 5:31-32; 19:1-12; Mark 1:1-12; Luke 16:18), particularly the meaning of the "except for *porneia*" in Matt 5:32; 19:9.¹ It is generally argued that divorce and remarriage are allowed in the case of *porneia*, which is interpreted as adultery or some form of sexual sin, unfaithfulness during betrothal, or marriage within the prohibited relationships of Lev 18:6-18. Christians struggling with this issue are faced with confusing and often contradictory arguments. What did Jesus teach regarding marriage, divorce and remarriage?

It would be most helpful to know how a first-century Greek scholar and theologian understood Jesus' teaching. Fortunately, we have such a first-century interpreter of the words of Jesus in the apostle Paul. This study focuses on Paul's concept of the permanence of marriage as expounded in 1 Corinthians 7. His analysis and understanding of the teachings of Jesus regarding marriage and divorce shed much-needed light on the present divorce and remarriage controversy.

First Corinthians contains Paul's replies to a number of inquiries made by the Corinthian believers. This is evidenced by his words, "Now concerning the things about which you wrote" (7:1), and the repeated use of the introductory phrase *peri de* (7:25; 8:1; 16:1). In chap. 7 Paul responds to several questions that the Corinthian believers had asked concerning marriage.

I. IS MARRIAGE PERMITTED? (7:1-9)

While most orthodox Jews of the first century were opposed to celibacy and regarded marriage as a duty, there were some ascetics at Corinth who advocated celibacy and wanted Paul to make it obligatory. Paul states in v 1 that it is "good" for a man not "to touch" a woman. It is debated whether the apostle was (1) asserting his position in his own words, (2) quoting a Corinthian slogan that he accepted, or (3) quoting a Corinthian slogan that he rejected.² A more likely possibility is that Paul was quoting a Corinthian slogan, but one he wanted to modify. Paul was in agreement with the principle of celibacy (7:7-8, 33-35), but not because he advocated sexual asceticism in marriage. According to Paul, physical re-

*J. Carl Laney is associate professor of Biblical literature at Western Conservative Baptist Seminary in Portland, Oregon.

¹H. G. Coiner, "Those 'Divorce and Remarriage' Passages (Matt 5:32; 19:9; 1 Cor 7:10-16)," *CTM* 39 (1968) 367-384; M. Geldard, "Jesus' Teaching on Divorce: Thoughts on the Meaning of *Porneia* in Matt 5:32 and 19:9," *Churchman* 92 (1978) 134-143; J. C. Laney, *The Divorce Myth* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1981) 66-78; B. Vawter, "The Divorce Clauses in Mt. 5:32 and 19:9," *CBQ* 16 (1954) 155-167.

²W. E. Phipps, "Is Paul's Attitude Toward Sexual Relations Contained in 1 Cor 7:1?," *NTS* 28 (1982) 125-131.

lations are not to be denied their rightful place in marriage (7:3-5). This union is highly honored for it is viewed by the apostle as analogous to the union between Christ and the believer (Eph 5:31-32).

The verb "touch" (*aptomai*) in v 1 is a common euphemism for sexual intercourse³ and here refers to legitimate marital relations (cf. 7:2-5). Note that Paul merely declares celibacy "good"—not obligatory or morally better than the married state. There is no veiled suggestion that marriage is not also "good" (cf. Eph 5:22-33; 1 Tim 3:2; 4:1-3; Heb 13:4).

But while Paul grants the validity of celibacy, he points out in v 2 that marriage is the duty of those who might be overcome by temptation in a society so permeated by immorality as Corinth was. Paul's words ("But because of immoralities, let each man have his own wife") do not suggest that he viewed marriage as merely a means to avoid fornication. Rather, he is saying that marriage is the norm for Christians even if there is no higher motive than the avoidance of fornication.⁴

While some in Corinth advocated sexual abstinence in marriage (v 5), Paul points out that marriage involves mutual obligations and conjugal rights. Neither the husband nor the wife has exclusive claim to ("authority over") his or her own body. Normal sexual relations in marriage are considered by Paul to be a sacred obligation and loving duty (vv 3-4). Paul concedes that a couple may abstain from sexual relations for a time of special emphasis on prayer, but he sets forth two requirements for such a situation. First, the couple must be in agreement on the matter in order to avoid the possibility of defrauding one's mate. Second, there must be a return to normal sexual relations in order to avoid encouraging temptation.

Paul's instructions in vv 1-5 were spoken as a concession, not a command. The "this" of v 6 refers back to his general premise that marriage is the norm for Christians (v 2). But this is merely Paul's suggestion, not his apostolic command. His personal preference would be for all to be single like himself (v 7).⁵ Paul recognizes, however, that each believer must consider his own gift—whether it be celibacy or marriage—and live accordingly (cf. Matt 19:12). Illustrating the point of v 7, Paul declares that it is good if unmarried men⁶ and widows are able to remain single, but only if they have the special gift of celibacy and the accompanying sexual self-control. Marriage is to be preferred over burning with sexual passion.⁷

³See Josephus *Ant.* 1.8.1 sec. 163; Gen 20:6 and Prov 6:29 (LXX).

⁴F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 267.

⁵Paul was unmarried at the time and perhaps a widower. The argument that as a member of the Sanhedrin (Acts 26:10) he must have been married (*m. Sanh.* 36b) is weak, for (1) the rule may have been made after the time of Paul, and (2) to "cast my vote" may be figurative for approving the sentence of judgment against the Christians.

⁶The "unmarried" refers here to bachelors, not divorcees or unmarried virgins whose cases are discussed later (cf. vv 11, 25-38); see A. Robertson and A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911) 138.

⁷For a provocative study, see M. L. Barré, "To Marry or To Burn: *pyrousthai* in 1 Cor 7:9," *CBQ* 36 (1974) 193-202.

II. IS DIVORCE PERMITTED? (7:10-11)

Paul goes on to address married believers about maintaining their marriage relationship. Appealing to the authoritative command (*parangellō*)⁸ of Jesus (cf. Matt 19:6; Mark 10:9-12; Luke 16:18), Paul declares in no uncertain terms that married persons should not seek divorce (7:10-11). Twice he affirms the principle of no divorce: "The wife should not leave her husband" (7:10), and "the husband should not send his wife away" (7:11). Paul understood Christ's "command" as prohibiting divorce among married believers. Conzelmann observes that "the regulation is absolute; for it comes from the Lord himself."⁹ Bruce comments:

For a Christian husband or wife divorce is excluded by the law of Christ: here Paul has not needed to express a judgment of his own, for the Lord's ruling on the matter was explicit.¹⁰

It has been observed that in Paul's quotation of Christ's command no "exception clause" is present. According to Stein, it appears that in the teaching of Jesus known to the apostle Paul the word of Jesus concerning divorce had no "exception clause."¹¹ Another possible explanation for its absence here is that Paul may have viewed the "exception clause" as nonapplicable to believing Gentiles.

But Paul concedes that in a fallen world divorce does occur. What then should be the course of action followed by believers who disobey Christ's command and become divorced or separated? Paul addresses this question in the parenthesis found in v 11. He leaves the divorced believer with only two options. The first option is to remain permanently unmarried, the present tense of *menō* ("remain") emphasizing the permanent situation. The active voice of the verb suggests that the believer must actively pursue the single state. This would prevent the involvement of a third party and encourage the possibility of reconciliation.

The second option made available by Paul to the divorced or separated person is for there to be a reconciliation to one's partner. The aorist tense of *katallassō* ("be reconciled") emphasizes the attainment of the end of the reconciliation process. Mare comments: "The stress of the passage on maintaining the marriage bond unbroken definitely strengthens the injunction for separated marriage partners to become reconciled."¹² There are, then, two options for the divorced or separated believer: remain single, or be reconciled. Paul gives no other options, for according to his understanding, neither did Jesus.

⁸When Paul gives directions on his own authority (v 12) he says, *legō egō* ("I say"), not *parangellō* ("I command").

⁹H. Conzelmann, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 120.

¹⁰Bruce, *Paul* 267.

¹¹R. H. Stein, "Is It Lawful for a Man to Divorce His Wife?", *JETS* 22 (1979) 118.

¹²W. H. Mare, "First Corinthians," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (ed. F. E. Gaebelein; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 229.

III. IS A MIXED MARRIAGE BINDING? (7:12-16)

Paul goes on in vv 12-16 to deal with the case where one partner becomes a believer after marriage. Having spoken to those who were unmarried (7:8-9) and to those who had married since their conversion (7:10-11), Paul now addresses "the rest," those who belong to neither class.¹³ The Corinthians may have been asking such questions as these: "Is marriage between a believer and an unconverted partner a binding relationship?" "Does the marriage relationship change when one of the partners becomes converted?" "In view of the pagan practices in Corinth, would it be advisable for a believer to stay in a marriage relationship with an unbelieving partner?"

While Christ did not give any command regarding spiritually mixed marriages ("I say, not the Lord," v 12), Paul does, and his teaching is divinely inspired and authoritative. As in the case of two married believers, Paul's instruction is "No divorce" (7:12-13). If the unbelieving partner is willing to remain with the Christian, then the Christian partner must not seek a divorce. The believing husband is not to divorce his unbelieving wife, nor is the believing wife to divorce her unbelieving husband. The principle of "no divorce" is set forth four times in vv 10-13. According to Paul, a marriage is binding even if one of the partners is an unbeliever. The marriage covenant that binds a couple together (cf. Mal 2:14) is in no way changed when one of the partners becomes converted.

Paul proceeds in v 14 to point out one advantage to continuing the marriage. "For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy." The word *hagiazō* ("be sanctified") literally means "be set apart." What is the unbelieving partner "set apart" to? The pagan partner is set apart to receive a Christian witness and influence that he or she might not otherwise have. In addition, the children of the couple are "holy." This does not suggest that they are "saved," but rather they too are set apart to God and will probably avoid entanglements with pagan worship and evil practices. Marriage was not designed by God as a program of personal evangelism (cf. 2 Cor 6:14-18; Eph 5:31-33), but in the case of a spiritually mixed marriage the Christian partner is not to seek divorce. The believing partner is to maintain the relationship and thus give the home a Christian influence it would not otherwise receive. The testimony of the believing partner may be used by God to bring the children and unbelieving partner to Christ.

In v 15 Paul acknowledges that the unbelieving partner may insist on ending the marriage when his or her spouse converts to Christianity. If the unbelieving partner insists on ending the marriage, is the believing brother or sister required by the command of Jesus and the teaching of Paul to preserve the union at all costs? There are those who interpret v 15 as allowing for divorce and remarriage in the case of abandonment in the interests of preserving peace. Paul is seen to be exercising his "pastoral privilege" in modifying the teaching of Jesus by adding another exception: desertion. Adams takes this view and interprets v 15 as suggesting the following:

¹³Robertson and Plummer, *First Corinthians* 141.

All the bonds of marriage have been removed. He is released entirely from every marriage obligation, and is a totally free person. Nor is there any obligation to be reconciled in marriage.¹⁴

While this view is popular among evangelicals, it does not appear to be a valid interpretation of v 15. First, it is very unlikely that Paul would permit in v 15 something he forbade in vv 10-13.¹⁵ Second, while Paul recognized the possibility of divorce among Christians (vv 10-11), under the command of Jesus remarriage to another partner was not allowed. It is very difficult to see why it should be allowed in this case and not the preceding one. Third, the winning of the unbelieving partner to Christ (v 14) would take place only through a continued or reconciled marriage, not through divorce and remarriage to a new partner.

In v 15 Paul is simply saying that if the unbelieving partner demands separation, then the believer is not "under bondage" (*dedoulōtai*, literally "enslaved") to preserve the union through legal maneuvers or by pursuing the unwilling partner all over the Roman empire. The word "enslaved" has to do with how the partners relate. Is the believer to function like a slave in relationship to the partner who is unwilling to maintain the marriage? Paul answers, "No!" It should be noted that the word "enslaved" is set in contrast with the words "at peace." The rejected Christian partner is either "enslaved" or "at peace." Paul directs believers to the latter state on no less authority than God's call. Peace in the midst of a rather difficult situation is God's portion for a rejected Christian partner, not a new marriage. Paul is simply saying in v 15 that Christ's prohibition against divorce does not enslave the believer to maintain the union against the wishes of an unbelieving partner who insists on ending the marriage.

Some have mistakenly concluded that the words "under bondage" in v 15 are identical or related to the word "bound" in v 39, and that v 15 would contain an exception to the permanence of marriage expressed in v 39. A popular Bible expositor writes that Paul uses the same root word *doulos* in v 39 as he does in v 15.¹⁶ But this is simply not the case. The words are quite different. The Greek word *douloō* used by Paul in v 15 means "to enslave" or "bring into bondage."¹⁷ The believing partner does not have to make himself or herself a slave (perfect passive) to the unbelieving spouse. The Greek word *deō* used by Paul in v 39 means "to tie, bind, fasten."¹⁸ The words used by Paul in vv 15 and 39 are obviously not the same word, and they are not even related to the same root. *Douloō* is derived from *doulos* and is used in the LXX to translate *ʿābad* ("to serve"), while *deō* is used in the LXX to translate *ʿāsar* ("to tie up"). *Deō* is used by Paul in Acts 20:22 of his sense of constraint or obligation to go to Jerusalem: "And now, behold, bound in spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there" (NASB). Paul uses *deō* in Rom 7:2; 1 Cor 7:26, 39 to describe the

¹⁴J. E. Adams, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980) 48.

¹⁵D. L. Dungan, *The Sayings of Jesus in the Churches of Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 97.

¹⁶C. R. Swindoll, *Strike the Original Match* (Portland: Multnomah, 1980) 145-146.

¹⁷G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, s.v. *douloō*, 122.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, s.v. *deō*, 103-104.

marriage commitment, which is "binding" until death. Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 7 that the marriage relationship is binding until death (v 39), but a rejected spouse is not "enslaved" to the extent of having to maintain the marriage against the wishes of the unbelieving and unwilling partner.

Those who take v 15 as allowing for divorce in the case of desertion also argue that a second marriage is permitted. Atkinson comments, "This 'not enslaved' must presumably mean 'not bound' to the marriage bond."¹⁹ A pastor asserts:

Being free of that "bondage" obviously means being free of the responsibility of that marriage. The desertion of the unsaved partner breaks the bond thus freeing the believer to divorce and remarry.²⁰

But note carefully that Paul says nothing in v 15 about a second marriage for the deserted spouse. Robertson and Plummer conclude:

All that "he is not bound" clearly means is that he or she need not feel so bound by Christ's prohibition of divorce as to be afraid to depart when the heathen partner insists on separation.²¹

Dungan agrees that "nothing more is permitted the Christian than accepting the unbelieving partner's wish for divorce."²² Coiner adds: "To conclude that remarriage is allowable is to go beyond the clearly stated words of the text."²³

Paul is quite familiar with the concept of remarriage and mentions it later in v 39. But apart from the debated v 15 (and also v 28), Paul makes no reference to remarriage except in the case of the death of the spouse (Rom 7:2-3; 1 Cor 7:39; 1 Tim 5:14). For a deserted spouse the two alternatives of reconciliation or a lifelong single life would still apply (7:11).

The words "not bound" are illuminated by what Paul has to say about slavery in v 22. According to Paul, true freedom does not come from changing external conditions but from recognizing one's position in Christ. Freedom can be realized by a Christian in any *de facto* situation.²⁴ Paul's words in v 15 do not suggest that the Christian may seek a new marriage partner but that the believer is freed from burdensome obligations to experience God's peace in the existing situation as a single person. DeLau comments: "Assuredly the freedom would be greater if the Christian had the right to remarry. But it seems that St. Paul would have mentioned explicitly this freedom, if he had intended to grant it."²⁵

It is debated whether v 16 goes back to vv 13-14 or follows the thought of v 15.

¹⁹D. Atkinson, *To Have and to Hold* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 124; see also P. H. Wiebe, "The New Testament on Divorce and Remarriage: Some Logical Implications," *JETS* 24 (1981) 137.

²⁰Swindoll, *Strike* 146.

²¹Robertson and Plummer, *First Corinthians* 143.

²²Dungan, *Sayings* 97.

²³Coiner, "Passages" 383.

²⁴J. A. Fischer, "1 Cor 7:28-34—Marriage and Divorce," *BR* 23 (1978) 31.

²⁵P. DeLau, "The Pauline Privilege: Is It Promulgated in the First Epistle to the Corinthians?," *CBQ* 13 (1951) 152.

The latter view is suggested both by the context and the symmetry of the passage. As v 14 provides reasons (*gar*) for maintaining the marriage, so v 16 provides reasons (*gar*) for allowing separation. If the unbeliever demands divorce, it should be granted for the sake of peace. For while the continuation of the marriage may provide the unbelieving partner with a gospel witness, there is no guarantee that he or she will respond. In other words, the conversion of the unbeliever is not guaranteed by the continuation of the marriage.

IV. IS A CHANGE OF STATUS ADVISABLE? (7:17-24)

In vv 17-24 Paul summarizes the thrust of his discussion thus far by setting forth a principle that applies to all areas of life, including marriage. The *Ei mē* (v 17), translated "only" in the *NASB* and "nevertheless" in the *NIV*, serves to define and limit the statement in v 15 that the believing partner is "not enslaved." The believer is not enslaved but is under obligation not to seek a rupture in the relationship.²⁶ Paul provides the Corinthians with a simple guideline: "Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And thus I direct in all the churches" (v 17). In other words, "Lead the life that God assigns you and be content in your situation" (Heb 13:5; Phil 4:11). This guideline is repeated three times in this short paragraph (vv 17, 20, 24).

In vv 18-24 Paul provides illustrations of the principle (one religious and one secular) to make his point. Using the illustration of circumcision, Paul points out that a man ought not to try to change his state as was the case with the hellenistic Jews in the time of Antiochus who disguised their circumcision (1 Macc 1:15). Rather, believers ought to focus on the priority of obeying the commandments of God. Then, using the illustration of slavery, Paul points out that it makes little difference whether a Christian is a slave or free.²⁷ He who is a slave is free in Christ, and everyone who is free is Christ's slave (v 22). Verse 23 probably expands the concept that the believer is "Christ's slave." As such, believers ought not to place themselves in a condition of life that would perhaps violate God's right over them. Paul concludes this section by repeating his basic guideline (v 24). Should a Christian seek to change his marital status? "No," says Paul. "Be content with your present calling. You are right where God wants you."

V. IS A VIRGIN PERMITTED TO MARRY? (7:25-38)

In vv 25-38 Paul responds to the Corinthians' question of whether unmarried believers may marry. The fact that they are called *parthenōn* ("virgins") is quite significant and aids in the interpretation of the verses that follow. While Jesus gave no command concerning the marriage of virgins, Paul addresses the issue and provides the Corinthians with his divinely inspired and authoritative instruction. It is Paul's conviction that in view of the "present distress" it is best for believers to remain in their present state (v 26). The "present distress" is not identi-

²⁶Robertson and Plummer, *First Corinthians* 145.

²⁷Paul cannot resist suggesting that the believer should take his freedom if he is able to do so (v 21), as he undoubtedly hoped that Onesimus would find freedom (Phlm 15-16).

fied specifically and probably refers to the general difficulty of supporting and caring for a family in a world that is rapidly changing (v 31). It can be assumed from the general nature of Paul's statements that the "present distress" was not unique to Corinth or the first-century setting.

According to Paul, the single life is the best course to follow in light of (1) the burdens of family life in an unfriendly world, 7:26-28; (2) the transitory nature of things in view of the Lord's imminent return, 7:29-31; and (3) the greater freedom and opportunity afforded a single person in serving Christ, 7:32-35. Paul views the single life as not morally better but as providing greater opportunity to be useful for Christ. However, Paul assures his readers that for a virgin to marry is not to commit sin but to incur greater responsibility and potential trouble in life (7:28). Therefore, he says, it is best to be content in the marital state you find yourself in.

Some would argue that in v 27 Paul is referring to those who have been divorced (*lelytai*) and that they may remarry without sin (v 28).²⁸ There are several factors that weigh heavily against this interpretation. First, the context of the immediate passage (vv 25-38) concerns virgins, not divorcees. Paul spoke to the issue of divorce earlier (vv 10-16). Second, for Paul to give permission for divorcees to remarry in v 28 would contradict his clearly-stated instructions in v 11 regarding the options available for those whose marriages have failed. Reconciliation or remaining single are the only two options presented by Paul. Third, when Paul speaks of divorce the verb he uses in this section is not *lyō* (v 27) but *aphiēmi* (vv 11-13) or *chōrizō* (vv 10, 11, 15). Robertson and Plummer recognize that Paul is unlikely to be addressing divorcees in this verse.²⁹

Elliott has argued convincingly that the *parthenōn* Paul refers to in v 25 means "engaged couples."³⁰ Accordingly Paul is responding to the question of whether or not betrothed couples should fulfill their promises of marriage in view of the "present distress." Elliott translates v 27: "Are you engaged to a woman? Do not seek a release (i.e. do not break off the engagement). Are you free from a woman (i.e. single)? Then do not seek a woman (as a wife)."³¹ In support of this view it is noted that the compound form *apolyō* bears the meaning "to break off a betrothal" in Matt 1:19. Rather than breaking off an engagement or betrothal in light of the present distress or Paul's preference for the single life, the apostle allows that the one who is promised in marriage may consummate the relationship. There is no need to break off a contract already entered into. To marry one's betrothed is not to commit sin.

The most serious objection to Elliott's interpretation is that *deō* clearly means "bound in marriage" in v 39 and in Rom 7:2. But in both of these verses the context is clearly that of husband and wife. Here the context is different. Paul is dealing in 1 Cor 7:25-38 with the matter of virgins (v 25), not married couples.

²⁸S. A. Ellisen, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980) 68; Atkinson, *To Have* 124-125.

²⁹Robertson and Plummer, *First Corinthians* 153.

³⁰J. K. Elliott, "Paul's Teaching on Marriage in 1 Corinthians: Some Problems Considered," *NTS* 19 (1972-73) 219-223.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 221.

Paul seems to be acknowledging the existence of two groups of single people in v 27: (1) those who are betrothed, and (2) those who are in a state of freedom from betrothal or future marriage commitment. Paul's advice is to maintain the status quo. In vv 27-28a he addresses the prospect of marriage from a man's point of view. Paul says, in essence, "Remain in the state you find yourself in, whether promised to a woman or free from a commitment to marriage." Then, adding a word of encouragement to those already betrothed, Paul says, "But don't consider it to be a sin if you decide to go ahead with the marriage." In v 28b Paul makes specific application of his teaching to the situation of the young woman: "And if a virgin should marry, she has not sinned." Phillips captures the flow of Paul's thought in his translation of v 28: "But if you, a man, should marry, don't think that you have done anything sinful. And the same applies to a young woman."³²

To argue that Paul is advocating the remarriage of divorced persons in 1 Cor 7:27-28, and that this may be done without sin, is to violate the context of the passage and contradict the clear teaching of Paul elsewhere that marriage is a relationship dissolved only by death (Rom 7:2-3; 1 Cor 7:39).

In vv 36-38 Paul applies his guideline that "it is no sin to marry" (v 28) to a specific situation. Unfortunately there is no degree of certainty as to what that particular situation was.³³ Some have interpreted these verses to refer to "spiritual marriage" whereby a couple joined in marriage are to live as brother and sister, abstaining from sexual relations. But while this was practiced in the third century A.D. there is no evidence that such "marriages" existed in the early Church. Certainly Paul would not have given his approval to such relationships in light of his statements in v 5. A recent suggestion is that Paul was dealing with a question regarding levirate marriage (Deut 25:5-10) and that the "virgin" (v 36) refers to a young widow, the widowed sister-in-law of the "man."³⁴ But *parthenos* means "virgin," not "widow," and there is nothing in the context that suggests that the Corinthian church was concerned with the rather obscure Jewish law of levirate marriage.

Others take it that the "man" in v 36 is one who is betrothed to a virgin.³⁵ According to Elliott, the "man" may marry the virgin to whom he is betrothed if his passions are strong, although he is especially commended if he refrains from marrying her.³⁶

Another interpretation is that the "man" refers to the virgin's father or guardian who has authority over the unmarried daughter (cf. Num 30:3-5) and is responsible for her marriage.³⁷ According to this view Paul is simply saying that if a

³²J. B. Phillips, *The New Testament in Modern English*.

³³For a good survey of the views see L. Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958) 120-122.

³⁴J. M. Ford, "Levirate Marriage in St. Paul (1 Cor. VII)," *NTS* 10 (1964) 361-365.

³⁵C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper, 1968) 184; Mare, "First Corinthians" 236-237.

³⁶Elliott, "Paul's Teaching" 223.

³⁷J. D. M. Derrett, "The Disposal of Virgins," in *Studies in the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 1. 184-191.

father thinks he is acting unfairly toward his daughter by withholding marriage when she has reached maturity and shows no evidence of the gift of celibacy, then he should let her marry. Either of the last two views is possible. The latter interpretation may be commended by the references in the Mishna to the father's authority over his virgin daughter with regard to her betrothal and marriage (*m. Ketub.* 4:4-5). However the passage is understood, Paul's point is summarized quite clearly for his readers in v 38. Marriage is good ("well"), according to Paul, but the single life is "better" since it affords greater opportunities for serving the Lord.

VI. IS A WIDOW PERMITTED TO REMARRY? (7:39-40)

Paul concludes his discussion concerning marriage with a brief word concerning the marriage of widows. He states quite clearly that marriage is a lifelong relationship: "A wife is bound as long as her husband lives" (v 39). The word *dedetai* (perfect tense of *deō*) is "a strong expression for the unbroken ties of marriage."³⁸

Paul's view expressed here is in harmony with his words in Rom 7:1-3. There he uses the binding and lifelong nature of marriage to illustrate the theological point that death dissolves the dominion of the Law (Rom 6:14; 7:1). Paul states that a woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives, but that when he dies she is released from the marital relationship (Rom 7:2). If while her husband yet lives she is "joined" (i.e., married) to another man, she shall be called an adulteress. Only on the death of the husband is the woman free to remarry without sin (Rom 7:3). The illustration reflects Paul's view that marriage is permanent until death and serves to confirm the teaching found in 1 Cor 7:39. According to Paul, a marriage is indissoluble except by death.³⁹

Consistent with his earlier instructions regarding the importance of continuing in one's present state (cf. 7:17, 20, 24) and the advantage of the single life, Paul adds that in his view the widow is happier if she remains single. There is no inconsistency between these words and 1 Tim 5:14 where young widows are encouraged to remarry in order that they might not be enticed into sin (cf. 1 Tim 5:11-15; 1 Cor 7:9). If the surviving spouse does remarry, the marriage must be to another Christian ("in the Lord," v 39; cf. 2 Cor 6:14-18).

VII. CONCLUSION

The clear teaching of Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 is that the God-ordained marriage union is indissoluble except by death. Hodge concurs:

The uniform doctrine of the New Testament is, that marriage is a contract for life, between one man and one woman, indissoluble by the will of the parties or by any human authority; but that the death of either party leaves the survivor free to contract another marriage.⁴⁰

³⁸Mare, "First Corinthians" 237.

³⁹Morris, *First Corinthians* 122.

⁴⁰C. Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprinted 1976) 133.

While Paul acknowledges that divorce will sometimes take place (7:10, 15), he does not present remarriage to another person as an option for the divorced. Reconciliation to the original partner or a single life are the only two alternatives he acknowledges (7:11).

Why did Paul teach the permanence of marriage without exception over against the teaching of Jesus where one exception ("except for *porneia*," Matt 5:32; 19:9) was allowed? There are at least three possible reasons why Paul did not acknowledge the so-called "exception clause" of Jesus. First, it is possible that he simply did not know of it. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians in A.D. 55 or 56 he probably did not have the gospel of Matthew in hand to refer to. But he did profess to know what Jesus taught concerning the permanence of marriage and accurately reflects his teachings as recorded by Mark and Luke. And while some have argued that the exception clauses in Matthew are not part of the genuine teachings of Jesus but represent either an adaptation by Matthew or an interpolation by the early Church,⁴¹ arguments against the genuineness of these clauses have not been convincing.⁴²

A second possible reason that Paul did not mention any exception in 1 Corinthians 7 is that he may not have viewed the "except for *porneia*" as applicable to believing Gentiles. This would certainly be consistent with the view that identifies *porneia* as the sin of unfaithfulness during Jewish betrothal.⁴³ It would also be in keeping with the view that identifies *porneia* as marriage within the prohibited relationships of Lev 18:6-18.⁴⁴ Accordingly Paul did not mention the exception because he saw it as relating only to Jewish culture in the first century and not applicable outside of that context.

A third and most interesting possibility is that Paul did not mention the exception clause because he understood it as allowing for divorce but not also remarriage. Most of those who deal with the exception clause argue that it gives allowance not only for divorce but also remarriage.⁴⁵ However, there are at least three reasons to question this traditional approach. The first is the placement of the exception. There are three possible places that the exception clause could appear: at the beginning of Jesus' statement (making separation mandatory in the case of *porneia*), in the middle (allowing divorce only), and at the end (sanctioning both divorce and remarriage).⁴⁶ If the exception clause in Matt 5:32; 19:9 ap-

⁴¹W. T. Manson, *The Teachings of Jesus* (Cambridge: University Press, 1951) 200.

⁴²B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1971) 47-48; A. Mahoney, "A New Look at the Divorce Clauses in Mt. 5:32 and 19:9," *CBQ* 30 (1968) 30.

⁴³W. Fisher-Hunter, *Marriage and Divorce* (Waynesboro, PA: MacNiesh, 1952) 1-173; T. H. Epp, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage* (Lincoln, NB: Back to the Bible, 1954) 1-85; A. Isaksson, *Marriage and Ministry in the New Temple* (Lund: Gleerup, 1965) 135-142.

⁴⁴W. K. L. Clarke, *New Testament Problems* (New York: Macmillan, 1929) 59-60; C. C. Ryrie, *The Role of Women in the Church* (Chicago: Moody, 1970) 40-50; J. A. Fitzmyer, "The Matthean Divorce Texts and Some New Palestinian Evidence," *TS* 37 (1976) 197-226; A. Stock, "Matthean Divorce Texts," *BTB* 8 (1978) 24-33; J. Jensen, "Does *Porneia* Mean Fornication? A Critique of Bruce Malina," *NouT* 20 (1978) 180; Laney, *Divorce Myth* 66-76.

⁴⁵J. Murray, *Divorce* (Philadelphia: Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1953) 36-43.

⁴⁶W. Heth, "A Critique of the Evangelical Protestant View of Divorce and Remarriage," *Studia Theologica et Apologia* 1 (1981) 11-39.

plies both to divorce and remarriage, these are the only two places in the NT where such an exception appears in the middle of the sentence and modifies both the preceding and following verbs.⁴⁷

The second reason for questioning the traditional approach is the history of the interpretation. Wenham points out that all the Church fathers except one (Ambrosiaster) agreed that remarriage after divorce, whatever the cause, constitutes adultery.⁴⁸ Even in the case of adultery the "innocent" spouse did not have permission to remarry. This remained the standard position in the west until the sixteenth century when Erasmus suggested that the "innocent" spouse not only had the right to divorce an unfaithful spouse but also to contract a new marriage. Wenham encourages scholars to give careful attention to the view of the Church fathers who had the advantage of being able to think and write in Greek "with a fluency no modern scholar can match."⁴⁹ If the Church fathers are right, then Christ never intended the exception to allow for remarriage.

The third reason for questioning the Erasmian interpretation of the exception clause is the double standard it imposes.⁵⁰ If divorce and remarriage are both allowable by Jesus, then Matt 5:32 permits remarriage for the adulterous wife (v 32a) but apparently prohibits it for the faithful partner ("and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery," v 32b). At least no one could marry a faithful but divorced wife without committing adultery.

It is quite probable that if Paul knew of Jesus' exception clause he either saw it as not applicable to his readers at Corinth or understood it to allow for divorce only and not remarriage. Either way, Paul teaches quite clearly in 1 Corinthians 7 that the God-ordained marriage union is permanent and indissoluble except by death.

⁴⁷See Acts 26:29, 2 Cor 11:28 (*parektos*); Acts 26:22, 1 Cor 14:5, 15:2, 27, 1 Tim 5:19 (*ektos*); Acts 8:1, 20:23, Matt 12:32 (*plên*).

⁴⁸G. Wenham, "The Biblical View of Marriage and Divorce 3—New Testament Teaching," *Third Way* (November 17, 1977) 7; Atkinson, *To Have* 36-69.

⁴⁹Wenham, "Biblical View" 7.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 9.