
Celibacy: An Exegetical Study of 1 Cor. 7:1

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ABSTRACT

There appear to be a misunderstanding or misconstrued idea by some Christians in the reading of 1 Corinthians 7:1. Some understand this text to be a support for Celibacy in Christendom. This has not only masked the true meaning of this text but a different implication has been read into it. The paper sought to inquire on the notion of Celibacy, discover the right interpretation of the text Historical exegetical Method of inquiry was used in this study. It was discovered that the notion of Celibacy in the text is alien when studied in its context, and celibacy and its obligation is not based in this text.

Keywords: Celibacy, Exegesis, Misunderstanding.

INTRODUCTION

Celibacy is the state of voluntarily being unmarried, sexually abstinent, or both, usually for religious reasons. It is often in association with the role of a religious official or devotee.¹ In its narrow sense, the term *celibacy* is applied only to those for whom the unmarried state is the result of a sacred vow, act of renunciation, or religious conviction. In a wider sense, it is commonly understood to only mean abstinence from sexual activity.¹ Certain religions have set this practice as the requirement for all members of the clergy and some base their argument on the text of 1 Corinthians 7:1. Looking at many of the text in the Old and New Testament that discuss the qualification of a priest, (Ex. 28:1-4; Numb.4:3; Lev.21:5; 21:9-14;22:3-9; Ezek. 44:17-22; 1 Tim.3 and Tit.1:5-9) is Celibacy mentioned as the requirement which though is not the objective of this study?

Because a misunderstanding and misinterpretation of this text 1 Cor.7:1, has not only buried the meaning of this text but has obscured and given an erroneous understanding of the message of Apostle Paul while writing to the people of Corinthians. The objective of this study is to present a good interpretation of the text to show Paul's exact teaching in this context.

The significance of this study cannot be overemphasized since the understanding of this text will not only help direct families but give credence to Godly Christian lifestyle. But if misunderstood, can destroy Christian virtues as Jesus warned about adding or removing from the scripture until He comes (Matt. 5:18) to the scripture.

The scope of this study is mainly 1 Corinthians 7. But because of the backdrop against which the text can be better understood, the books of Ephesians 5 and Genesis 2 will also be considered during interpretation.

Literary Unit

The immediate context of this text is I Corinthians 7:1-16 where Paul was explaining to the Corinthians the reason why a man should not have the sexual intercourse with engaged wife before marriage.

The larger context of the text is r from chapter 1 of the book of Corinthian where so many questions has been raised for Paul to answer. In these first five verses, Paul throws his weight around and exhorts us to fulfill our sexual desires through a loving, sacrificial relationship with our spouse. Paul begins with these words: "Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman" (7:1). Chapter 7 begins a new section of 1 Corinthians. The words, "Now concerning" prepare the reader for Paul's response to the Corinthians' question.

¹ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003)

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The larger context of text is passage (7: 1) in view is from verse twelve of chapter six of first Corinthians to verse forty of chapter seven of the same book (1 Corinthians 6: 12 – 7: 40).

The larger context of this passage has four different blocks or units.

The first unit talks about the sexual immorality. 1 Corinthians 6: 12-20.

Apostle Paul talks about the sexual immorality. 1 Corinthians 7: 1-16

The third unit apostle Paul laid much emphasis on the change of status. 1 Corinthians 7: 17 -24.

The fourth unit is concerning the unmarried. 1 Corinthians 7: 25-40.

The unit before the immediate context is first Corinthians chapter six verses twelve to twenty (1 Corinthians 6: 12-20). While the unit after the immediate context is first Corinthian chapter seven verses seventeen to forty (1 Corinthians 7: 17-40).

Genre

The genre of the text is theologically rhetorical. Paul was expounding doctrine on the basis for admonition to formally persuade his audience to change attitudes and behavior.

STRUCTURE

A structure of the immediate context, 1 Corinthians 7:1-11 is as follows:

A. Not to Touch a Woman 7:1-6.

- i. Mutuality of Marriage
- ii. Not to stay without marriage
- iii. Avoid fornication
- iv. Not to deny sex to each other
- v. To avoid temptation and incontinent

B. Reason for not Marring 7:7-11.

- i. Special instance of abstinence
- ii. If it a gift from God
- iii. If one can endure the urge
- iv. If divorced, to remain unmarried

C. Divorce (7: 10-16).

- i. The Lords charge against ultimate separation
- ii. Paul's recommendation that believers not divorce unbelievers
- iii. Believers not bound by broken marriages with unbelievers

Interpretation and Theology

In the first six chapters of this letter, Paul has been dealing with sinful struggles in the life of the church in Corinth that he had heard about through Chloe's people (cf. 1:11). But now, beginning in 7:1, Paul is going to respond to a whole series of questions that were addressed to him in a letter from the leadership of the church in Corinth. They were questions about practical issues like marriage, divorce, singleness, food offered to idols, spiritual gifts, public worship, what happens to our bodies when we die, and finally, a concern about an offering to be taken for some believers in Jerusalem who were in poverty. Paul will devote the rest of this letter to answering these questions.

In 7:1b, Paul cites a line from the Corinthians' letter (“it is good for a man not to touch a woman”), which he intends to qualify and correct. The phrase, “it is good for a man not to touch a woman,” has nothing to do with a hug, a handshake, or any other manifestation of fellowship or friendship. To “touch a woman” is a euphemism for sexual intercourse.² Consequently, various English versions just drop the euphemism and translate “sexual relations” (NET, ESV). The phrase “to touch a woman” is translated “to marry” in the NIV, but this is weak. (The NIV does provide a better alternate reading.)

² David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003)

Introducing the idea of marriage confuses the point that the Corinthians were promoting. The mindset of the Corinthians went way beyond issues of marriage or even celibacy. Some were promoting abstinence in the marriage relationship. The natural question is, “Why would the Corinthians not be interested in sex in the context of marriage?” We cannot know for certain, but the most likely suggestion is that there is an aesthetic group in the congregation. They believe that the highest plane of spirituality is to forgo sex.

While this idea seems a bit odd to those of us who live in a sex-saturated society, it coincides with the doctrinal beliefs in Corinth. The Corinthians adhered to a Greek philosophical dualism that prioritizes the spirit over the body. Thus, in 6:12-20, the Corinthians justified sexual immorality because what they did in the body was not as important as what they did in the spirit. But dualism can also lead to a strong asceticism. Those who esteem the soul can argue that it is best for one to deny as many physical needs as possible. Obviously, both of these extremes are unbiblical. Paul compels us to satisfy and protect our spouse.

In 7:2, Paul gives the basic command: Continue to have sexual relations with your spouse.³ Paul writes, “But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband.” The word “but” expresses Paul’s disagreement with the proposition quoted in 7:1. Paul vehemently disagrees that married couples should abstain from sexual pleasure. Paul is not anti-sex; he is pro-marriage! This is confirmed by his use of the verb “to have,” which is a euphemism for sexual relations. In other words, rather than abstaining from sexual relations, Paul’s expectation is that husbands and wives continue in normal sexual relations. Moreover, the word “have” is a present tense command that implies “keep.” Thus, Paul commands, “Let each man live sexually with his wife, and let each wife live sexually with her husband.” The Lord’s provision for sexual immorality is to get married and have frequent sex. Marriage is the answer to immorality of all kinds. Satisfy and protect your spouse.

The development of this paragraph a little later indicates that the question regards the conduct of Christian couples toward each other, a question no doubt related to the broader question of celibacy as a way of life, this being a deduction from the terminology “not to touch a woman”. Epictetus used this word to denote one's marrying⁴. Morris also agreed that in the context “Touch” refers to marriage⁵. “It is good not to touch a woman” here Paul first addressed himself to the prior question of celibacy, admitting here that in a sense; it was “good” the word “good” in this place does not mean morally good, but that it is for man's best interest in some circumstances to remain single⁶. According to Paul W. Marsh who said that Apostle Paul made such a comment because of the persecution of Christian, it is better not to get married and bring children in the world to be killed and suffer persecution⁷. It should be carefully observed, however, that Paul in no sense advocated celibacy, except in certain situations and circumstances, and that even in those cases it was merely “allowable¹” and not commanded⁸. There is no belittling of marriage here, Paul’s writing in (Ephesians 5: 22-23), marking it abundantly clear that he held the institution of marriage, but answering their questions within the context of current attitudes and circumstances. Marsh translated this place, “It is well for man not to touch a woman.....meaning commendable, but not morally or intrinsically better⁹. It is true now even as it was in the beginning that “it is not good for a man to be alone” (Genesis 2: 18). As Lipscomb noted, “Paul’s teaching here regards the persecution then raging against the Christians, and, on account of these, if a man could restrain his lusts it was better not to marry¹⁰”.

³ Bruce Wilkinson, *Set Apart: Discovering Personal Victory Through Holiness* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1998 [2003]), 146-159.

⁴ Donald S. Metz, *Beacon Bible Commentary* (Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City Missouri: 1968), 372.

⁵ George W. Deffott, *Sermons on first Corinthians* (Tennessee Murfreesboro Press, 1947), 63.

⁶ Paul W. Marsh, *A New Commentary* (Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House Grand Rapids, 1967), 387.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ David Lipscomb, *Commentary on First Corinthians* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1935), 114.

⁹ Paul W. Marsh.

¹⁰ F. W. Farrar, *The Pulpit Commentary Vol. 19*, (Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1978), 69.

A CURSORY HISTORY OF THE NOTION OF CELIBACY

In the initial years of the church, the clerics were mostly married men. 1 Cor 9:5 evidently demonstrating that "apostles, like other Christians, have a right to be married", and the right for their wife to be "maintained by the communities in which they the apostles are working".¹¹ The earliest textual evidence of the forbidding of marriage to clerics and the duty of those already married to abstain from sexual contact with their wives is in the fourth-century decrees of the Council of Elvira and the later Council of Carthage. According to some writers, this presumed a previous norm, which was being flouted in practice.¹²

Council of Elvira (c. 305)

(Canon 33): It is decided that marriage be altogether prohibited to bishops, priests, and deacons, or to all clerics placed in the ministry, and that they keep away from their wives and not beget children; whoever does this, shall be deprived of the honor of the clerical office.

Council of Carthage (390)

(Canon 3): It is fitting that the holy bishops and priests of God as well as the Levites, i.e. those who are in the service of the divine sacraments, observe perfect continence, so that they may obtain in all simplicity what they are asking from God; what the Apostles taught and what antiquity itself observed, let us also endeavor to keep... It pleases us all that bishop, priest and deacon, guardians of purity, abstain from conjugal intercourse with their wives, so that those who serve at the altar may keep a perfect chastity. Among the early Church statements on the topic of sexual continence and celibacy are the *Directa* and *Cum in unum* decretals of Pope Siricius (c. 385), which asserted that clerical sexual abstinence was an apostolic practice that must be followed by ministers of the church. The writings of Saint Ambrose (died 397) also show that the requirement that priests, whether married or celibate, should be continent was the established rule. To the married clergy who, "in some out-of-the-way places", claimed, on the model of the Old Testament priesthood, the right to father children, he recalled that in Old Testament times even lay people were obliged to observe continence on the days leading to a sacrifice, and commented: If such regard was paid in what was only the figure, how much ought it to be shown in the reality.¹³

From the above, it is obvious that the issue of Celibacy is not really founded in the scriptures but became popularized by agreement of religious leaders coming together to agree on what they feel is the best to protect the spirituality and sanctity of the church and her leadership. From then it has become practice up to this day in Christianity.

CONCLUSION

The work though not comprehensive has shown that the interpretation of 1 Cor 7:1 was not in any way discussing the issue of celibacy but continence in marriage and the need for virtue in relationship. The need for correct exegesis is needed to avoid wrong interpretation of the scriptures.

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¹¹ C K Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 2nd Edition (1971), A&C Black, London, p 203.

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