

# MARRIAGE AND THE GOOD NEWS OF GOD

## Study Six

### YOU ARE NOT YOUR OWN

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#### MARRIAGE IN A SINFUL WORLD

So far we have looked at marriage within itself: what it is and what it is for, the sexual attraction and appreciation of each other, and the right ordering of relationships within marriage. In this, we have seen how marriage is linked with the high and holy purpose of God for His whole creation, and the implications of this for being married.

Even so, for those who are looking towards or have entered into marriage in the real world of today, all this may appear theoretical or idealistic. How can we keep ourselves and our marriages strong and pure in a sex-charged world where relationships are easy-come and easy-go? How do we come to workable living arrangements between persons who are different from each other, perhaps even in fundamental values and beliefs? What about a relationship that has become intolerable? What if we have already tried and failed in our experiences of relationships and sexuality? What of those who are not yet married, or who remain 'single'—perhaps for the rest of their lives? Is it better to eschew marriage altogether and live a life of celibate abstinence?

These are issues that the apostle Paul addresses in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapters six and seven. Of all the letters in the New Testament, 1 Corinthians answers most directly and fully questions that have arisen from the impact of the gospel of God upon people's real-life situations. No covering of what the Bible has to say about marriage would be complete without a consideration of 1 Corinthians 6 and 7.

The apostle Paul never approached such matters piecemeal, but always from a gospel base that rested securely in God's salvation of us sinners in Jesus Christ, and our belonging to him in the kingdom-rule of God. This, rather than any application of general principles or laying-down of the law, is what determines in each instance what he says.

However much we may have lived our lives to please ourselves, in a marriage and family relationship we find that our lives are not our own to do what we like with—consideration of others is now in view. If it is just a question of ourselves and other people, however, it may end up being a conflict of interests, needs and preferences. Paul establishes that it goes back further than just our necessary consideration of other people. When Jesus died on the cross, and we accepted by faith that he was there for us and for our salvation, then we came to belong to God through him, and we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God. So Paul says:

you are not your own . . . you were bought with a price (1 Corinthians 6:19, 20).

What are some of the practical implications of this for marriage and what surrounds it in the real world?

### **Questions for discussion**

- *What questions arise in our own minds regarding the practice of being married in the context of the 'real world' of today?*
- *What is the difference between addressing an issue from the standpoint of our salvation in Christ, and applying general principles or laying down the law?*
- *When has it come through to us: 'you are not your own'?*

## **WASHED, SANCTIFIED, JUSTIFIED**

The 'real world' of Corinth in Paul's day was in many ways much like our own:<sup>1</sup>

The city to which Paul came preaching the gospel was . . . a very cosmopolitan place. It was an important city. It was intellectually alert. It was materially prosperous. It was morally corrupt. There was a pronounced tendency for its inhabitants to indulge their desires of whatever sort. In the words of von Dobschütz: 'The ideal of the Corinthian was the reckless development of the individual. The merchant who made his gain by all and every means, the man of pleasure surrendering himself to every lust, the athlete steeled to every bodily exercise and proud in his physical strength, are true Corinthian types: in a word the man who recognized no superior and no law but his own desires.'<sup>2</sup>

In particular, the cult of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, promoted the glorification of sex; and the worship of Apollo, the ideal of male beauty, fired homosexual practices.<sup>3</sup>

Most of the Corinthian believers came from less than ideal circumstances:

not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth . . . foolish in the world . . . weak in the world . . . low and despised in the world (1 Corinthians 1:26, 27, 28).

This helps us to understand what Paul was addressing when he wrote to them. Paul reminded the Corinthian believers what some of them used to be:

Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers . . . this is what some of you used to be (1 Corinthians 6:9–10, 11).

Sexual sins feature prominently here—fornication, adultery, and homosexual practice—along with false worship, stealing, alcoholism, slander and violence. All of these some of the Corinthian believers have been involved in. But something has happened to them:

But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:11).

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<sup>1</sup> From Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary* (Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester), 1958, pp. 16–17.

<sup>2</sup> Quote by Von Dobschütz from the Commentary on 1 Corinthians by R. St. J. Parry in *The Cambridge Greek Testament*, 1926, p. x.

<sup>3</sup> David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians: Life in the Local Church*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, Second edition (with study guide) 1993, pp. 11, 12.

Purity, holiness and righteousness have come to them from God. These Corinthian believers are no longer what they were. Previously outside and opposed to God's rule and reign, they have now come to 'inherit the kingdom of God' (1 Corinthians 6:10)—they have gladly come into God's reign and rule, and they belong to Him there.

This is good news for married couples. Whether we have been involved in sexual sin or not, none of us come to our marriages pure. All of us bring into them the taint of sin, which can end up barricading us against each other. How much, then, we need to be those who have been washed, sanctified and justified!

### **Questions for discussion**

- *What stops 'fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers' from inheriting the kingdom of God?*
- *If people who have been these things end up inheriting the kingdom of God, what then must have happened to them?*
- *How does this relate to those of us who have already failed in the area of sexuality and relationships?*

## **SHUN FORNICATION!**

Even so, the Corinthians need to be reminded that this is what has happened to them. There was great danger in being where they used to be: 'wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God' (1 Corinthians 6:9). A clear distinction needs to be made between their newfound freedom in Christ and their former licentiousness, lest these become confused in their own minds. It is not freedom to sin, but freedom to live in Christ as pure, holy and righteous. It appears that some of them have said, 'All things are lawful for me'—I can now do whatever I like. Paul picks up what they say, and warns against what is not beneficial, and against what will end up dominating us:

'All things are lawful for me,' but not all things are beneficial. 'All things are lawful for me,' but I will not be dominated by anything (1 Corinthians 6:12).

It appears that some of them have excused sexual laxity on the basis of sex being a natural appetite that needs to be satisfied, like hunger with food: 'Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food'. What is wrong with simply satisfying the sexual 'appetite', in whatever way? Paul counters this by saying that the time will come when both food and the stomach will be rendered inoperative, but our bodies will go on to be raised from death eternally, like Jesus was. Our bodies are not designed for the sin of fornication in the way our stomachs are designed for food.<sup>4</sup> God has made us—our bodies—for Himself:

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<sup>4</sup> Compare Hebrews 13:4: 'Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers'. Fornication is a sexual relationship outside of any marriage bond; adultery is a sexual relationship that intrudes on an already existing marriage. It has been wisely said that in the Bible there is no such thing as 'sex'—only marriage. This is worth pondering.

‘Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food,’ and God will destroy both one and the other.<sup>5</sup> The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power (1 Corinthians 6:13–14).

Paul does not say only, ‘The body is meant . . . for the Lord’—by which we are to be devoted to Him—but he also says, ‘and the Lord for the body’—God, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is determined to come and make His home in us (see John 14:16–18, 20, 23)! This has significant implications for what we do, and do not do, with our bodies.

Even now, our bodies are part of Christ’s body, and will be one with him eternally. We have been baptised into Christ, and have been united with him in a death like his, so that we will be united with him in a resurrection like his (see Romans 6:3–5). A body that is united with Christ in this way is not to be given over to the sin of fornication:

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, ‘The two shall be one flesh.’ But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him (1 Corinthians 6:15–17).

An illicit sexual union is incompatible with this spiritual union with Christ. The ‘one flesh’ union, according to God’s good purpose in Christ, is for husband and wife. To take your body and join it to a prostitute runs counter to this good purpose of God, and is a profane travesty of it.<sup>6</sup> Some take this text to mean that any sexual union virtually constitutes a marriage. I believe Paul is here saying exactly the opposite: no way does such an illicit union of bodies match true one-flesh marriage that reflects and participates in our union with Christ.

Far from replicating or being on a par with proper marriage, the bonding of bodies in sexual union outside of marriage actually harms the participants:

Shun fornication!<sup>7</sup> Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself (1 Corinthians 6:18).

Some translations supply the word ‘other’, that is not there in the text—‘Every *other* sin’—to make it that sexual sin is worse or more body-related than other sins (a distinction that is not made elsewhere in the Bible—sin is sin).<sup>8</sup> This sentence may be another of the quotes from the Corinthians that Paul was refuting: ‘Every sin that a person commits is outside the body’, meaning that sin has got nothing to do with what happens in the body.<sup>9</sup> There was a view current in Greek thinking that the body was a lesser ‘cage’ for the true person which was the divine spark of the spirit, which would eventually be released from its cage into true freedom, and that what we did with our bodies could not touch the essential person of the spirit, and so we could do what we like with our bodies and it would not matter. A good excuse!<sup>10</sup> Such thinking is incompatible with the Scriptures, which see God as making us a single and

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<sup>5</sup> ‘The quotation may extend to the word *other*’ (NRSV footnote)—in which case the point the Corinthians are making would be: What does it matter what we do with our bodies, since they are going to die anyway (compare 1 Corinthians 15:32). Paul counters this with his reference to the resurrection of the body.

<sup>6</sup> This would be highlighted even more if, as is likely, the prostitutes worked from the false religion of the pagan temples. This would make it comparable with what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:14–22 about mixing worship of Christ with idolatrous worship (note the quoting again of the catchcry, ‘All things are lawful’, in 10:23).

<sup>7</sup> This reiterates the warning given at length in Proverbs 7.

<sup>8</sup> See back in 1 Corinthians 6:9–10, where sexual sins are lumped in among the rest.

<sup>9</sup> Suggested by C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge Uni. Pr., Cambridge 1953), pp. 196 ff.; see Morris, *1 Corinthians*, p. 103. See also Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (John Knox Press, Louisville, 1997), pp. 105ff.

<sup>10</sup> Such a mindset also denied that Christ could have come actually in the flesh, let alone died on a cross: see 1 John 2:22; 4:2, 10, 14; with its accompanying immorality: 2:4; see Martin Bleby, *Life, Light and Love in the Letters of John* (NCPI, Blackwood, 2007), pp. 31–32, 45, 70–72.

undividable body-soul-spirit entity, all of which God will resurrect after death (see 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24). Paul makes the point that the fornicator fully sins with and against this whole bodily entity. Any unredeemed sin affects our relationship with God, and the eternal destiny of our resurrected body. On the wider scale of this purpose of God, the body that is Christ himself, as well as the community that is joined to Christ as his body, may also be in view.<sup>11</sup> No sin affects only ourselves: it is an offence against God and His Christ, and impacts others.

### **Questions for discussion**

- *What similarities do we see between what Paul was addressing and attitudes in our own day?*
- *What does it mean to say: ‘The body is meant . . . for the Lord, and the Lord for the body’?*

## **A TEMPLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**

Paul then emphasises the outcome of being ‘washed . . . sanctified . . . justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God’, and says more about what it means to say, ‘The body is meant . . . for the Lord, and the Lord for the body’:

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body (1 Corinthians 6:19–20).

A heavy price—the life of God’s own Son—has been paid to set us free from being slaves to sin. This does not mean we are now our own masters. God has bought and paid for us—our bodies belong to Him. Such is His love for us that He has made our bodies His own dwelling-place: each one of us ‘a temple of the Holy Spirit’. We are not our own—we are His. God’s intimate indwelling presence, and our belonging to Him, is to govern everything we do. We are to glorify God in our bodies—in ways that display and participate in God’s great plan and purpose for us in His creation.

This has implications for how we relate with each other, particularly in marriage. A husband and wife are not just alone with each other, and they cannot relate with each other just one-on-one. God is in the midst of them. They relate rightly with each other only through Him. The presence of our Saviour Christ places a relationship that otherwise would have been full of sin into the pure, clear, sun-filled air of forgiveness and love.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

. . . a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ. Among men there is strife.<sup>12</sup> ‘He is our peace,’ says Paul of Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:14). Without Christ there is discord between God and man and between man and man. Christ became the Mediator and made peace with God and among men. Without Christ we should not know God, we could not call upon Him, nor come to Him. But without Christ we also would not know our brother, nor could we come to him. The way is blocked by our own ego. Christ opened up the way to God and to our brother. Now Christians can live with one another in peace; they can love and serve one another; they can become one. But they can continue to do so only by way of

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<sup>11</sup> Compare 1 Corinthians 10:16–17; 11:20–29.

<sup>12</sup> For ‘men’ read human beings; for ‘man’ read man or woman; for ‘brother’ read brother or sister.

Jesus Christ. Only in Jesus Christ are we one, only through him are we bound together. To eternity he remains the one Mediator.<sup>13</sup>

Jonathan spoke of his friendship-covenant with David in these terms: ‘The LORD shall be between me and you’ (1 Samuel 20:42; see also 20:16). This was their bond, as strong as death.<sup>14</sup>

This is different from its pagan substitute, sometimes read out at weddings:

But let there be spaces in your togetherness.  
And let the winds of the heavens dance between you.

Love one another, but make not a bond of love:  
Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls.  
Fill each other’s cup but drink not from one cup.  
Give one another of your bread but eat not from the same loaf.  
Sing and dance together and be joyous, but let each of you be alone,  
Even as the strings of a lute are alone though they quiver with the same music.<sup>15</sup>

In a sinful world, where people may hurt each other, this makes a studied virtue of separateness, as a kind of protection. In Christ there is a one-flesh union where people can be free and safe and secure. That many believers in Christ still need to learn this is borne out by the fact that Paul had to write to the Corinthian believers on this very matter. This leads us on into 1 Corinthians 7.

### **Question for discussion**

- *What difference does it make in practice to be able to say in a relationship: ‘The LORD shall be between me and you’? What are we left with if this is not the case?*

## **HUSBANDS AND WIVES**

Paul continues to address the matters that the Corinthian believers have raised:

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: ‘It is well for a man not to touch a woman’ (1 Corinthians 7:1).

In some translations the words ‘It is well for a man not to touch a woman’, meaning it is better to refrain from sexual relations altogether, are taken to be the words of Paul. This, however, would not fit with what Paul goes on to say. Most likely it is a position held by some of the Corinthians themselves, possibly in reaction to the widespread sexual immorality of the time. We find a similar quasi-religious stance referred to in another of Paul’s letters:

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will renounce the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the hypocrisy of liars whose consciences are seared with a hot iron. They forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by God’s word and by prayer (1 Timothy 4:1–5).

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<sup>13</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, SCM Press, London, 1954, pp. 13–14.

<sup>14</sup> See further: Martin Bleby, *Power in Relationships: Issues of Love and Control* (NCPI, Blackwood, 2008), especially ch. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Kahil Gibran, *The Prophet*, Heinemann, London, 1976, pp. 16–19.

This is true of marriage, as it is of food. Paul refers to the sexual immorality of the time to draw an opposite conclusion from these ascetic Corinthians:

But because of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband (1 Corinthians 7:2).

Marriage between a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others for life is proof against sexual immorality in a sex-charged world. Within this marriage, the sexual relationship should be free and mutual:

The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband (1 Corinthians 7:3).

Note here, and throughout the chapter, the careful emphasis on full equality and mutuality between woman and man in these matters. Here there is no reference to headship and submission that we find elsewhere—that does not come into it in this intimate context:

For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does (1 Corinthians 7:4).

Here is absolute trust, openness, and delighted freedom. We hear echoes of what Paul has just said in the previous chapter: ‘you are not your own’. Just as we are not our own because we belong to Christ, so from him we can learn to trust that we are not our own because we belong to each other.

Paul acknowledges that there are times when it may be good to refrain from sexual union, but not in such a way as would play into the hands of the promoters of total abstinence. Christ remains at the centre, and Satan is not to be given any ground:

Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote yourselves to prayer, and then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control (1 Corinthians 7:5).

There are other reasons why sexual union may be refrained from in a marriage, as Barry Chant says:

Marriage is not open go to satisfy the sexual urge . . . On an average, most married couples probably engage in sexual intercourse about twice a week. Some do so more frequently; some less. It depends on the couple themselves; the kind of work they are doing, the hours they keep, and so on. But let me take it a little further. What happens in a marriage?

Often, the answer is tiredness, sickness, busyness, pregnancies, and sometimes separations. In all of these cases, there is some time of enforced abstinence from intercourse—and the necessary self-control . . . we have three children, and even though my wife had wonderfully healthy pregnancies, she has still been unable to enjoy intercourse during the latter months and the first few months after childbirth . . . I am often away from home on ministry tours for periods of days or weeks at a time. I don’t enjoy these separations very much. But I do have opportunity to practise the self-control that I enjoin on others!

Even within marriage, then, there is often the need for personal integrity and victory in the sexual realm.<sup>16</sup>

The Old Testament also required abstinence from sexual union during the woman’s menstrual period:

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<sup>16</sup> Barry Chant, *Straight Talk about Sex: A Guidebook to Sexual Attitudes for Teenagers*, Luke Publications, Adelaide, 1975, pp. 95–96.

You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness (Leviticus 18:19; compare 20:18; Ezekiel 18:6; 22:10).

Whatever this meant for ritual cleanness in connection with tabernacle or temple worship (see Leviticus 15:19, 24), it also gave the woman a break from needing to fulfil expectations that she was not in a position to meet, and gave the man an opportunity to care for her by waiting. Orthodox Jewish couples today during this time take to separate beds for a period of days.<sup>17</sup>

Paul has said it may be appropriate for married couples to abstain from sexual union for a time of prayer.<sup>18</sup> Lest the abstainers turn this into a law, he goes on to say that this is not obligatory:

This I say by way of concession, not of command (1 Corinthians 7:6).

The safety and freedom of this relationship in Christ is secured by its exclusive and life-long quality. Paul gives strong emphasis to the need for marriage to be life-long, by referring to the teaching of Jesus:<sup>19</sup>

To the married I give this command—not I but the Lord—that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife (1 Corinthians 7:10–11).

Paul reiterates this at the end of the chapter, while at the same time making the point that marriage does not continue after death—it is for this life only:

A wife is bound as long as her husband lives. But if the husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, only in the Lord. But in my judgment she is more blessed if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 7:39–40).

Note the freedom accorded to the woman here, that is not subject to arrangements made by others: ‘she is free to marry anyone she wishes’. Such is the benefit of both marriage partners belonging to Christ, that Paul says this is to be ‘in the Lord’—a union between two fellow-believers in Christ. The comment about her being ‘more blessed’ if she remains single relates to Paul’s commendation of the single state (see below). In another place, Paul encourages younger widows to marry, again in the interests of not repressing sexual desire, and for other reasons (see 1 Timothy 5:3–16).

So far, Paul has been addressing married couples who are both believers in Christ. We have seen that he does not encourage a believer to marry an unbeliever. It would seem however that there were in Corinth believers who were married to unbelievers—possibly one of them had become a believer in Christ after they were married. These he addresses now. The question may have arisen as to whether such a marriage should be retained, or is even valid. Paul’s answer makes it clear that marriage, as a creational ordinance, applies to believers and unbelievers alike. Since this is not a question on which Jesus gave any teaching, Paul gives advice of his own making, which is no less authoritative as an apostle of Christ:<sup>20</sup>

To the rest I say—I and not the Lord—that if any believer has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. And if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his

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<sup>17</sup> See Herman Wouk, *This Is My God: The Jewish Way of Life*, Fontana/Collins, Glasgow, 1976, pp.142–5.

<sup>18</sup> The Israelites were told to abstain from sexual relations over a three day period in preparation for their meeting with God at Mount Sinai (see Exodus 19:15–17). This is not because God disapproves of sex—He invented it! But it was a way of making the point that our union with God is even more wonderful—and more ultimate—than the sexual union.

<sup>19</sup> As, for instance, in Mark 10:2–11. This will be discussed in Study 7.

<sup>20</sup> See 1 Corinthians 7:40; 14:37.

wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound. It is to peace that God has called you. Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband. Husband, for all you know, you might save your wife (1 Corinthians 7:12–16).

Note again the even-handed treatment of the equality of status for both the wife and the husband. The main point is that, where there are those who have been washed, sanctified and justified, the contagious nature of holiness or belonging to God in Christ is not to be underestimated: it can spread to your unbelieving husband or wife, and the children are included. So simply being married to an unbeliever is no reason for separation or divorce (it is likely that both words amount to the same thing in the practice of the day<sup>21</sup>). But neither is a believing husband or wife bound to expect that the other one will become a believer (the last two sentences could be read either way). In an intolerable situation, where separation or divorce is called for, the believing partner is not ‘bound’ (the word used here means ‘enslaved’, ‘reduced to servitude’, under spiritual or moral bondage).<sup>22</sup> While lifelong marriage is seen as the creational norm, it cannot be said that the Bible, in this sinful world, forbids or makes no provision for separation or divorce.<sup>23</sup>

### **Questions for discussion**

- *What are the implications of the statement ‘you are not your own’ in the context of a relationship between husband and wife?*
- *How can waiting for one another, as well as entering into sexual union, be an expression of care for one another between wife and husband?*
- *What is there about the exclusive and lifelong character of marriage in Christ that secures true safety and freedom in relationship?*
- *What does Paul’s advice to believers who are married to unbelievers tell us about the peace, hope and freedom we have in Christ?*

## **THE UNMARRIED**

It is evident that Paul himself was single. He may have been a widower, as he had been a Pharisee, and Pharisees were generally married.<sup>24</sup> He now remained single, as John the baptiser and Jesus himself had been before him, probably in the interests of serving the kingdom with unhindered devotion to the Lord as the last days press in (as indicated later in 1 Corinthians 7:26–35). He naturally commends this state, but it was not obligatory on church leaders, as ‘the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas [Peter]’ were married and travelled with their wives in ministry (1 Corinthians 9:5). Neither marriage nor celibacy is a legal requirement or a social expectation to be insisted upon, but a gift that is given from God:

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<sup>21</sup> See Barbara Roberts, *Not Under Bondage: Biblical Divorce for Abuse, Adultery and Desertion*, Maschil Press, Ballarat, 2008, p. 39.

<sup>22</sup> *The Analytical Greek Lexicon*, Samuel Bagster and Sons, London, n.d., p. 107. Barbara Roberts helpfully examines the application of this to situations where a spouse who by abusive behaviour has virtually ceased to be a believer precipitates the necessity for a believing partner to separate or divorce: see Roberts, *Not Under Bondage*, pp. 18–44.

<sup>23</sup> The remarriage of divorced persons while their former spouse is still alive is another question, which we will look at in Study 7.

<sup>24</sup> Phil. 3:5; see Noel Due, *One Corinthians*, Coromandel Valley–Hawthorndene Baptist Church SA, 1991, p. 59.

I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind (1 Corinthians 7:7).

So while Paul encourages people to remain single, he also encourages people to marry—especially if they have not been given the gift of self-control. There is no special virtue in suppressing sexual desire:

To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion (1 Corinthians 7:8–9).<sup>25</sup>

Further on, Paul goes into more detail:

Now concerning virgins, I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. I think that, in view of the impending crisis, it is well for you to remain as you are. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you marry, you do not sin, and if a virgin marries, she does not sin. Yet those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that (1 Corinthians 7:25–28).

We are not told what the 'impending crisis' was—whether the likelihood of severe persecution, which would be of grave concern particularly for those who were married with families, or something else. Whatever it was, it was sufficient to give pause to any who might be considering a change in their situation, to spare them undue distress. Yet even this is not to prevent those who do marry from doing so.

On the larger scale, all of us at every time face the possibility of the imminent return of Jesus Christ at the end of the world, which reminds us that none of the good things of this life, marriage included, is ultimate or forever. We are to live in the midst of these things, even while we are fully engaged in them, with a healthy detachment that keeps us from making an idol of any of them, as we eagerly await the final coming of our Lord:

I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, 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 possessions, 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 (1 Corinthians 7:29–31).

We are not our own. Married or not, our lives, and all that make them up, belong to the Lord, for the service of His kingdom. In the light of this, Paul gives a reason for his own personal preference for single celibacy:

I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman and the virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to put any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:32–35).

Those entering into marriage need to have a realistic estimate of the responsibilities that this will involve. Even so, Paul again makes clear that he is not imposing single celibacy as a

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<sup>25</sup> The word for 'unmarried' can include those who are separated or divorced, as in 7:11. Some commentators see 7:8–9 then as encouraging the marriage of divorced persons while their former spouse is still alive. B. Ward Powers, who has a needs-based view of marriage, argues this way in *Marriage and Divorce: The New Testament Teaching* (Family Life Movement of Australia, Concord, and Jordan Books, Petersham, 1987); see pp. 15–18, 24, 181–189. It is unlikely that Paul has this in mind, since he says in 7:11 that the separated wife is to 'remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband'.

legal restraint. Those to whom he writes are free in Christ to make that decision as appropriate:

If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his fiancée, if his passions are strong, and so it has to be, let him marry as he wishes; it is no sin. Let them marry. But if someone stands firm in his resolve, being under no necessity but having his own desire under control, and has determined in his own mind to keep her as his fiancée, he will do well. So then, he who marries his fiancée does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better (1 Corinthians 7:36–38).

The word for ‘fiancée’ is again ‘virgin’, as in 7:25. This may not be addressed to engaged couples, but rather to parents or guardians who have unmarried daughters. Especially since ‘he who marries’ is more likely to mean ‘he who gives in marriage’, and ‘if his passions are strong’ means more literally ‘if she passes the stage of being fully developed’, and ‘having his own desire under control’ can mean simply ‘having the right to give effect to his own purpose’.<sup>26</sup> Once again, we are to be free and purposeful in these important decisions, and not swayed by custom or expectation.

Once again, we hear the echo of: ‘you are not your own . . . you were bought with a price’ (1 Corinthians 6:19, 20). We are no longer bound by our sin, by the desires of flesh or senses, by Satan, or by worldly expectations. We belong to God in Christ, and we serve His kingdom. In Him, in marriage or singleness as in everything else, we have great freedom to move in all the will of God, and to glorify Him in our bodies.

### **Question for discussion**

- *What disadvantages do we impose on single celibate persons in the church? How does Paul’s teaching encourage us to honour and support them, as we honour and support those who are married?*

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<sup>26</sup> Morris, *1 Corinthians*, pp. 120–2.