

A STUDY OF 1 CORINTHIANS 7:8-16

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THE CONTEXT

A study of the larger context of Chapter 7 must include the background information that is customarily part of an introduction to the study of 1 Corinthians. Additionally, one should note that the instructions given in the chapter are predicated on “the impending crisis” (v. 26). It seems that some, if not all, of the instructions given in the chapter are specific to the contextual circumstance.

The immediate context of the passage includes verse 8, thus verses 8-16 are a grammatical unit.

Note that Paul addresses three groups (vv. 8, 10, 12). At first reading, it would appear that the first two groups (unmarried and widows, married) would encompass everyone. One must therefore ask, what group is in view in v. 12? The context and textual study support that vv. 10-11 are written to Christians married to Christians, with vv. 12-16 addressing the situation of Christians married to non-Christians.

An important question as the contemporary twenty-first century church seeks to understand the passage is the timing of such marriages, that is, when did the marriages occur? There are two primary options. Did Christians purposefully marry non-Christians? Or, did one partner in a marriage convert to Christ while the other partner remained a non-Christian? The last two verses of the chapter may provide insight. The specific reference in vv. 39-40 is to widows who are to marry only “in the Lord.” For completeness, one should note also that another group is referenced in v. 25, “the virgins,” with application to the “never married.”

THE TEXT

The teachings of Jesus or Paul’s authoritative inspired instructions? In vv. 6-9, Paul writes that he is giving his own view, knowing that not all will follow his preference. In vv. 10-11, Paul bases his instruction on the words of the Lord. In contrast, the phrase “I, not the Lord” to introduce the paragraph of vv. 12-16 indicates that Paul was not aware of any specific instruction from Jesus about the topic. In vv. 10-11, Paul was aware of the teachings of the Lord (likely referring to Jesus’ teachings during his ministry). In vv. 12-16, Paul by inspiration says that he is unaware of any applicable teachings of the Lord. Paul does not apply Jesus’ teachings in the Gospels in the specific cases of vv. 12-16. Remember that these are Paul’s inspired writings and are thus the Word of God. Again, for the situations described in vv. 12-16, Paul does not apply any of the teachings of Jesus.

Verses 6-9. To whom are these verses addressed? Jones¹ makes a good case that the “unmarried” of 7:8 are male widowers (see NIV 2011), in parallel to the widows. That Paul addresses the “never married” in 7:25-38 may support this application.

Verses 10-11. In the Greco-Roman world of the first century, the state was not a part of marriage contracts.² Marriages were private agreements between individuals, often including families. The verb separate (*chorizo*) in this passage appears in a marriage contract from the second century. In the Roman-Greco world, a woman could “divorce” her husband simply by departing (*chorizo*, to separate, leave, depart) from the home, even without a certificate of divorce. Such a separation was essentially a divorce so that the two verbs (*chorizo* and *aphiemi*) were often used synonymously. The use of the translation “separate” should not be confused with marital separation in today’s world.

In vv. 10-11, the action attributed to the wife is to separate herself (*chorizo*). If she separates, she must remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. The action of the wife is limited by the clause that follows, a clause that modifies only the action of the wife, not the action of the husband in the next sentence. The husband is not to divorce (*aphiemi*) his wife. The verb *aphiemi* indicated a more official, legal action.

The two verbs, *aphiemi* and *chorizo*, both signified a divorce or cessation of the marriage. Paul’s use of *chorizo* in 7:10 is either an action done by the woman herself (middle voice, reflexive) or an action done to her

¹ Jerry Jones, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage* (College Press, 2016), pp. 26-28.

² Ibid. Some of the information presented in this section, vv. 10-11, is summarized from Jones.

(passive voice). Whether the wife separated herself or the husband divorced his wife, the action was against the Lord's command and reconciliation was to be sought.

Since the "married" of vv. 10-11 are contrasted with the "rest" of vv. 12-16, the contrast is apparently between Christians married to Christians (vv. 10-11) and the rest who are Christians married to non-Christians (vv. 12-16). The content of the passage further supports this understanding.

In the case of Christians married to Christians, Paul appeals to the authority of the Lord's command (*paraggello*). Since the Gospels were written after 1 Corinthians, how Paul was familiar with the command is unclear. Paul had been trained as a Pharisee, knew the Old Testament well, and had received his call and instruction directly from the Lord. The teachings of Jesus circulated in both oral and written form in the first century (Luke 1:1-4).

Verses 12-16. This translation calls attention to important words for translation and interpretation.

"(12) To the rest I say, if a brother has an unbelieving (*apistos*) wife and she is willing (*suneudokeo*, it seems good with her) to live with him, he should not divorce (*aphiemi*, to send away, a usual word for divorce) her. (13) If a woman (*gune*, wife) has an unbelieving (*apistos*) husband, let her not divorce (*aphiemi*) the husband.³ (14) For the unbelieving husband is made holy (*hagiazo*, sanctified, not in the sense of being saved, but in the sense that the marriage is holy or acceptable to God, as is evident in the context) because of (*en*, through, by, because of) the wife; and the unbelieving wife is made holy (*hagiazo*) because of the brother (*adelphos*). Otherwise, your children would be unclean (*akatharta*) but not they are holy (*hagia*, same word root, not saved, the meaning is that they are not illegitimate). (15) If the unbeliever (masc., but refers to both cases, as is evident from the next phrase) departs (*chorizo*, separates, departs), let him depart (*chorizo*); the brother or the sister is not enslaved (*douloo*, lit. or fig., enslaved, in bondage⁴) in such circumstances; God has called you in peace. (16) How do you know, woman (*gune*, wife), if you will save (*sozo*, save, the meaning is that spouse is a human instrument assisting in salvation) your husband? Or how do you know, husband, if you will save your wife?"

Paul's instruction is for the believer to remain with the unbeliever (vv. 12-14). But what if? What if the unbeliever leaves or initiates the divorce (v. 15)? Paul writes that the believer is not enslaved (*douloo*).⁵ This verb is similar to the word for slave (7:21). The verb Paul uses in v. 15 is a stronger verb than 7:39 (*deo*, bound, see also Rom. 7:2). Paul says that the believer is no longer enslaved. If 7:39 and Rom. 7:2, "not bound," describe freedom from the marriage bond, would not an even stronger word, "not enslaved," say the same thing even more emphatically? The opposite of being enslaved is being free (7:21). The opposite of being bound is being free (7:39; Rom. 7:2).⁶

Jones observes that the wording in at least one Jewish divorce certificate and Paul's statement of not being "enslaved" are quite similar. The verb was understood as being released (no longer enslaved) from a marriage.⁷

THE INTERPRETATION

The continuing context of the chapter is helpful in interpreting vv. 8-16. Here is a translation of verses 17-24.

³ The possibility that the woman could divorce the husband reflects Greek legal systems and was not within the realm of possibility in Jewish law. One would not expect that the possibility of v. 13 would be included in Jesus' instructions in Matthew 5 or Matthew 19.

⁴ Interpreters disagree about this statement. One view is that the believer is "not bound to continue in the marriage," that is, is free to divorce, divorce is allowable, but not remarriage on the basis of v. 11. Note, however, that vv. 10-11 applies a different group of persons. The other view is that the believer "is not bound with regard to marriage," that is, is free to remain single or to remarry. A study of the verb used in this verse will be helpful.

⁵ This verb is used infrequently in the New Testament. Here is a complete list of the other occurrences: Acts 7:6; Rom. 6:18, 22; 1 Cor. 9:15; Gal. 4:3; Tit. 2:3; 2 Pet. 2:19.

⁶ See Jones, pp. 35-37, for an expanded treatment of the two verbs, *douloo* and *deo*, and the concept of freedom, *eleutheros*.

⁷ *Ibid.*

“Only understand that God gives each one a specific part of life, and each one has to live within the calling of God. This is the instruction for all of the churches. Called in circumcision? Do not undo it. Called in uncircumcision? Do not undo it. (Those are nothing, but keeping God’s commandments is what matters.) Let each one remain in the calling received from God. Were you called as a slave? Do not let it concern you. But if you are able to be free, it is better to do it. The one called in the Lord as a slave is a free person in the Lord, and likewise the one called as a free person is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price. Do not be slaves of men. Brothers, each one in whatever calling, in that remain with God.”

As described above, the contrast of slave (*doulos*) and free (*eleutheros*) in this reading is of interest because of the parallel verb that Paul uses in v. 15, and because of how Paul uses references to freedom in vv. 39-40 and in Rom. 7:2.

Based on the contextual circumstances of first-century Corinth and context of our passage, including vv. 17-24 and vv. 39-40, the most consistent interpretation is that in the specific circumstance where one has become a Christian and the spouse has remained an unbeliever, vv. 12-16 are to be applied. Paul has no teaching from the Lord that he can apply in this specific case. A Christian must be willing to “remain enslaved” to the marriage as long as an unbelieving spouse is willing to be a part of the marriage: do not leave or divorce. But if the unbelieving spouse wants to leave or does leave, the believing spouse is no longer enslaved to the marriage; in fact, the marriage cannot exist without the consent of both parties. The marriage no longer exists. This would have been a good place for Paul to clarify the application of the teachings of Jesus concerning divorce, but he does not do so. The right to remarry would be granted in most legal systems.

CONCLUSION

The question of marriage and divorce is complex, especially for persons who divorced before becoming Christians. Paul’s theme in 1 Corinthians 7 is “remain.” Stay as you are. This study cannot address every situation. However, Paul’s instructions for Christian marriages and for mixed marriages that resulted from one spouse becoming a Christian can be studied and understood.⁸

Note that there is no room in the conclusions drawn in this study for justifying divorce, identifying innocent and guilty parties (which are not biblical descriptions), and misapplications of Paul’s teachings to situations he was not addressing.

The ultimate solution in the context of the contemporary church is to maintain the heart. This text gives no place for manipulation, forcing the partner to leave, seizing the opportunity to exit an undesirable marriage through misbehavior, and such things. In the application of these verses, according to whatever understanding one has, it is essential to insist that the Christian maintain a pure heart, a pure life, and a pure conscience.

⁸ It is hard for this writer to imagine a situation where a believer (Christian) would purposefully enter into an intimate, spiritual relationship such as marriage with an unbeliever, a view also reflected in the instructions of vv. 39-40.