

A STUDY OF 1 CORINTHIANS 7:8-16

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THE CONTEXT

The larger context of chapter 7 is the background information that customarily is included in a study of 1 Corinthians. Additionally, one should note that the instructions given are predicated on “the impending crisis” (v. 26). It thus seems that at least a part of the instructions given in the chapter are specific to the contextual circumstance.

The immediate context to be established should include verse 8, thus verses 8-16.

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. Thus, one must ask, what group is in view in v. 12. I believe the context and text support that vv. 10-11 are written to Christians married to Christians, vv. 12-16 to Christians married to non-Christians. An important study to guide the contemporary church would be to try to understand the timing of such marriages. Did Christians purposefully marry non-Christians, or did one partner in a marriage convert to Christ after the marriage while the other partner chose to remain a non-Christian? The last two verses of the chapter may provide guidance, although the specific reference there is to widows who are to marry only “in the Lord.”

THE TEXT

The phrase “I, not the Lord” simply indicates that no specific instruction from Jesus about this topic existed. Thus these are Paul’s inspired writings, but there is nothing parallel in the teachings of Jesus.

Several words in the text must be considered to arrive at a good translation and understanding. “(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.¹ (14) For the unbelieving husband is made holy (hagiazō, 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 (hagiazō) 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, departs²), let him depart; the brother or the sister is not bound (douleo, lit. or fig., enslaved, in bondage³)

¹ The possibility that the woman could divorce the husband reflects Greek legal systems and was not within the realm of possibility in Jewish law.

² The use of the two verbs, aphiemi and chorizo, must be carefully observed. If the verbs are to be used consistently in the larger context, the translation of vv. 11-12 will be changed in many translations where chorizo is often translated “divorce” instead of “depart.”

³ Interpreters disagree about the 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 the reading in context applies vv. 11-12 to 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 conceptual parallel seems to

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?

THE INTERPRETATION

The continuation of the reading may be helpful in interpretation. Allow me to give a free translation of verses 17-24. "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."

Of special interest in this reading is the concept of slave (doulos) and free (eleutheros) because of the parallel usage in vv. 39-40, and also in v. 15, although these are figurative references and the reading in vv. 21-23 seems to be based in literal circumstances, although the "in the Lord" references are also figurative.

Based on the contextual circumstances of first-century Corinth and the textual readings, including vv. 17-24 and vv. 39-40 with the use of the same word roots, the most consistent interpretation is that in the specific circumstance where one has become a Christian and the spouse has remained an unbeliever, vv. 13-16 are to be applied.⁴ Given that situation, the Christian must be willing to "remain in bondage" to the marriage as long as the spouse is willing to be a part of the marriage: do not divorce. But if the spouse wants to leave or does leave, the believing spouse is not bound to the marriage; in fact the marriage cannot exist without the consent of both parties. The marriage is no more, and the right to remarry is granted in most legal systems.

CONCLUSION

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.

exist in vv. 39-40 where the same word (douleo) is used of a wife bound to her husband as long as her husband lives, but if her husband dies, she is free (eleuthera) to remarry.

⁴ It is hard for this writer to imagine a situation where a believer (Christian) would purposefully enter into an intimate relationship such as marriage with an unbeliever, which may also be in view in vv. 39-40.