

## Chapter 8. 1 Corinthians 7

With these concepts in mind, we now need to take up the New Testament's central passage on marriage and divorce, 1 Corinthians 7. Oddly, most discussions of these doctrines begin with Jesus' statements in Matthew 5 or Matthew 19. I say "oddly" because Jesus in these passages was specifically commenting on Deuteronomy 24—the Law of Moses. Jesus, of course, was speaking to Jews who at the time were subject to the Law of Moses. Much of what Jesus said is important for Christians—but we make a serious mistake if we try to start with a commentary on the Law of Moses. We'll come back to these (and other passages) after we've considered the one passage that directly addresses divorce of Christians.

*1 Cor. 7:1* Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry.<sup>41</sup>

Now here is the key to understanding this chapter. Paul repeatedly comments in 1 Corinthians 7 on his desire for Christians—virgins, widows, and the divorced—to remain unmarried. Indeed, Paul says that he wishes everyone was single—as was Paul:

7 I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. 8 Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. 9 But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion. ...

25 Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. 26 **Because of the present crisis**, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are. 27 Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife. ...

32 **I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs**—how he can please the Lord. 33 But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—34 and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. 35 I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.

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<sup>41</sup> Literally, as translated in the KJV, "touch a woman," rather than "marry." The context makes this metaphor refer to marriage—or perhaps to having sexual relationships, which are obviously only proper in marriage—hence much the same thing in Paul's mind.

Throughout chapter 7, Paul urges his readers to remain single. Clearly, he permits marriage—it is not a sin—but Paul would prefer his readers avoid the problems caused by the “present crisis”<sup>42</sup>—possibly local persecution—would bring on those committed to a spouse and children; and Paul also wishes that the Corinthians be freed from concerns about a spouse in order to be free to serve Christ. After all, Paul himself had chosen to be single and so was able to continually risk his health and life in spreading the gospel. It’s hardly surprising that he counseled his readers to follow his example.

Now the notion of voluntary celibacy is utterly foreign to modern American readers. We pass it off as a First Century curiosity and then move on to the other verses. But as we’ll see, the other verses must be read in light of this overriding theme.

After stating his preference for remaining single, Paul addresses marriage in Genesis 1 and 2 terms—placing special emphasis on the fact that sex is not only allowed in marriage but also that sex is to be a part of marriage and that denying sexual gratification to one’s spouse is wrong:

2 But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. 3 The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. 4 The wife’s body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband’s body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. 5 Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. 6 I say this as a concession, not as a command. 7 I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.

Paul explains that one God-given purpose of marriage is sex—indeed, this is certainly much of what Genesis 2 refers to as being “one flesh.” Marriage is much more, but the sexual relationship is important. So much so that Paul instructs husbands and wives that it is wrong to deny the other spouse sexual relations—except by mutual consent and then only briefly. Paul’s reasoning is, of course, consistent not only with Genesis 2 but also rabbinic interpretation of Exodus 21:10-11. In fact, given how strictly Paul speaks, he is surely heavily influenced by Exodus 21:10-11.

Notice how carefully Paul treats men and women identically. Contrary to the Jewish and Greek culture of the day, Paul considers women to have the same rights to sexual relations as men.

8 Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. 9 But if they cannot control

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<sup>42</sup> “Present distress” in the King James Version.

themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.<sup>43</sup>

Once again, we see Paul stating a strong preference for being single, but insisting on making it clear that marriage is not a sin. Many Christians have trouble with this concept, because they see the Bible as black and white—it must either be right or wrong—it can't be good or better. But Paul plainly states that sometimes it's okay to be less than best. It's not sin to marry—celibacy for the sake of the Lord's work is a gift that not everyone has.

*10 To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. 11 But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.*

Now Paul repeats the admonition of Christ found in several places that divorce is sin. "Separate" does not mean a legal separation in the American legal sense. Rather, in First Century practice, when couples separated, they were no longer married at all. This is made entirely clear in verse 11 which states that a separated wife should remain "unmarried." Clearly, Paul sees a separation as ending the marriage.

In American and European law, a married couple can obtain a legal separation, meaning that they are no longer expected to live together but are still married in the eyes of the law. In such a case, the "husband" and "wife" are not united or one flesh as described in Genesis 2, nor are they honoring Paul's command in the first few verses of this chapter to grant one another sexual relations except "for a season." In Bible terms, a legal separation is a divorce.<sup>44</sup>

Paul recognizes that divorces will occur even though Christ commanded against it. He says in such a case the couple may remarry each other. Amazingly, I've heard preachers advise divorced couples that it would be sin to remarry—presumably on a hyperliteral interpretation of Matthew 5:31.<sup>45</sup> Common sense tells you that reconciliation of a divorced couple is highly desirable and certainly not wrong.

This is an illustration of our historical insistence on strictly enforcing our translations of the Gospel passages while utterly ignoring Paul's teaching in this area.

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<sup>43</sup> "With passion" is added by the NIV translators. Some take "burn" to refer to burning in hell. But the NIV addition seems consistent with Paul's teaching on grace as well as with the context.

<sup>44</sup> This legal concept was invented as a device to avoid obtaining a church- or government-granted divorce, often considered sin, while accommodating the reality that it is often unsafe for a wife to live with an abusive husband. Doctrine taught that divorce was wrong, but common sense dictated that the wife couldn't risk being brutalized—or killed, and so a "legal separation" was invented, creating a fictitious marriage for the sake of doctrine while allowing the wife to leave.

<sup>45</sup> As typically translated, Matt. 5:31 says that a man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. Thus, it is occasionally argued that remarriage is marrying a divorced woman and hence adultery.

Rather than wrestling with all relevant passages, we've chosen to just ignore those passages that are inconsistent with our predetermined conclusions.

Paul says that if a couple is divorced, they should not marry others—they should reconcile or remain unmarried. Here, for the first of several times, we find the NIV translation is less than exact. Paul does not really say “she must remain unmarried.” Rather, he says, as in the KJV, “let her remain unmarried.”

In the Greek, the verb is present imperative middle. Spiros Zodhiates, a premier New Testament Greek scholar, states that an imperative verb “is used to give a command; an exhortation; or an entreaty.” Thus, whether Paul is commanding or merely exhorting must be taken from the context. The KJV is better than the NIV in leaving the ambiguity in the text for the reader to interpret from context rather than forcing the translators' opinion on the readers, as does the NIV. For example, in verse 2, “let every man have his own wife” is also imperative, but Paul is not commanding marriage. He is urging marriage if necessary to avoid fornication. In verse 6 Paul makes it clear that this is “not of commandment” (KJV) but only “by permission” (KJV). Likewise, in verse 12, Paul says that an unbelieving husband should not divorce his wife, and this is also in the imperative mood. Plainly, Paul is entreating—not commanding. He has no authority to command an unbeliever (1 Cor. 5:12). Countless examples could be multiplied.

I've been through every present imperative middle verb in 1 Corinthians and many of Paul's other epistles, and the conclusion is that this tense and voice may be a command or may be a recommendation, and the distinction may only be found in the context.

Now Paul could be urging the divorced to remain unmarried for more than one reason. First, he could be saying that it would be sin for a divorced spouse to marry anyone other than the original spouse. But he could also be urging the readers to remain single for the same reason that he does so in verse 1, verse 7, verse 26, and verse 32—because he prefers that all Christians who are single for any reason remain single “because of the present crisis” and because “an unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs.” In fact, given Paul's very strong and oft-repeated emphasis on remaining single, we would be surprised to hear him say anything to the divorced other than an entreaty to remain single.

Which of these possible interpretations is right must be drawn from the immediate context—not the biases of the interpreter. Let's skip ahead to the verses that I believe provide the answer.

25 Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. 26 Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are.

Once again, Paul addresses the importance of remaining single. It's not a command—just an entreaty.

27 Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife. 28 But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this.

Verse 27 repeats Paul's earlier admonition that Christians should not divorce. Literally, "seek a divorce" is "do not seek to be loosed." "Loosed" means to unbind. If several sticks are tied together and the tie is cut, the twigs have been "loosed." It is plainly a metaphor for ending the marriage bond. As mentioned earlier, it's not about who goes to the courthouse—the sinner is the one who breaks the marriage covenant. A better translation would be "do not break the marriage covenant."

Paul then says, "do not look for a wife." This is also present imperative middle. But it's an entreaty, not a command, as you will see.

Verse 28 then completes the thought. he says that if the virgin or "unmarried" person does marry, it is not sin (even though such a person would have violated Paul's imperative entreaty to remain single!) Paul's entreaty to virgins and the unmarried to remain single is clearly not a command in the sense that a violation would be sin. Paul says it's not sin—surely he is right!

Now, notice that Paul is addressing virgins and the unmarried. Now if the "unmarried" aren't virgins, who are they? Plainly, they are the divorced members of the church, and so Paul has plainly said that remarriage by a divorced person is no sin!

Well, you might object, he could be discussing widows, but this is clearly not true, for two reasons. First, in context, Paul has been discussing the divorced, and it's much more likely that he refers to the divorced as "unmarried" than widows. After all in verse 8 he refers to the "unmarried and widows," and so Paul does not include widows in the term "unmarried."

But there is a much stronger argument here. When verse 27 refers to "unmarried" in the NIV, the NIV has badly mistranslated the word. Rather than the word "unmarried," Paul really says "have you been loosed from a wife"! This is plainly a reference to the divorced. Not surprisingly, many translations have translated this correctly.

I must admit that many translations also translate this incorrectly, the NIV being a prime example. So how do I know which translations are right? By using Greek resources that give me the precise verb tense, and then noting that many very conservative religious groups have translated this correctly in their own translations—it is very unlikely that the Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, or early Restoration Movement leaders would have translated consistent with my understanding unless compelled to do so by the Greek.

*King James Version.* Art thou bound to a wife? Seek not to be loosed. **Art thou loosed from a wife?** Seek not a wife. But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned.

*New King James Version.* Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be loosed. **Are you loosed from a wife?** Do not seek a wife. But even if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned.

*American Standard.* Art thou bound unto a wife? Seek not to be loosed. **Art thou loosed from a wife?** Seek not a wife. But shouldst thou marry, thou hast not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned.

*New American Standard Bible* Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. **Are you released from a wife?** Do not seek a wife. But if you should marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin should marry, she has not sinned.

*Living Oracles (4<sup>th</sup> edition).* Are you bound to a wife? seek not to be loosed. **Are you loosed from a wife?** seek not a wife. And yet, if you marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she has not sinned.<sup>46</sup>

*Young's Literal Translation.* Hast thou been bound to a wife? seek not to be loosed; **hast thou been loosed from a wife?** seek not a wife. But and if thou mayest marry, thou didst not sin; and if the virgin may marry, she did not sin.

*Webster's.* Art thou bound to a wife? seek not to be loosed. **Art thou loosed from a wife?** seek not a wife. But if thou marry, thou hast not sinned: and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned.<sup>47</sup>

*Barclay.* Are you bound to a wife? Then do not seek any loosening of the marriage bond. **Has your marriage been dissolved?** Then do not seek a wife. But, if you do marry you have committed no sin; and, if a virgin marries, she has committed no sin.<sup>48</sup>

*New English Bible.* Are you bound in marriage? Do not seek a dissolution. **Has your marriage been dissolved?** Do not seek a wife. If, however, you do marry, there is nothing wrong in it; and if a virgin marries, she has done no wrong.<sup>49</sup>

*Revised Challoner-Rheims Version (Catholic).* Art thou bound to a wife? Do not seek to be freed. **Art thou freed from a wife?** Do

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<sup>46</sup> By Alexander Campbell, based on work of George Campbell, James Macknight, and Philip Doddridge (1835). Campbell was, of course, one of the founders of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Restoration Movement, of which the Churches of Christ are a part.

<sup>47</sup> Translation by Noah Webster (1833).

<sup>48</sup> A translation by the author of the popular Daily Study Bible series.

<sup>49</sup> A translation by the Church of England.

not seek a wife. But if thou takest a wife, thou hast not sinned. And if a virgin marries, she has not sinned.<sup>50</sup>

*Rheims (1582)* Art thou bound to a wife? seek not to be loosed. **Art thou loosed from a wife?** seek not a wife. But if thou take a wife, thou hast not sinned. And if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned.<sup>51</sup>

The following translations are from interlinear Greek Bibles. These are Greek Bibles with the translation of each Greek word appearing next to the word. The word order is confusing, because these follow the Greek word order precisely:

*Diaglott Greek interlinear (Jehovah's Witnesses)*. Art thou having been bound to a wife, not seek thou a release; **has thou been loosed from a wife**, not seek thou a wife. If but even thou shouldst have married, not thou didst sin; and if should have married the virgin, not she sinned.

*Alfred Marshall Greek interlinear*. Hast thou been bound to a woman? Do not seek release; **hast thou been released from a woman?** Do not seek a woman. If But indeed thou marriest, thou sinnedst not, and if marries the virgin, she sinned not.

Greek scholar Zodhiates indicates that “loosed” is perfect indicative passive, usually translated with “have” or “has”—hence, “have you been loosed.”<sup>52</sup>

Perfect tense describes an action, or more correctly a process, that took place in the past, the results of which have continued to the present. It has no exact equivalent in English, but is usually translated by using the auxiliary verbs “has” or “have”: ... “Daughter, thy faith hath made thee whole.”<sup>53</sup>

Finally, notice that the word “loose” appears twice in verse 27. When Paul says “do not seek to be loosed,” the translations are quite uniform in translating “loosed” as divorced. The same word is used in the very next clause with obvious parallel intent. It means “divorce” there, too.

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<sup>50</sup> A mid-20<sup>th</sup> century translation by the Catholic Church—which is very conservative on the divorce and remarriage question.

<sup>51</sup> A Catholic translation older than the KJV.

<sup>52</sup> Spiros Zodhiates is a premier Greek scholar and has published a number of important Greek reference books. He is theologically conservative. As his name suggests, he has the advantage of having been born Greek.

<sup>53</sup> *The Complete Word Study New Testament* (AMG 1991). References herein to conclusions drawn by Zodhiates are from this reference work or, occasionally, from the software version of this work by the same name.

The only plausible objection to this plain statement of Paul is that Jesus said something different in the Gospels. Indeed, some actually argue that Jesus' words somehow overrule Paul's, on the premise, I suppose, that Jesus is a greater authority than Paul. But I don't believe the Bible contradicts itself.

We will see later that there really is no contradiction, Jesus' words having been mistranslated. But even if Jesus and Paul were to say different things, they wouldn't contradict one another. Jesus was plainly interpreting the Law of Moses in such passages as Matthew 5 and 19 and was addressing a Jewish audience before the Law of Moses was abrogated by the cross.

I mean—Jesus told the lepers he healed to show themselves to the priests to be declared clean (Luke 17:14). Similarly, Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount regarding leaving gifts at the altar do not apply today as literally stated (Matt. 5:23-24). We no longer leave literal gifts at literal altars, which is literally what Jesus was speaking about—to a Jewish audience who were at the time commanded to do so. No one argues that modern lepers who are cured should do the same—Jesus was simply honoring the Law of Moses as it existed at that time.

And (now this is important!), the Bible doesn't contradict itself. And conservative Christians shouldn't defend their views by questioning the inspiration of Paul! Paul was obviously aware of Jesus' teaching,<sup>54</sup> and yet Paul quite plainly said that the divorced and virgins should not marry—but if they do, it is not sin. The Bible says it. I believe it.

The discussion could really end at this point, and the point would be fully proven. But because we have so often based our doctrine on Jesus' commentaries on Deuteronomy 24, we will study his words in some detail later. But the case is already proven.

Now before we go on to Jesus' teachings, we need to consider other portions of 1 Corinthians 7:

*12 To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. 13 And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. 14 For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. 15 But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. 16 How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?*

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<sup>54</sup> 1 Cor. 7:10.

This passage is sometimes referred to as the Pauline Exception. It is argued that this creates a second exception to the prohibition on divorce—the first exception being fornication, as declared by Jesus, and the second being an unbelieving spouse.

Interestingly, Paul never mentions fornication nor does he speak of remarried spouses being guilty of adultery. While Paul is obviously aware of Jesus' teaching on divorce, he doesn't remotely speak in those terms. Paul's teaching is simple. It's wrong to violate the marriage covenant. And it's always better to be single to better serve the Lord. But neither marriage nor remarriage is a sin.

Paul is not creating an exception to the command to not divorce. He is simply giving the practical advice that if an unbelieving spouse divorces the believing spouse, the believer is not a sinner and is not bound to pretend to be married to someone with whom he or she is no longer united. On the other hand, Paul plainly says that a believer must honor the marriage covenant so long as the unbeliever permits that marriage to last.

Paul is not authorizing a divorce. He is simply pointing out that a Christian is only bound to his or her unbelieving spouse so long as the unbelieving spouse is willing to remain married. The phrase "God has called us to peace" is of rabbinic origin. It's what the rabbis said when reaching a pragmatic conclusion not necessarily dictated by the Law of Moses.<sup>55</sup>

Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 7:15 is better translated "you are no longer enslaved" (the Greek is quite clear). It's a bit shocking for us to hear Paul referring to marriage as slavery, and so many modern translations (such as the NIV) soften the words. However, the Jewish certificate of divorce and certificate of freedom for a slave were virtually identical documents, and much of rabbinic divorce law came from Exodus 21:10-11, which speaks of marrying a slave girl. Therefore, the metaphor is a clear allusion to a standard Jewish certificate of divorce, which always allowed remarriage. In fact, the very purpose of the certificate was to allow remarriage.

May the Christian spouse remarry in such a case? Of course. As explained above, verses 27-28 say so.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Instone-Brewer, p. 203. For example, an imbecile could not be prosecuted for theft but nonetheless the stolen goods were confiscated and return to their right owner "for the sake of peace" in rabbinic teaching.

<sup>56</sup> In *Divorce, Repentance, and the Gospel of Christ* (Gospel Enterprises, 1981) (hereafter, "Hicks"), Olan Hicks quotes Alexander Campbell, one of the founders of the Restoration Movement, who responded to a question about a woman who had been abandoned by her husband and then sought a formal divorce, as follows:

If in that matter she had actually erred, she is not now to be repudiated for that error any more than one who formerly was a slanderer or a persecutor, and has been brought to repentance and reformation, is now to be rejected for crimes committed before his conversion. And if the divorce was obtained after she became a disciple, in order to conform to the statutes of the state, with express reference to her marriage, it seems not to materially alter the case.

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17 Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. 18 Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. 19 Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts. 20 Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him. 21 Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so. 22 For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave. 23 You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. 24 Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to.

Why is Paul addressing circumcision and slavery in this discussion on marriage, divorce, and remarriage? Notice that he immediately returns to his original subject in verse 25. The only logical explanation is that Paul is still addressing marriage here. He is teaching us about marriage by analogy to other more obvious principles. His point is that if we remain a slave after becoming a Christian, or remain circumcised or uncircumcised after becoming a Christian, then we remain married after becoming Christian—so far as it is within our power to do so.

Now this is not an absolute rule, as the analogies themselves make clear. Paul certainly would not argue that a slave should refuse to accept his freedom if it became available, as he makes clear in verse 21. Therefore, while Christianity does not require a change in life situation, neither does it prevent a change when the change can be accomplished without sin.

Paul's argument is broad. Take for example a married couple where each spouse is on his or her second marriage. Suppose that couple is converted to the Lord and wish to be baptized. Some have argued that they must be divorced as a condition to being saved, because their marriage is wrong—indeed, adulterous—arguing from Matthew 5:31-32.

But Paul plainly teaches that Christians who are married when converted are to stay married. Indeed, divorce is a sin. How can we urge couples to divorce—that is, to sin—as a condition to being saved? I thought we taught repentance—not sin!—as a step toward salvation!<sup>57</sup> How does one repent of vow breaking by breaking another vow?<sup>58</sup>

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Campbell noted that Walter Scott concurred in his judgment. Scott, another Restoration leader, invented such notable slogans as the “five finger exercise” of “hear, believe, repent, confess, and be baptized” and introduced the use of the gospel invitation after each sermon.

<sup>57</sup> Acts 2:38.

<sup>58</sup> Foy E. Wallace, Jr. writes, “It is in this connection that the apostle added in verse 20, ‘Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called,’ and it should serve as a check to some marriage [continued following page]

The only possible argument that we should require divorced and remarried couples to divorce to be saved is to contend that the couple is not married at all because the spouses are still married to their first spouses in the eyes of God, their divorces being wrongful. But, as will be explained in more detail later, this is not possible. After all, Jesus himself said, “What God has put together, man should not separate” (“put asunder” in KJV). How can we contend that a marriage can’t be wrongly ended when Jesus said that man *can* (but shouldn’t) separate the marriage?

More fundamentally, Paul plainly says in verse 28 that it is not a sin to remarry after a divorce. It is the divorce that is a sin—not the remarriage. Marriage is good, blessed, and ordained of God. Divorce—more precisely, breaking the marriage covenant—is hated by God. Why? Because God loves his people and violating a marriage hurts his people.

The husband and wife who have remarried are just as bound to their new covenant as they were to their first covenant. And their children will be just as hurt by a divorce of their parents as they would be if their parents were on their first marriage.

We’ll address this situation further later.

We skip verses 25–28a, having covered them earlier.

*28b* But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this. *29* What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; *30* those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; *31* those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.

Paul now explains in more detail why he prefers that the Corinthians not marry. It’s not because it’s wrong to marry—or to remarry. It’s because marriage can be a burden when Christians face persecution. While Paul doesn’t explicitly refer to persecution, he sees “troubles” coming. Some have wrongly argued that Paul is referring to the Second Coming, expecting Jesus to return very soon. But Paul is referring not to future glory but to “many troubles.”

*32* I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord’s affairs—how he can please the Lord. *33* But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—*34* and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the

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counselling preachers who are so readily disposed to break up marriage relationships that are not in conformity with their own immature opinions.” *Sermon on the Mount and the Civil State* (1967), p. 45, quoted by Hicks, p. 24. Wallace was editor of the *Gospel Advocate* for many years during the midst of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. By today’s standards, Wallace would be considered very conservative and, indeed, legalistic.

Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. 35 I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.

Now notice also that Paul sees the world very differently from the way we do. Serving the Lord is most important—personal happiness or self-actualization is secondary, at best. Not marriage, not sex—nothing is more important than serving the Lord.

36 If anyone thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if she is getting along in years and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married. 37 But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin—this man also does the right thing. 38 So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does even better.

This is a famously difficult to translate passage. Paul is either discussing giving a daughter in marriage or marrying one's fiancé. Either way, Paul makes the same point—marriage is not sin, but remaining single is better.

39 A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. 40 In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is—and I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

Paul, having addressed virgins and the divorced in turn, discusses widows. Once again, it is better for widows to remain single, but marriage is not a sin.

In 1 Timothy 5:14, Paul says, "I counsel younger widows to marry." Thus, we now see beyond reasonable doubt that Paul's strong preference for singleness is dictated at least in part by circumstances. Nonetheless, I have to believe that Paul's ultimate preference is shown by his own life—it's better to remain single to serve the Lord with unrestricted dedication.

Now some argue that "as long as he lives" means that a woman cannot become unmarried until her husband dies, so that an "unscriptural divorce" is no divorce at all. But this can't be true. First, those who contend for this interpretation conveniently ignore the fact that Paul makes no exception for fornication—and so the rule stated by Paul must admit of unstated exceptions (as it very clearly does).

Well, what exceptions might be unstated? Certainly, Paul having already said that a woman is not bound when her unbelieving husband departs, he doesn't need to say it again for it to still be true. And just as surely Paul would assure us that having said that divorced spouses may remarry without sin, he doesn't have to mention that exception again here.

Paul is speaking in generalities. We can't invent a doctrine by ripping a generality out of context and ignoring the exceptions stated in the very same passage.

Now that we've wrestled with all of chapter 7, we need to summarize:

1. Marriage is not a legal relationship. It is a relationship that derives from Eden—a time before sin, before government, and before churches and preachers. Marriage is a covenant to be united and to be one flesh. This includes consenting to sexual relations—except “for a season” and even then “only by consent.”
2. A modern legal separation violates the marriage covenant and, indeed, ends the marriage. It is an utter fiction to suppose that one can stay married (in the Biblical sense) and not live with and be united with one's spouse. Of course, a trial separation may be considered a separation “for a season” permitted by Paul.
3. The word translated “divorce” in chapter 7 does not have a legalistic meaning. It means to violate the marriage covenant so as to end the bond of unity. Exactly when or how this happens is sometimes beyond human wisdom. It will bother many for me not to lay down nice and easy rules, but human relationships don't lend themselves to nice and easy rules. After all, do I have the wisdom to divine whether someone has really repented? Or can I say whether someone else has so rejected Jesus as Lord as to have fallen away (Hebrews 10:26)? Or to be beyond repentance (Hebrews 6:4-6)? Some of the most central questions—who's saved? who's lost?—don't lend themselves to easy answers when applied to particular people, because they are fundamentally questions of the heart. God knows the heart—I don't. Just so, whether someone has so violated the marriage covenant that the spouses are no longer united is sometimes not easy for an outsider to judge.
4. Christians are commended to remain single in order to better serve the Lord. This is true of virgins, the divorced, and widows. But Paul is always clear that remarrying is not sin.
5. Married couples who are converted to Christ don't need to be divorced to become Christians, even if the present marriage followed a divorce.
6. There is no sin in a second marriage following a divorce, even if the person marrying for the second time was guilty of fornication or no fornication was involved. (As we'll cover later, however, making the second marriage is sin if the divorce was obtained in order to make the second marriage.)