

“When Those Who Are Close Don’t Believe”

1 Corinthians 7:8-24

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One of the basic rules of studying the Bible is that we must pay attention to the context of the writing itself and the historical circumstance (to which the writing was first addressed) – if we want a better sense of what was intended by the author. When it comes to passages in First Corinthians, I have seen some well meaning people go through considerable emotional turmoil. They were particularly troubled by interpretations of passages and what they thought was implied for their lives. In most cases, these individuals had heard quick interpretations from their teachers, who, in my opinion, had given them rather undisciplined explanations with virtually no attention to the context of the passages.

Because this section of Paul’s letter to the Corinth house church contained several but related topics and because the unusual situation Paul was addressing is so important to our understanding what he was saying, . . . I’m going to quickly catch us up on what was going on in that church and then have the paragraphs read individually – giving some explanation as we go. Finally, I will try to suggest places where the principles (in the text) may apply to our very different circumstances today.

When Paul was dictating this letter to a scribe (who probably had better handwriting than he had), he was responding to a letter he had received from the newly formed house church in Corinth. Recall that they had begun that church under Paul’s leadership but actually had no Bible (as we know it) and no *Book of Order* from a church denomination. All they had was handed down stories about Jesus, Old Testament scriptures and a recollection of that about which Paul had preached when he was there.

They had their worship traditions from their former synagogue experiences as well as some traditions held by those who had formerly worshiped in pagan temples. With virtually nothing committed to writing about Jesus or Christianity, this church had gotten into trouble – writing to Paul about disputes that were ripping that congregation apart.

To refresh our memory, some of these controversies were:

- whether to eat meat that had been sold at the pagan temple outlet stores (that had been offered to idols)
- women not wearing their veils during the worship services (when they lead everyone in prayer)
- and individuals who were claiming to be more spiritual than everyone else because they were speaking in tongues.

Just about everything that could go wrong went wrong in that small church in Corinth. Paul’s Corinthian letters, however, were helpful for other new churches in the first few centuries and they have relevance for us today.

First, the context.

Among the many heresies and misconceptions raging in that church was the thinking, on the part of some, that one shouldn’t be married to a non-Christian. You see, most of the people in that church were recent converts to Christianity. Some were lucky enough to have their spouse convert to the faith with them. Then there were others who were not married but had become Christians. But with changes in faith, there were some religious and sociological problems about which they wrote and sent off to their former pastor for his opinion on what to do.

We’ll pick up in the middle of Paul’s dictating in the section we call chapter 7: verses 8-9.

(1 Cor. 7: 8-9 is read)

The question posed to Paul was this: “What is a person supposed to do if they are a widow or unmarried? Get married or stay single, because some (in our church) are saying that it is holier to be unmarried. What do you think Paul?”

Paul obviously preferred staying single. Because of the rigors of his missionary travel, he had found it to be a distinct advantage to be single. Paul said (in verse 26) that because of the impending distress – (maybe a persecution or Christ’s second coming and final judgment) – he felt that investing oneself in a love relationship may only bring greater grief if one has to see a spouse suffer as well. But Paul conceded that it is better to ‘marry than be aflame with passion.’ *We know about what he was talking.*

To single people, then, Paul suggested that they *stay* single – if they wanted his advice. Then Paul

applied this general rule of thumb to other circumstances about which they wrote. Verses 10 & 11 answered the matter about married people who were new converts to Christianity but who found that their spouse had not converted.

(1 Cor. 7:10-11 is read)

When Paul said ‘to the married I give charge, not I but the Lord,’ there was something very interesting going on we should notice. Previously Paul was saying: ‘if you want my advice, I’d say to do this or that.’ Now he was saying: ‘this isn’t from me – this is what Jesus said.’ And he went on to remind them of Jesus’ teaching about divorce.

There is an entire study necessary for the complex subject of Divorce and First Century Judaism but you can easily get a copy to read.¹ But very briefly, Jesus was reacting to the divorce laws of His day when He said one shouldn’t divorce one’s spouse.

The Rabbis, just before Jesus’ time, had invented petty reasons for why a man (only a man) could initiate a divorce, leaving his wife penniless for the rest of her life. So when Jesus said ‘someone who divorces their spouse and marries another commits adultery,’ (speaking in that context of debating the contemporary interpretations of the rabbis,) Jesus was saying that a man who divorces his wife *in order to quickly marry another woman* (using one of the Rabbi’s ridiculous reasons like a burnt meal), was, in actuality, adulterous.

Paul, then, was suggesting that married Christians shouldn’t be the ones to initiate a divorce **only over a matter of one not being converted to Christianity at the same time as their spouse.** Remember the context – the people who had asked Paul the question had just become Christians and had immediately found themselves facing a spouse who wanted no part of Christianity.²

¹ Simply go to: <http://connectedness.org/> and then click on the Sermon Links button 

Sermon Links and read the **2/14/1999** file. If you don’t already have it, you will need to get the free *Acrobat*[®] *Reader*[™].

² In the first years of the newly forming Christian church in the Roman empire, one of the first complaints the new Christians – by non-believers – was that Christianity appeared to break up families. During some local persecutions, the Roman charges

Further, in verses 25-40 (which follow these verses), Paul was speaking to a group of people who had decided to maintain a Platonic love relationship because of their thinking that they could serve Christ better that way. A very complicated but interesting passage. But the point is that at that time in Church history, some Christians were convinced that Jesus was coming back soon, as Paul was, and had turned ascetic, wishing to become “less worldly.” They became committed to either living alone or in a celibate relationship without sex.

The Gnostic Christians, with their so-called “secret wisdom,” went in one of two directions toward the extreme in their thinking. Some of them taught that to be truly spiritual, one should become like a monk or nun and be celibate – even if they were married. Others of them taught that since Christianity is free from having to be good enough to experience God’s love, anything goes.

So in that specific church context, in the urgency of those conflicting heresies and with (what Paul thought) would be the eminent end of the world and Christ’s second coming – he was counseling them: ‘Don’t divorce someone just because of a difference in faith. But if you end up having to split (because it’s just too devastating for both people), then remain single after the divorce and don’t marry on the rebound. And then Paul explained why he held this opinion in the next section, verses 12-14.

(1 Cor 7:12-14 is read)

Notice how he started this paragraph by saying that these statements are “not from the Lord.” Paul was giving this conflict his best personal ideas and he couldn’t think of anything he ever heard that Jesus might have said on this. And if we stop to think about that, it ought to cause us to loosen up a little about our concepts of what the Bible is about. Too often, I think, some people in the Church have viewed the Bible as a simple document (almost dropped out of the sky), somehow written by one person in one culture and addressed to all people in every culture throughout time – with simple and easy answers to every issue in life.

But here Paul was saying that this was the best he could come up with on this particular matter for these specific people asking these questions. His advice,

against some Christians, was: “Tampering with domestic relationships.”

here, turned out to be much of the same philosophy of staying in the situation you're in, if you can. 'If you're a new Christian,' he said, 'and your spouse wants to keep living with you, don't change.'

We all know people in our lives who are easily led by others. It was likely that some Corinthian Christians were advising new converts to leave their non-Christian spouses in order to supposedly "live more holy lives." Some of those people believed that advice but Paul was saying he disagreed.

His reasoning was that in the intimacy of a good marriage, one *could be influential* in leading their spouse to benefits of being a Christian. But this talk about a spouse 'being consecrated by being married to the Christian spouse' is a little difficult to understand. It had something to do with Paul's Jewish background.

In Judaism they often spoke of how being married to a non-Jew negatively affected the spouse (making the Jewish party ritually "unholy.") Strangely, they also talked about how the children of a Jew (even one married to a non-Jew) were counted as consecrated, or holy, because they were children of the covenant community.

Perhaps there's a little of this thinking lurking in our modern baptism theology. In most Protestant churches, at least one parent of the child has to be a professing Christian and a member of the local church in order for a child to be baptized.

Paul's argument for a married person (newly converted to Christianity) to stay married – was a positive one. 'Who knows,' Paul was saying, 'maybe your spouse will convert from your influence. After all, you don't think your kids are "impure" just because your spouse isn't a Christian. Similarly, don't get bogged down with all this Jewish uncleanliness terminology with your spouse either.'³

So, under no circumstances would it be fair to interpret that these verses prohibited divorce if a person found themselves married to an unbeliever. It was just Paul's personal advice, to a few naive and easily led people, who were temporarily worried about their spiritual life because they were new Christians while their spouses were not.

³ Obviously a paraphrase to attempt to bring out the meaning

Next Paul addressed the question of when a new Christian wants to stay in the marriage but their spouse wants out.

(1 Cor. 7:15-16 is read)

Paul quickly concluded, 'let them go if you can't convince them otherwise.'

And lastly, Paul concluded this section by stating several reasons why they should take his advice.

(1 Cor. 7:17-24 is read)

The first argument was that all the other members of churches (he had started) were not making drastic changes in *their* relationships because of their faith. The argument was that if *these others* were maintaining the state they were in, *the Corinthian church members* should as well. Jews who had been circumcised, when converted to Christianity, were not trying to alter that (as if they could). Gentiles who had converted to Christianity (likewise) were not changing and becoming Jews with that ritual. Slaves were not walking off the job.⁴

The text summing it all up is verse 20. "Everyone should remain in the state in which he or she was called." The biggest reason Paul was advising them to avoid making any big changes was because he believed "The End Times" were upon them and Christ was going to return any day. That firm belief influenced everything Paul said to those people.

As a parenthesis, notice that neither Jesus nor Paul ever dealt directly with ethical the issue of slavery – although what they taught (about treating all people like brothers and sisters) eventually lead us (in the 19th century) to end that injustice.⁵

There were all kinds of things going on as the Christian churches were forming and today we almost wonder how the Church managed to arrive at what was orthodoxy and what was heresy.⁶

⁴ although if they are set free because their master came to their ethical senses and set them free, most anyone would take their freedom

⁵ As an historical footnote: shortly before Jesus' time, there were some individuals who were so committed to their faith that they made themselves eunuchs 'for the sake of God's kingdom?' Jesus refers to them, in passing, as having that gift of dedication in Matthew 19:12.

⁶ If you want to try your hand at wrestling with that one, you would find Bauer's book interesting. See: Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

So we ask, as we always should, if there is anything in this text that is relevant to us today? After all, the isolated and unusual circumstance Paul was addressing then seems not to relate to us today.

First of all, many of us, either through friendship or marriage, *do* find ourselves close to others who are not Christians. But the circumstances that would cause one to consider ending a relationship usually do not directly relate to whether one is or is not a Christian.

For sure, if the one with whom you are in a relationship is a Christian, they will more likely have the humility ingredient (which enables them to more readily admit errors and be more open to growing and learning from you). But the same should be said of you, regardless of your partner's faith expression. But I should go on to emphasize that it is only more likely that they will have humility and an openness to learning as a Christ follower. There are no guarantees in marrying a person professing to be a Christian.

It happens that I have counseled many "Christians" who married someone who claimed to be "a Christian" but who turned out, through the years, to be anything but open to learning from their partner – actually listening to them or staying open to do anything other than what they wanted to do. They always wanted to stay "in control" all the time.

But to whatever degree those close to us differ with us, in matters of Christianity, Paul's general principle still seems to apply. At the minimum, we could heed his advice to not make any major changes just because of some initial differences in our faith. But beyond that, each of us are left to deal with the conflicts we face, as best we can, and with the wisdom of prayer and talking with others.

In some ways, being close to someone who doesn't share your same faith expression can be a growth experience. In that situation, you tend to hear – more quickly – if what you are saying about your faith does not make sense. You can't get away with as much phoniness or clichés in your rhetoric when you are in the presence of someone who is more objectively removed from the faith expression with which you feel most comfortable. But I would be quick to add that it would be a most serious mistake to marry someone who decidedly differs with you on such an important world-view as your religious faith – if you have the luxury of a choice in front of you.

Secondly, Paul's general principle: to grow where you're planted" was not a fatalistic view of life. It was just a realistic feet-on-the-ground suggestion to live in the world and realize that no circumstance, in which we find ourselves, is ever perfect.

There are no perfect friendships and no perfect marriages. We're all living under the crude and uneven and sometimes unfair circumstances of the human condition. We're living between what is and what should be. It's more than clear to us that humanity is a ways off from being what our Maker seems to have had in mind with how we're living.

Meanwhile, we're stuck driving behind someone who insists on making a left turn ahead of us (from our lane) without using the left turn lane in the middle. We're stuck shelling out four or five dollars for light bulbs that never last for the 5,000 hours they lie about on their package. So whoever we are and whatever context in which we find ourselves, it is what we've got. And Paul's principle was that we should devote ourselves, as best we can, to the context we are in – relying on God's help, and the help of other Christians and non-Christians.

Thirdly, when Paul admitted he didn't have an easy answer for some of their questions, I think that should remind us, (especially those of us who are in teaching positions), to be more humble. It is a reminder to me to remember that not only does the Bible *not* have an answer for everything that comes along but that when I have made my best effort at interpreting the Bible (or giving an opinion on a non-Biblical issue), I have, at times, been clearly wrong. Dead wrong and I'll be wrong sometimes in the future as well. Thank goodness the Bible has enough in it that speaks to most of our situations and helps us make enough sense out of life to keep us going.

Fourthly, where Paul talked about a Christian's influence on a non-believer, it may raise a similar question for us today. To what extent are *we* influential in the lives of people who are less familiar with Jesus' teachings? Life is hard and for some, extremely difficult. But while some may feel trapped and utterly alone, what do they see in us?

Do they sense that within us, there is an inner peace? Do they sense that while we have problems, like anyone else, we still have an inner sense of hope and expectation? Do they sense that we are somehow connected to a future existence in the very presence of a loving and all powerful God? Do they see that there

is more to us than the usual getting and spending with
which most of the people in this world seem
concerned?

What is it that others see of God in us? ■

