



First Corinthians

1 Corinthians 7:1-40: Marriage and Slavery

1 Corinthians 7:1 begins a new section of the epistle. Now Paul is not referring to matters he has heard about by word of mouth. He is responding to a letter written to him by some of the Corinthian Christians. Almost certainly, as the quotation marks in our English translations suggest, Paul begins by quoting their letter quite directly: "It is well for a man not to touch a woman."

Paul writes without the slightest hint of romantic intuition. The Corinthians are almost certainly writing to him about the place of sexual intercourse (that's what "touching" means in this context) within marriage. It seems likely that some Corinthians have thought that as part of their life in the Spirit, as they await the return of Christ, they should simply refrain from sexual relations. Paul cuts to the practical chase. If two married people stop having sex with one another it will be all too tempting for one or both of them to have sex with someone else.

The other issue for married people is the issue of divorce, presumably for couples where one spouse is a believer and the other not. Paul recalls a teaching of Jesus on the subject (an infrequent device in his letters) and counsels against divorce. More than that, consistent with his belief that our bodies have the potential for genuine holiness he argues that when a believer has intercourse with a nonbelieving spouse the result is the sanctification of the unbeliever and not the corruption of the believer.

In general, Paul believes that because Jesus is returning soon people should try to remain as they are. Widows and widowers should not hurry to remarry. "Virgins" (unmarried young women?) should not hurry to marry at all. The advantage of singleness is that the unmarried have more time and energy to devote to the work of the Lord. However, while marriage is not to be encouraged for those who have lost their spouses, it is better than one familiar alternative: "For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion." (7:9)

All this leads toward one of the most striking and complicated of Paul's injunctions...Christians are to live as if they were not who they are. The married as if they were unmarried, the mournful as though they were not mourning and the worldly as if they were not worldly at all. Because all worldly things are passing away and the new world is coming.

So stay as you are but without being bound by your circumstances, says Paul. For better or for worse, he thinks this applies to slaves as well. Given the shortness of time slaves should 1)make

the most of their difficult condition, and 2) recognize that they are really Christ's slaves and therefore really free.

Excellent scholars tell us that slavery in the first century Greek and Roman worlds was not the same as slavery in the ante-bellum American South, but no African American Christian I know has ever found this very comforting. Perhaps because he is in some ways socially conservative, certainly because he believes Jesus will return in his lifetime, Paul does not make a connection between Christian freedom and emancipation.

Many Christians, noting that Jesus has tarried and skeptical that slavery can be compatible with the Gospel, have thought Paul needed stretching here.

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