

Better  
to MARRY



# Better to MARRY

SEX and MARRIAGE in  
1 CORINTHIANS 6 and 7

Second Edition

David J. Engelsma



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For Ruth



*But if they cannot contain, let them marry:  
for it is better to marry than to burn.*

*—1 Corinthians 7:9*





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# Preface to the First Edition

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There is great need for a faithful witness in the churches of the West to the biblical teaching on the related subjects of sex, marriage, divorce, remarriage, and single life. Western civilization shows its fundamental paganism by its unashamed promiscuity and perversity. A disciplined, holy life regarding sex and marriage is not only crumbling in the churches, but also has in many churches already completely broken down. The impure and disorderly lives of the members meet with silence on the part of the churches' teaching office. Or the churches defend and justify the sexual uncleanness and marital infidelity of their members. Either the churches officially adopt reports that sanction the sexual activity of the unmarried, the unbiblical divorcing and the remarrying of the married, and the homosexual lust and conduct of married and unmarried; or the churches preach a grace of God in Christ that approves all this wickedness by tolerating it in the lives of professing Christians and in the fellowship of the congregation.

None of this is due to any fault in the scriptures. The scriptures speak clearly, sharply, and extensively on those aspects of the holy life of the believer that consist of sexual purity and of the sanctity of marriage. One of the outstanding passages is 1 Corinthians 7.

As is indicated by the words that introduce the chapter, "Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me," the apostle is answering specific questions about marriage from the recent converts in Corinth, Greece. These new Christians had problems in their marriages and problems with marriage itself. Like all good pastors, the apostle is forced to be a marriage counselor. The chapter, therefore, is primarily practical. It differs in this respect from that other great passage in Paul's writings on marriage, Ephesians 5:22–33, which is primarily doctrinal. However, the apostle answers

the practical questions and solves the problems by applying the doctrine of the word of God to the lives of the Corinthian saints. He does not accommodate the holy life of the believers in marriage or in single life to the prevailing culture in Corinth. He does not make concessions because of the situation of his questioners. He is not pragmatic, interested in what “works.” Rather, he shows and insists upon the practice required by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Like the Corinthians, the people of God in the twenty-first century must seek answers to their marriage problems from the apostles of Christ, that is, from the word of God. Like the apostle, the churches must give the word of God as the answers to these problems. The world is filled with advice and counsel about sex and about marriage. But the world’s wisdom in these matters is not derived from the gospel of Jesus Christ. Listened to, this wisdom leads the saints astray. It is foolishness. It becomes increasingly rare that the churches and their teachers base their instruction and guidance squarely on the word of God. Especially when church members find themselves in marital difficulties, the churches are ready to give counsel that deviates from, and even plainly contradicts, holy scripture. In the end, there is no difference between the advice of the unbelieving counselor and the advice of the supposedly Christian marriage counselor.

Christ has his own unique practice of marriage. Therefore, the church, taught to observe all things that Christ commanded the apostles (Matt. 28:20), has her own distinctive counsel concerning problems in this important area of human life.

Paul’s answers to the questions of the Corinthians became part of the apostle’s open letter to the entire congregation at Corinth and part of the inspired scriptures to the church of all ages. This, evidently, is instruction that all need and that all may have—married and unmarried, men and women, adults and children.

The presence of the seventh chapter of 1 Corinthians in the Bible guards against two dangers into which churches can fall. One is that the churches keep back sharp, strong teaching on marriage from their members because this teaching will

offend some or because it will make the lives of some very painful. This is common. As divorce and remarriage become rampant in almost all churches, the preachers see to it that they never proclaim God's hatred of divorce (Mal. 2:16) or the adultery of remarriage (Mark 10:1–12). It is a striking thing that often it is the very people whom the preachers are trying to protect who are dissatisfied with the churches' silence and who demand to know what the Bible really teaches.

Besides, if the churches teach faithfully, they can to a large extent prevent the sins and miseries that now are flooding the congregations.

The apostle was not hesitant to give the recent converts at Corinth the full, plain, unvarnished truth about marriage, even though for some this meant a difficult, painful life. Some had to remain married to unbelievers. Others had to remain unmarried as long as they lived.

The other danger warded off by the presence of 1 Corinthians 7 in the Bible is that the churches neglect to teach certain aspects of marriage because of squeamishness about sex.

The scriptures are characterized by frankness and openness about sex regarding both its abuse outside of marriage (Prov. 5 and 7) and its use and enjoyment within marriage (Prov. 5 and the Song of Solomon). Paul is open and blunt in 1 Corinthians 7. The subject of verses 2–5 is the sexual aspect of marriage and sexual behavior in marriage. John Calvin took note of this in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 7:5:

Profane persons might think that Paul does not act with sufficient modesty in discoursing in this manner as to the intercourse of a husband with his wife; or at least that it was unbecoming the dignity of an Apostle.<sup>1</sup>

The churches also must be free to speak plainly and unashamedly about sex, especially since the saints in the twenty-first

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1 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. John Pringle (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948), 1:226.

century live in an impudent world. Yet, like their apostle, the churches may not trifle with the subject in a silly, jesting, crude, or embarrassing manner. The church has her own spiritual manner as well as her own sound message.

We must also learn from the answers to the Corinthians' questions about marriage what truths about our own marriages are important. We must learn to ask the right questions. It is a real danger today that Christians learn their questions from the world. "How can I be happy in marriage?" "How can I find the greatest sexual pleasure and satisfaction?" "What may I do to deliver myself from the misery of a bad wife or husband?"

The scriptures teach believers to ask their own, and quite different, questions. "In what calling am I to please God—in marriage or single life?" "How can I please my wife or husband sexually?" "If I have a miserable wife or husband, what am I required by the Lord to do in order to honor his marriage ordinance?"

In this book, the scriptures will control the questions as well as the answers.

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# Preface to the Second Edition

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I regard this book as the complement to my book, *Marriage, the Mystery of Christ & the Church: The Covenant-Bond in Scripture and History*. If *Marriage, the Mystery*, although explaining and applying practical aspects of marriage, is mainly the treatment of the fundamental truths about marriage, *Better to Marry*, although taking note of the principles of marriage, is mainly the treatment of the practical aspects of marriage.

Indeed, the passage, 1 Corinthians 6 and 7, is the biblical complement to Ephesians 5:22–33.

It would be a mistake, however, to regard 1 Corinthians 6 and 7 as exclusively practical. Not only is it evident throughout the passage that the sound doctrine of marriage—what marriage essentially is, according to the will of God—governs Christian behavior and practice in marriage. But also the passage *declares* the doctrine of marriage, especially in verse 39: “The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth.”

In addition, 1 Corinthians 7:10–11 explicitly addresses and conclusively settles an issue that is fundamental to the truth of marriage—practical as well as doctrinal: the question whether the wife or husband who is divorced on the ground of the mate’s sexual infidelity is permitted to marry another.

The original edition of the book dealt with this issue, and rightly, in Chapter 6, “Remain Unmarried,” and in the Appendix, “The Remarriage of the Innocent Party—a Sermon.”

So important is this issue for the truth of marriage and so widespread in Reformed and Presbyterian, indeed most Christian, churches is the (virtually unquestioned) notion that the Bible permits the Christian who is divorced on the ground of a mate’s adultery to marry another that I have added to the new edition of the book the text of a sermon I have recently made and preached on 1 Corinthians 7:10–11,

“The Prohibition of the Remarriage of the Innocent Party.”

“Remain[ing] unmarried” (1 Corinthians 7:11) is also part of the practice of Christian marriage for some believers, and not the least significant.

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DECEMBER 2013





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# Flee Fornication

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*Flee fornication...he that committeth fornication  
sinneth against his own body.*

—1 Corinthians 6:18

Immediately upon taking up chapter 7 of 1 Corinthians, we are directed to the background of the chapter in the warning against fornication in 1 Corinthians 6:13–20. In verse 2 the reason given for marrying directs us to this background: “to avoid fornication” (“on account of fornications”).

In the New Testament, fornication (*porneia*, from the word for a whore) does not refer only to the sexual sin of unmarried persons before marriage. Often, it refers to sexual sin of all kinds, whether committed by unmarried persons or by married persons. In Matthew 5:32 and in Matthew 19:9 “fornication” refers to illicit sexual activity on the part of a married person. In Ephesians 5:3 it is used broadly to include all forms of transgression against the seventh commandment. Moulton and Milligan’s *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament* explains “fornication” as “applied to unlawful sexual intercourse generally. It was a wider term than *moicheia* [adultery].”

Defending the explanation of “fornication” in Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9 as “extra-marital intercourse on the part

of the wife, which in practice is adultery,” the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* rejects the interpretation that makes “fornication” sexual sin prior to marriage, as though “fornication” in the New Testament always refers exclusively to sexual activity of the unmarried.<sup>1</sup>

The fornication against which Paul warns in 1 Corinthians 6 was intercourse with whores not only by the unmarried men of the Corinthian congregation, but also by the married men.

## FORNICATION IS COMMON

This was so common in the pagan world of Paul’s time, and especially in Corinth, that nothing was thought of it. It was accepted behavior like eating and drinking. For this reason the apostle had to insist on a radical difference between eating and fornicating: “Meats for the belly, and the belly for meats: but God shall destroy both it and them. Now the body is not for fornication, but for the Lord; and the Lord for the body” (1 Cor. 6:13). The prevalence of fornication among the heathen and the heathen attitude toward it of taking it for granted were indicated by the decision of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. This decision had to mention the sin of fornication, with certain matters of Christian liberty, as forbidden to the converts from heathendom.

In the fornicating world of that day, Corinth was notorious for sexual license. It was the San Francisco of that time. F. F. Bruce has written that Corinth’s “name became proverbial for sexual laxity. The verb *corinthiazesthai*, lit. ‘to play the Corinthian,’ was current from the fifth century BC in the sense of practising fornication.”<sup>2</sup>

As the decision of the Jerusalem Council made plain, it was a danger that Gentile converts to Christianity, having adopted the attitude of their society toward fornication, would carry

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1 Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, ed., Geoffrey W. Bromiley, trans. and ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964–1974), 6:592.

2 F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), 249.

that attitude with them into the church. They would then not view fornication as diametrically opposed to the Christian faith and life and as absolutely forbidden to disciples of Christ. Rather, they would regard it as something permitted to Christians and, therefore, would freely practice it. It was particularly the danger that these converts from heathendom would view fornicating as their freedom in Christ. This made it necessary that the apostle address the issue of Christian liberty in 1 Corinthians 6:12: “All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any.” Verses 13–20 make clear that fornicating is not a matter of Christian liberty. Fornicating is sin: “He that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body” (v. 18). It is a gross and grievous sin against the Lord Christ and his gospel.

This points out that the situation of those to whom the Holy Spirit addressed 1 Corinthians 7, with its background in the condemnation of fornication in chapter 6, was the same as the situation of the saints today. Christians today live in a world saturated with fornication. It is no different from eating, except that more effort is put forth to stir up the appetite for fornicating than for eating. The result is that, at best, the members of the churches are inclined to view fornication indulgently. At worst, they practice it as an activity for which the gospel of Christ gives them liberty. This is found in churches that are evangelical and Reformed. Baptized young people fornicate freely, if not boldly, all the while maintaining their membership in the churches and thinking of themselves as Christians. If it has not come to such a pass that married church members visit the whores or sleep with other men than their husbands, as their freedom in Jesus, married professing Christians do publicly practice fornication as a gospel-right by divorcing their mates and remarrying the object of their lust.

## FORNICATION IS CONDEMNED

The apostle of Christ breaks into this situation with the gospel’s uncompromising condemnation of fornication and sharp

warning against this sin. Here is evident both the moral purity of the gospel and its fearless courage, as well, of course, as the courage of the genuine preacher of the gospel. Christianity opposes the prevailing culture! The gospel is the sworn foe of sexual immorality! The true servant of the Lord makes no concessions to the fornicating age, offers no compromise with the world's thinking on fornication, and licenses no church member's fornication by appeal to the liberty of the gospel of grace.

The condemnation of fornication begins already in verses 9–11 of 1 Corinthians 6.

Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind,

Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.

And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.

Fornicators will not inherit the kingdom of God in the day of Christ. One specific form of fornication that, if impenitently continued in, will exclude those who have practiced it from the kingdom is homosexual activity (“effeminate...abusers of themselves with mankind”). In verse 11 the power of the gospel to cleanse men and women from fornication is extolled. It forgives all past sins of fornication, including homosexual sins (“but ye are justified”); and it breaks the ruling power of the sin of fornication (“but ye are sanctified”). Whether the gospel has the power to deliver those who have the perverse desire for people of their own sex, so that they crucify this desire and resolutely refuse to practice it, is not even a question in the church where the gospel is known. The “name of the Lord Jesus and...the Spirit of our God” have this power in every child of God who may have this unnatural desire, just

as they have this power in the other children of God who struggle with natural sexual lusts.

The condemnation of fornication, stated in verses 9–11, is fully worked out in 1 Corinthians 6:13–20. The starting point of the careful exposure of fornication as unlawful for the Christian is the fundamental truth that the body of the Christian shares in the redemption of Christ: “ye are bought with a price” (v. 20). Because the believer has been bought with the blood of Christ, body as well as spirit, his body belongs to God: “which are God’s” (v. 20). It follows that the body of the believer is “for the Lord [Jesus],” even as “the Lord [is] for the body” (v. 13). The believer’s body has the glorious, everlasting destiny of the resurrection (v. 14).

No less glorious is the present condition of the body. The believer’s body is the dwelling—the “temple”—“of the Holy Ghost” (v. 19). By this indwelling of the Spirit, who is the Spirit of Christ, the body is united to Christ so that the body as a whole and every member in particular, including the sexual organs, are “members of Christ” (v. 15).

The Christian is “joined unto the Lord [Jesus]” (v. 17), and this “joining” includes the body. The word in the Greek is *kollaoo*. It is the word translated “cleave” in Matthew 19:5, with reference to the one-flesh union of husband and wife in marriage, as originally revealed in Genesis 2:24: “A man... shall cleave unto his wife.” Every believer is joined to Christ with his body, because Christ cleaves to him, body as well as soul, in the mystery of the real, spiritual marriage (cf. Eph. 5:22–33).

This makes fornication an appalling, repulsive, almost unthinkable sin. The fornicating Christian unites the members of Christ with the whore: “Shall I then take the members of Christ, and make them the members of an harlot?” (1 Cor. 7:15).

There is no such thing as “casual sex.” According to verse 16, the fornicator is “*joined [kollaoo]* to an harlot.” The fornicator does not merely “have sex” with a whore (who can be the professional prostitute or the “easy mark” at school or the adulterous woman in the neighborhood). But in the sexual act

he is joined to her, cleaves to her, enters into a relationship with her that is something like the union of marriage.

This last is expressed when the apostle states that the fornicator becomes “one body” with the whore, on the ground (“for”) that God said that the “two...shall be one flesh” (v. 16). The apostle does not teach that sex with a whore constitutes marriage. Deliberately, he describes the relationship with the whore as “one *body*,” not as one *flesh*. Becoming one flesh is a marriage. Becoming one body is not. Nevertheless, there is a union that parodies that of marriage. Because fornication uses sex in sinning, sex that belongs strictly, exclusively, and significantly to marriage, sex that is at the heart of marriage’s unique union, every act of fornication involves a real, a close, and a significant union of the two. There is a shadow-union of marriage, a devilish counterpart to, and imitation of, marriage.

The horror is that the Christian does this with a body that is united to Christ so that now Christ is united to a whore through the fornicating Christian.

Against this, Paul reacts with his strongest expression of outrage and disgust: “God forbid” (v. 15). If the churches today are unable to make this “God forbid” their own, in their preaching and discipline, there is no love for Jesus Christ in them, nor any honor of the risen, all-glorious Lord.

## RUNNING FROM FORNICATION

Because of the utter “unbecomingness” of fornication for Christians and because of the prevalence and power of the temptation to fornicate, the apostle calls the saints, old and young, to “flee fornication” (v. 18)! This is a far stronger admonition than the demand not to commit fornication. Many sins the Christian ought to stand up to. This one even the holiest saint must run away from. The only way of conquering is the way of the most abject cowardice. A brave man or woman here is a fool.

The saint flees by avoiding whatever incites to fornication, whatever could conceivably lead to it, and whatever is remotely connected with it. This includes dangerous physical proximity

and contact, for example, dancing. Banned are all books, magazines, and pictures that present fornication as good and that stir up the passion of illicit sexual desire—a desire that is powerful enough without any artificial incitement. The English word *pornography* is derived from the Greek word for fornication, *porneia*, indicating that this shameful product of a debauched culture (which some professing Christians evidently suppose they have the liberty to enjoy) falls directly under the vehement denunciation of the apostle in 1 Corinthians 6. Prudent obedience to the command to flee fornication is a reason the Christian does not watch many programs on television and most of the movies. Indeed, it is a reason Christians ought seriously to consider not having a television set in their home. It is difficult to flee fornication when almost every program and every commercial trades on fornication and arouses unchaste thoughts and desires.

In addition, the child of God flees fornication by running into marriage. This is the connection between the warning against fornication in 1 Corinthians 6 and the advocacy of marriage in 1 Corinthians 7. To avoid fornication, let every saint marry.

## A UNIQUE WARNING

Before we look at chapter 7's instruction regarding sex in marriage, several observations on chapter 6's warning against sex outside of marriage are in order.

First, the warning is timely. This is so obvious to everyone that nothing more needs to be said about it.

Second, the warning is clear, sharp, and urgent.

Third, the warning is uniquely the warning *of the gospel*. It is a warning to believers and their holy children based on their status as redeemed, renewed saints in Christ. It is not a warning to all and sundry because fornication ruins society and because fornication exposes physical life to deadly diseases. But it is a warning to those whom Christ bought at the price of his blood and in whom the Holy Spirit has taken up his abode (and who know themselves as such), because

fornication dishonors their Lord Jesus, his Spirit, and his God. The question for the Christian, which alone has the power to keep him or her from the pleasure of fornication, is not shall I risk AIDS, or pregnancy, or disgrace? but shall I then take the members of Christ and make them the members of a whore?

This must be the approach of parents and churches with their young people. There is some place in this instruction for warning about the peculiar judgments of a holy God upon the body and earthly life of the fornicator. Proverbs 5 makes this plain. The father warns his son that if he fornicates with the strange woman he will “mourn at the last, when thy flesh and thy body are consumed” (v. 11). But the sex education of godly parents does not consist of recommending condoms to their sons and of helping their daughters obtain birth prevention pills. It is rather the teaching of the gospel, “Your body is for the Lord; therefore, glorify God in your body.”

Sex outside of marriage is forbidden Christians as the grossest form of dishonoring the Lord Jesus. Fornication makes a cuckold of Jesus. It joins the holy Jesus to a filthy whore.

This condemnation of fornication forms the backdrop of the apostle’s instruction concerning marriage in 1 Corinthians 7. The absolute, unqualified prohibition of sex outside marriage serves the legitimization, indeed the advocacy, of sex within marriage.





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# Pay the Debt

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*Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband...Defraud ye not one the other.*

*—1 Corinthians 7:3, 5*

The subject in 1 Corinthians 7 is marriage, specifically the behavior of Christians with regard to and in marriage. The apostle is led to this subject by practical questions concerning their marriage problems from the members of the church at Corinth. The first question had to do with sex. This is apparent from Paul's opening answer: "Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman" (v. 1).

Some Christians questioned whether Christianity did not really forbid marriage altogether and whether it did not require single life. They were of that opinion because marriage is so "fleshly," so "unspiritual," on account of the "touching" of sex. Their question went something like this: "Paul, would it not be good for us spiritual Corinthian saints to avoid marital relations entirely? Should not the single be commanded not to get married? And should not those of us who are married separate or arrange a 'Joseph marriage'?"

## SEXLESS MARRIAGE

A “Joseph marriage” is a marriage without sexual relations. The name is derived from the Roman Catholic description of the marriage of the mother of Jesus and her husband, Joseph. In the interests of their doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary (“*Virgo ante partum, in partu et post partum*,” “a virgin before birth, in birth, and after birth”), itself a doctrine intended to support and encourage the worship of Mary by Roman Catholics inasmuch as virginity is supposed to be inherently more holy than marriage, Rome teaches that Joseph and Mary never had sexual relations. “Sexual intercourse was not an essential element in marriage, which continued to be a full marriage even when sexual intercourse played no part. The marriage of Mary and Joseph was the ‘perfect marriage.’”<sup>1</sup>

Rome’s view of virginity as an intrinsically higher spiritual state than marriage is expressed in the Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, Twenty-Fourth Session, “Doctrine on the Sacrament of Matrimony,” canon 10: “If any one saith...that it is not better and more blessed to remain in virginity, or in celibacy, than to be united in matrimony: let him be anathema.”<sup>2</sup>

Mary’s perpetual virginity is confessed by Rome in many places. Article 9 of the Profession of the Tridentine Faith (1564) speaks of “the perpetual Virgin the Mother of God.”<sup>3</sup> The Apostolic Constitution of Pope Pius XII (1950), “*Munificentissimus Deus*,” declaring it to be Roman Catholic dogma that Mary was assumed into heaven, body and soul, calls Mary “the ever Virgin Mary”: “We pronounce, declare, and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma: that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory.”<sup>4</sup> In its “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” the

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1 Edward Schillebeeckx, *Marriage: Human Reality and Saving Mystery* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1965), 291.

2 Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 6th ed., 3 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1931; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 2:197.

3 *Ibid.*, 2:209.

4 Pope Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus* [Most Liberal, or more literally,

Second Vatican Council (1963–65), quoting the Canon of the Roman Mass, declares that “the faithful must also venerate the memory ‘above all of the glorious and perpetual Virgin Mary, Mother of our God and Lord Jesus Christ.’”<sup>5</sup>

Thomas Aquinas thinks it necessary to “abhor the error” that dares to assert “that Christ’s Mother, after His Birth, was carnally known by Joseph, and bore other children. For, in the first place, this is derogatory to Christ’s perfection... Secondly, this error is an insult to the Holy Ghost... Thirdly, this is derogatory to the dignity and holiness of God’s Mother... Fourthly, it would be tantamount to an imputation of extreme presumption in Joseph, to assume that he attempted to violate her.”<sup>6</sup> Mary’s perpetual virginity had been made part of the confession of the fifth ecumenical council, II Constantinople (AD 553): “the holy and glorious Mary, Mother of God and always a virgin.”<sup>7</sup>

There is no biblical evidence whatever for a perpetual virginity of Mary. Luke 1:27, 34 teach the virginity of Mary at the conception of Jesus, not a lifelong condition of the mother of Jesus. The scriptures refute the Roman teaching of Mary’s perpetual virginity and the fiction of the “Joseph marriage.” Matthew 1:25 implies that Joseph did “know,” that is, have sexual relations with, Mary after Jesus’ birth:

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Most Munificent God]: The definition by His Holiness, Pope Pius XII, of the dogma that Mary, the Virgin Mother of God, was assumed, body and soul, into the glory of heaven, trans. Joseph C. Fenton, S.T.D. (Washington, DC: National Catholic Welfare Conference, n.d.), 19.

- 5 Walter M. Abbott, ed., Joseph Gallagher, trans. and ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: The America Press, 1966), 86.
- 6 Third Part, Q 28, “Of the Virginity of the Mother of God,” Third Article, in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, vol. 2, *Containing Second Part of the Second Part*, QQ 1–189 and Third Part, QQ 1–90 (New York and other cities: Benziger Brothers, 1947), 2173–74. Thomas concluded that “we must therefore simply assert that the Mother of God, as she was a virgin in conceiving Him and a virgin in giving Him birth, so did she remain a virgin ever afterwards.”
- 7 Henry R. Percival, ed., *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, 2nd ser., ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, n.d.), 14:312.

“And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son.” To escape this implication, the Roman Catholic Bible translator Ronald Knox deliberately mistranslated: “And he had not known her when she bore a son, her firstborn.” Matthew 13:55–56 teaches that Joseph and Mary had four sons and at least two daughters after Mary gave birth to Jesus (cf. also Mark 3:31–35). This is offensive only to the church that is determined to break the first commandment by worshiping Mary and even then only if that church has a fundamental problem with the gospel’s message that sex as a “creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: For it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer” (1 Tim. 4:4–5).

## THE EVIL OF ASCETICISM

In Corinth, as in the early church generally, there was a tendency to disparage, and even forbid, marriage. The apostles had to contend with the morbid creation-denying and world-fleeing heresy of asceticism. The apostle fully analyzes and roundly damns this “doctrine of devils” in 1 Timothy 4:1–5. As 1 Timothy 4:3 shows, a characteristic feature of this anti-Christian philosophy is that it is always “forbidding to marry.” This found permanent expression in Roman Catholicism with its celibacy of the clergy as the implication of its teaching that marriage is intrinsically unspiritual and that the single life, therefore, is inherently more spiritual and more holy than marriage.

One of the things that Paul must do in this outstanding chapter on marriage is to teach the fundamental doctrine that marriage is lawful; pleasing to God; perfectly honorable for all Christians; and, as a rule, the necessary mode of life for all Christians, clergy and laity, if they wish to avoid fornication. He affirms God’s institution of marriage as a sexual union in creation (cf. Gen. 2:18–25). He reminds the saints of Christ’s approval of marriage in Matthew 19:3–12.

The apostle begins in 1 Corinthians 7:1 by conceding to the questioner that it is good for a man not to touch a woman.

That is, for an unmarried man to refrain from sexual relations by never marrying is both permissible and, under certain conditions that Paul will mention in verses 7–9, preferable. The man for whom it is good that he not touch a woman sexually is an unmarried man. It is good for him to remain single, not as though the single state is holier than the married state, much less as though the single state is holy in contrast to evil marriage, but in the sense that the single life is an excellent, useful way of life for some Christians.

Nevertheless, single life is not the rule for Christians, but the exception. Ordinarily, the will of God for Christians is marriage. The apostle, therefore, exhorts the members of the church to marry: “Let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband” (v. 2). The reason is “to avoid fornication” (v. 2). The increased sexual desire of male and female is satisfied in marriage. Marriage is the earthly solution to the temptation of fornication.

This seems a prosaic, even ignoble, reason for marrying. It is not that the young man and the young woman want to reflect the union of Christ and the church. It is not even that they are attracted by romantic love. They are to marry “on account of fornications.” Similarly, in verse 9, the apostle gives as the reason for marrying that for some who “cannot contain,” that is, control their sexual desire, it is “better to marry than to burn.”

Is the apostle in fact teaching that marriage is a “necessary evil,” as the early church fathers held?

What the apostle teaches elsewhere about marriage must fill out the total picture of marriage as presented by Paul. Particularly, what the apostle teaches about marriage in Ephesians 5:22–33 must not be forgotten when one reads 1 Corinthians 7. The apostle who elsewhere is idealistic about the marriage of Christians, proclaiming it in the lofty terms of a symbol of the covenant between Christ and the church, is here very practical, down to earth, and indeed earthy in his description of marriage. Nor is this earthy description of Christian marriage unworthy of the apostle, or in the least at odds with the idealistic description in Ephesians 5:22–33. There is a perfectly healthy realism about the word of God.

It is practical wisdom to recognize the power of the sexual nature and desire. It is an honoring of God's work of creation to call Christians to marriage as not only the remedy for sexual burning, but also the goal of the sexual nature of men and women as creatures of God.

The implied warning to those members of the church who deliberately refuse to marry for wrong reasons should not be overlooked. Some decline to marry because they enjoy the earthly freedom of single life and shrink from the responsibilities of marriage. The warning is that they are likely to fall, or run, into fornication. As a rule, the alternative to marriage is not celibacy but fornication. In view of the dreadful wickedness of fornication, as pointed out at the end of 1 Corinthians 6, this alone is good reason to marry.

### A CELIBATE CLERGY?

Disregarding this clear warning, the Roman Catholic Church has forbidden marriage to all its clergy. Rome, therefore, is directly responsible before God for the fornication that has always been and is today endemic to their clergy from priest to pope. Even the secular media in recent times have been noting the widespread sexual immorality, especially the homosexuality, of the Roman clergy. Many instances of sexual immorality are dragged into the light of public knowledge. Much more remains hidden until the things done in secret are publicized in the final judgment. And this does not yet take into consideration those who, although they may refrain from sexual relations with others, "burn," to use the language of 1 Corinthians 7:9, that is, are constantly on fire with sexual passion.

This wickedness of the Roman clergy should surprise no one who has read 1 Corinthians 7:2. It is one of the truly humorous aspects of church history that Roman Catholic polemicists rail against the Protestant Reformation as an unchaste movement because the reformers advocated marriage for the ministers. Luther, who well knew the uncleanness of the Roman clergy, ironically called attention to the Roman Catholic position in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 7:

But even though one were to defile a hundred married women, corrupt a hundred virgins, and keep a hundred whores at one time, still this man can be a priest, become or remain a priest—so remarkably holy is this priesthood! No sin or shame is so great or so widespread in the whole world as to prevent a man from being or becoming a priest, except the state of holy matrimony...This one work of God has no place in the priesthood.

Dropping the irony, Luther went on to judge the Roman law of the celibacy of the clergy in sober truth:

And what do they expect to achieve by this, if not to defame the divine institution of marriage and pave the way for fornication throughout the world? And this is what is happening before our very eyes.<sup>8</sup>

John Calvin commented similarly on the Roman Catholic charge against the reformers that “we have stirred up something like a Trojan War on account of women.” Calvin was referring to the Roman assertion “that Luther and others, urged on by the itching of the flesh, not only created the freedom of marriage for themselves but also dragged a multitude of priests, monks, and nuns into the same allurements.” Noting significantly that he would say nothing about the “unnatural lusts” that had free play among the Roman clergy, Calvin responded, “Certainly, to put it at the lowest, it is not necessary to go outside the papacy for those who like women.” This is about as much humor as Calvin allowed himself in his writings.<sup>9</sup>

It is better to marry.

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8 Hilton C. Oswald, ed., *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1973), 28:24.

9 John W. Fraser, trans., *Concerning Scandals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), 102–6. For an account of the Roman Catholic polemic against the Reformation as a sensual movement, confer James Atkinson, *Martin Luther: Prophet to the Church Catholic* (Exeter, Devon: The Paternoster Press, 1983), 3–20.

## THE GOODNESS OF SEX

Within marriage, sex with its intense pleasures is good. As the Holy Spirit declares in Hebrews 13:4, in honor of his own work, sex fully partakes of the honorableness of marriage: “Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge.” Christians may enjoy sex with full right and perfect freedom. However, also here, a certain distinctive, uniquely Christian viewpoint must prevail.

This is the remarkable instruction of verses 3–5 of 1 Corinthians 7.

Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband.

The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife.

Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency.

## THE DUTY OF SEX

Whereas prior to marriage it is good that a man not touch a woman sexually, after a man has married, abstinence is no longer good. Some married Corinthians, it will be remembered, were of a mind that the abstinence of married Christians would be a good thing because the sexual relationship is beneath the dignity of truly spiritual people. The apostle does not so much refute this notion as demolish it by the startling assertion that sexual intercourse is a *duty* for married Christians. Sex is a “debt” that the husband owes his wife and a “debt” that the wife owes her husband. This is clearly implied by the admonition in verse 5, “Defraud ye not one the other.” One defrauds another by not giving him what is owed him.



That sex in marriage is a debt is expressly stated by another reading of verse 3 than that which appears in the King James Bible. The King James has, “Let the husband render unto the wife *due benevolence*.” The reader probably understands this to be a general kindness of word and deed that is obligatory upon husbands and wives. The other reading has, bluntly, “Let the husband render *the debt*.” With this reading, there can be no misunderstanding the apostle’s meaning: Within marriage, sex is a debt that each owes the other.

The meaning of the text is the same regardless of which reading is adopted. If we retain the reading of the King James Version, the reference of “benevolence” is not to kindness in general. The mention of “benevolence” in verse 3 occurs in the context of the treatment of the sexual aspect of marriage. Verse 1 establishes the subject of a man’s touching a woman. Verse 2 requires marriage to avoid fornication. Verse 4 gives husbands and wives authority over the body of their mates. Verse 5 forbids married persons to withhold themselves from their mates sexually. In this context “benevolence” cannot refer to kindness generally but must refer to the sexual activity. This is a particular act of kindness springing from the love that the husband has for his wife and that the wife has for her husband. Also on the reading of the King James Version, this sexual kindness is “due,” that is, owed—a debt.<sup>10</sup>

In sexual intercourse, each “pays off” the debt he or she owes the other. The word in verse 3 translated “render” literally means “pay off that which is owed.” The attitude of the married Christian, therefore, may not be that sex is a favor that he or she graciously bestows upon the other. Sex is a marital duty. Now it may be more than a duty. Indeed, it

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10 The Greek word translated “benevolence” by the King James Version in 1 Corinthians 7:3 is *eunoia*. Although the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* does not even consider the word as appearing in 1 Corinthians 7:3, since the *TDNT* recognizes the other reading as the correct reading of the text, it does, interestingly, note that *eunoia* is used “sometimes for sexual union,” inasmuch as it can refer specifically to the “love between husband and wife.” References are given to secular authors. Cf. *TDNT*, 4:972.

ought to be more than a duty. The Song of Solomon sings sex as a delightful pleasure that the husband and wife enjoy. But sex may not be less than a duty.

Paul is opposing a false and wicked spirituality that is not unknown in the church. Husbands and wives have left their mates in order to serve God in a more spiritual vocation. Or they live together, but one or the other refuses sexual relations because sex is carnal.

At the same time, the word corrects believing men and women who neglect, or refuse, to live sexually with their mates for all kinds of other reasons. There are marriages, there are occasions in marriage, there are such strains upon marriages that make this command crucially important for the salvation of the marriages of the saints.

The ground of the exhortation "Pay off the debt" is that married people now have authority over each other's body. This is verse 4: "The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband," etc. "Hath...power" is literally "has...authority," "has...rights in." The husband's body is no longer exclusively his own. It is now also his wife's. The same is true of the body of the married woman: it belongs also to the husband.

Underlying this assertion of mutual rights in each other's body is the fundamental truth about marriage laid down by the Creator in the beginning: "And they shall be one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). Husband and wife are no longer two but one. So intimately close are they, such is the divine fusion, that there are no longer two bodies but one male/female body. Such is the union of marriage that neither may say about even his or her body "mine." But each must say "ours."

Because sexual intercourse is a debt owed, inasmuch as married persons have authority over each other's body, for one to withhold himself or herself from the other sexually is "defrauding" (v. 5). This is the same word that is used in 1 Corinthians 6:7 of the stealing of property or money. The husband who allows himself to lose interest in sexual relations with his wife or the wife who always has a headache is a thief, a defrauder. They are in a class with all deadbeats who do not pay their debts and thus steal from those to whom the debts are owed.

## SEXUAL ABSTINENCE IN MARRIAGE

The one exception to the prohibition of abstaining from sexual relations is “with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer” (v. 5). Abstaining must be mutually agreed upon, not unilaterally imposed. It must be only “for a time.” It may not be permanent. Nor may it be an indefinite period. The limit must be set. It must be for a spiritual purpose: “Fasting and prayer.”

Despite the noble spiritual purpose, the time of abstinence may not be prolonged: “And come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency.” “Incontinency” is literally “lack of self-control.” Satan will tempt married persons who abstain for too long a time. One or the other may prove to be unable to restrain himself or herself so that he or she falls into fornication.

The apostle is a realist. He knows the power of the sexual desire. He knows the weakness of the saints. He knows that the great enemy of the people of God is on the prowl seeking to devour them by means of the sexual desire. Satan has an interest in the sexual behavior of the saints as well as in their doctrinal beliefs. He places his agents in the bedrooms of the Christians as well as in the theological halls of the churches.

The striking exception to the rule of living together sexually, consisting of a short period of fervent prayer, brings out two intriguing practical truths about the sexual relationship of married Christians. First, such is the purity, the goodness, the honorableness of sex that it can easily and without any embarrassment consort with prayer. The husband and wife get up from their knees, where they have been worshipping God intensely, to renew their sexual relationship with equal intensity.

Second, the exception in favor of prayer and fasting clearly indicates that the spiritual aspect of the shared lives of married Christians—their worship of the God and Father of Jesus Christ—must both be present in marriage and have precedence over the physical, sexual aspect. The same is taught in 1 Peter 3:7, where the apostle Peter gives as the purpose of

a husband's living rightly with his wife "that your prayers be not hindered."

How many believing husbands and wives have recently abstained from sexual relations for a time in order to give themselves more ardently to prayer? How many have ever done this?

The ignoring of the provision that sexual relations be interrupted for "prayer and fasting" should not lightly be laughed off. Christian marriage is in dire straits in the twenty-first century. In many evangelical churches the rate of the breaking up of marriages is the same as in the world around the churches. And the rate is high, scandalously high. Invariably, the breakup of a marriage means that one or both of the married persons has fallen, or will fall, to fornication. But the threat to marriage in the churches is not mainly sexual. It is spiritual. For solid, healthy, Christ-honoring, and, yes, happy marriages, the spiritual life shared by husband and wife is basic—the life of worship, of the reading and study of scripture, of seeking to do the will of God, of dealing at once with sin's influence upon the marriage and home. And for this vibrant, strong spiritual life, prayer is necessary, prayer intensified, perhaps, by temporary abstinence from food and from sex.

## IMPORTANT IMPLICATIONS

This inspired instruction about sex in marriage has several important implications.

First, the apostle of our Lord limits sexual intercourse strictly to the marriage relationship: "Let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband" (v. 2). Outside of marriage, every sexual relationship is fornication.

Second, within marriage, sex is good and of great importance. It is not shameful, but neither is it of trifling importance. It is of great importance both for the extremely important avoidance of fornication and for the extremely important expression and enjoyment of the unique intimacy of the marriage bond. The sexual union of husband and wife is of great importance altogether apart from producing children.

Procreation is not the only purpose, nor even the primary purpose, of sex. Much less is it true, as some of the church fathers thought, that sex is redeemed and justified by the begetting of children. That which God has made and the gospel has blessed needs no “redemption” and “justification.”

Third, the gospel has its own unique viewpoint regarding the activity of sex in marriage. Relentlessly, the gospel brings its demand that the Christian live not for himself but for his neighbor in the sexual relationship. Husband and wife must view themselves as belonging to the other. Each then must have the concern and determination to please the other, rather than exclusively, or even mainly, to gratify himself or herself. This is the force of verse 3: “Let the husband pay off the debt owed to the wife...likewise also the wife...” This viewpoint on sex is the exact opposite of the viewpoint of human nature: “Let the husband take from the wife what he can get; likewise, let the wife gratify herself by the husband.” The gospel’s viewpoint on sex is that one gives rather than gets and that one pleases the other rather than gratifies himself.

Failure to practice this is the cause of serious trouble in marriage. The husband ignores the sexual needs and desires of his wife, is inconsiderate of her different make-up as a female, and pleases himself by means of her. He uses her. Or the wife, giving no thought to her husband’s sexual wants, regulates their sexual relationship simply by her own feelings. She forgets him.

Fourth, although husband and wife have authority over each other’s body, this authority must be exercised in love, as all the rights of Christians must be exercised. Neither may abuse or force or humiliate the other. In Ephesians 5:28 the apostle calls on the believing husband to nourish and cherish his wife. Implied is that married couples speak freely about the sexual aspect of their marriage and, particularly, about the pleasing of each other in the sexual relationship.

Fifth, this marvelous intimacy—a good gift to Christians from the Creator and a gift sanctified to the use and enjoyment of the saints by the Redeemer—points to the essential truth

about marriage, namely, that marriage is a one-flesh bond.

But before we consider this, we must hear what the apostle of Christ says about single life.