

Paul's Issues on Marriage and the Frequency of Sex: A Reader-Response Criticism of 1 Corinthians 7: 1-16

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ABSTRACT

1 Corinthians 7:1-16, especially verse 5 which speaks about the frequency of sex in marriage, has been interpreted variedly using different hermeneutical approaches. This study which uses the Reader-Response Criticism methodology opines that, there is an inherent tension between married couples regarding the frequency of sex. Paul understood how powerful sexual needs are. And his advice that, husbands and wives should not ignore sexual relations for a long time lest Satan may tempt them, is in line with the teaching and behavior of Jesus who treated the physical body as a very important part of the whole person. The paper recommends that Paul's advice, when taken seriously, will prevent some of the issues in marriages that are caused by the frequency of sex. His advice is prevention again lust among married couples.

Introduction

God created the universe; he sustains it and he cares for the whole of humankind, and has given us the Bible as a guide-book by which to live. The Bible tells us how to conduct ourselves in relation to God and to the rest of creation. And since God is timeless, the wisdom of the Bible is timeless too. The Bible is not only relevant to individuals; it is relevant to society and culture. Christianity is not just for private behavior and

public worship, it also a world system which competes with other world systems. It argues on more than equal terms with Marxism, Existentialism, Nationalism, and Capitalism.¹ Each of these systems is based on its own particular view of human behavior, and all have their own moral standards.

The Ghanaian Christian believes that since the Christian teaching is true, it will be more useful and relevant than any human system or cultural norms.² In other words, the Bible offers the twenty-first century man and woman the things they are longing for in human existence.

On the other hand, culture describes the many ways human beings express themselves in living. The way a group of people dress, what they eat and do not eat, they ways marriage and of worship, all constitute aspects of their culture. According to Collier, the most dominant of our cultural 'paradigms' or intellectual frameworks of thought are given to us by the discipline of economics.³ So if cultures are ways of living articulated in language, rituals and institutions, then our modern culture is 'economic' culture because our lives are dominated by the rituals of 'getting and spending.' Arbuckle says, to expect a human person to define culture is like expecting a fish to define the water in which it lives, "As water is to fish, so culture is to human person."⁴

Warfield et al in discussing marriage as a divine institution, constituted at the beginning before the origin of human society indicates that, God implanted social affections and desires in the nature of the human person.⁵ God made male and female, and ordained marriage as the indispensable condition of the continuance of the race (Gen 1:27, 28).

¹ J Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity*, Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1986, p.12.

² See Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity*, p.12.

³ J Collier, "Contemporary Culture and the Role of Economics" in H. Montefiore (ed), *The Gospel and Contemporary Culture*, Guildford: Biddles Ltd, 1992.

⁴ G Arbuckle, *Earthing the Gospel: An Inculturation Handbook for the Pastoral Worker*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990, p.1.

⁵ B B Warfield and G T Purves, *Illustrated Davis Dictionary of the Bible*, Nashville, Tennessee: Royal Publishers Inc., 1973, p. 498.

He implanted social affections and desires in man's nature. He made marriage an ennobling influence, powerfully contributing to the development of a complete life in man and woman.⁶ He declared that it is not good for man to be alone and provided a help meet for him (Gen 2:18). Abstinence from marriage is commendable at the call of duty (Matt 19:12; 1 Cor 7:8, 26), but its austere ban is a sign of departure from the faith (1 Tim 4:3). Monogamy is the divine ideal because God established marriage as a union between one man and one woman (Gen 2:18-24; Matt 19:5; 1 Cor 6:16). He preserves the number of males practically equal to the number of females in a nation.⁷

God has indicated the permanence of marriage by making the growth of affection between husband and wife, as the years pass, to be a natural process, invariable under normal conditions. Moral ends require that the relation be permanent. Therefore, marriage should not be dissolved by any legitimate act of man. It is dissolved by death (Rom 7:2, 3) or may be dissolved on account of adultery (Matt 19:3-9).

The gospel was brought to the city of Corinth, the chief city of Achaia, within twenty years of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Paul was the first to plant the Gospel there (1 Cor 3:6 and 4:15), and he watched the growth of the church with intense personal interest.⁸ Corinth became a natural centre for trade and a convenient halting-place for travelers moving east and west.⁹ As such, it was a cultural diverse city that was made up of Greeks, Roman colonists, and Jews. There were peculiar difficulties including that of marriage which Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians 7.

⁶ Warfield and Purves, *Illustrated Davis Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 498.

⁷ F A Dolphyne on the other hand, looks at the African context and defines marriage as a union between two families, rather than between two individuals and considers it as very important in the African societies. See F. A. Dolphyne, *The Emancipation of Women*, 1991, Accra: Ghana Universities Press, p. 1-2.

⁸ F Davidson, M A Stibbs and E F Kevan (eds.), *The New Bible Commentary*, London: The Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1965.

⁹ F F Bruce, H L, Ellison and G C D Howley (eds.), *New International Bible Commentary*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978.

This study is an interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:1-16, using the Reader-Response Criticism. According to Stanley Fish, it is a general term for those kinds of modern criticism and literary theory that focus on the responses of readers to literary works, rather than on the works themselves considered as self-contained entities.¹⁰ It is not a single agreed theory so much as a shared concern with a set of problems involving the extent and nature of readers' contribution to the meanings of literary works, approached from various positions including those of structuralism, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and hermeneutics. The common factor is a shift from the description of texts in terms of their inherent properties to a discussion of the production of meanings within the reading process. The reader-response criticism approach may arouse, shape, and guide a reader's response, and as such, expectations may be violated or fulfilled, satisfied or frustrated.

A Reader-Response Criticism of 1 Corinthians 1:1-16

According to H House Wayne,¹¹ Paul knew of the problems within the Corinthian congregation by two means. One was the report from the house of Chloe. From this Christian household, he learned about the divisions in the church, the immorality (1 Cor 5:1-13), the lawsuits against one another (1 Cor 6:1-1), and indiscriminating sexual behavior (1 Cor 6:12-20). Second, Paul apparently heard from the Christians at Corinth themselves.¹² Although Paul seriously addresses the subject of marriage and the mutual duties of man and wife, his preference is celibacy. This can be deduced from 1 Corinthians 7: 1, 7, 8, 9, 27b, 38b.

¹⁰ S. Fish, *Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics*, New York: McGraw-Hill. 1970, p. 21.

¹¹ H H Wayne, *The Role of Women in Ministry Today*, Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 1990.

¹² Perhaps in a letter which he specifically addressed to the Corinthian church. Although the New Testament only contains two letters to the Corinthians, the evidence from the letters themselves is that he wrote at least four: (1) 1 Cor 5:9 "I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people"

The reasons for this life-style: the prevailing circumstances (1 Cor 7: 26, 29), undivided devotion to Christ (1 Cor 7: 32, 34, 35), and freedom from physical necessity (1 Cor 7: 37). Recognizing its practical necessity, Paul countenances marriage (1 Cor 7:2), stipulating the mutual responsibilities of husband and wife and the relation of these to their spiritual lives (1 Cor 7: 5). The question we ask ourselves is: Is Paul running away from the problems in marriage or should everyone also run away from it? If so, how does humankind fulfill the procreation mandate? Perhaps Paul is answering their questions within the context of their attitudes then and their circumstances of the day.

In 1 Corinthians 7:1-16, Paul begins to answer the issues the Corinthians raised in their letter to him. His concern is to set forth arguments that are based on how the Corinthians perceived women and men. It is very surprising because he normally discusses issues with the community through its male members. Brassler, thinks that women were possibly prominently involved in raising questions about some of these issues, which forced Paul to come out of his normal habit of addressing a community exclusively through its male members.¹³ It is in this chapter, for example, that the Christian kinship term “sister” is paired with “brother” (1 Cor 7:15).

Paul begins his comments with an unexpected statement that defines the real problem at hand to be sex and not marriage: “It is well for a man not to touch a woman” (1 Cor 7:1). He informs them that marriage, and the comforts and satisfactions of that state, are by divine wisdom prescribed for preventing fornication (1 Cor 7: 2). To avoid fornication, ‘let every man,’ says Paul, ‘have his own wife and every

(NIV) refers to an early letter, sometimes called the “warning letter.” (2) 1 Corinthians. (3) The “Severe Letter.” Paul refers to an earlier “letter of tears” in 2 Cor 2:3-4 and 7:8. 1 Corinthians does not match that description; so this “letter of tears” may have been written between 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians. (4) 2 Corinthians. (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, accessed, 24/04/14.

¹³ J Brassler, “1 Corinthians” in C. Newman and S. Riings (eds.) *The Women's Bible Commentary*, Westminster: John Knox Press, 1992, p. 322.

woman her own husband;' that is, men and women should marry, and confine themselves to their own mates.¹⁴ And, when they are married, let each render to each other due respect (verse 3), and perform their marital duty. Here Paul is giving advice concerning the married state. A man and a woman joined together in marriage have a duty to consider the bodily needs of each other, which he says is a 'debt' (*opheilē*), that they owe each other; that is, the duty or the responsibility of the couple to have sex together because they are joined as husband and wife by virtue of marriage. The Greek word *apodidotō* in this verse indicates the normal condition, that is, the mutual paying of a debt which in this context means the couple having sex together. Mutual giving of oneself to one's spouse does not mean inferiority. The relationship is clarified further in verse 4, where the same statement is projected separately of both husband and wife, demonstrating their equality.

The phrase 'does not belong' (*ouk exousinazei*) in 1 Corinthians 7: 4 means that they do not have the right or power to use their own bodies at will. In verse 5, the command, translated literally as 'Do not deprive each other' (*mē apostereite allēlous*) may be translated, 'Do not defraud, rob, steal, deny, or refuse one another;' it has a continuous and repeated sense. According to Marsh, it suggests that married couples in Corinth were refraining from intercourse on the grounds of mistaken asceticism. Only a limited period of abstinence by agreement, for special devotions, is permissible. Clearly then, procreation is not the sole purpose of intercourse. 'Come together again' (*ētee pi to auto palin*) (v.5b) is suggestive of something far more frequent, regular and intimate. In 1 Corinthians 7: 6 'I say this' (*legō touto*) refers to the preceding 5 verses. Marriage is permitted by concession, but is not a command for all.

¹⁴ Here, Paul, as a realist and not a theorist, was not reflecting on a low view of marriage, but the moral conditions of Corinth. His attitude is defined in Eph. 5:21-33, where he states that each man each woman should have his own husband and wife. This is a clear statement of monogamy.

1 Corinthians 7: 7. 'Each has his own gift' (*akastos echei idion charisma ek theou*) means that like marriage, celibacy is a special gift from God.¹⁵ In 1 Corinthians 7: 5 'do not refuse one another except perhaps by agreement for a season' means 'do not refuse to have sexual intercourse. So Paul clearly teaches that Christian husbands and wives should use their bodies, each for the sake of the other.

As indicated earlier, there were some false teachers who taught that the spiritual part of a person was important and that the physical part was not. Perhaps there were some Christian husbands and wives who said, 'Now that we are true spiritual Christians, we can only have spiritual intercourse. So Paul said, 'Do not refuse....' In saying this, he was following the teaching and behavior of Jesus, who treated the physical body as a very important part of the whole person. He did not want to separate the physical part from the spiritual. He came to bring 'wholeness' to people. That is why some people criticized him.¹⁶

However, there is misunderstanding over the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:5 According to Hargreaves, the verse means that:

- Paul was against parents controlling the number of children which they have. But Paul who was expecting the coming of Jesus very soon could not have intended to give guidance to all future generation on the subject of birth control. In fact Christian parents are responsible for controlling very carefully the number of children they have because the Bible encourages parents to nurture them.¹⁷
- Paul taught that Christians should have intercourse in order to have children, and not in order to enjoy each other's bodies. But

¹⁵ *Charisma* in this context is also used for gifts of the Spirit in 1 Cor. 12.

¹⁶ For example, he was asked, 'why do your disciples not fast?' (Mark 2:18), and called him 'a glutton' (Luke 7:34).

¹⁷ J Hargreaves, *A Guide to 1 Corinthians*, London: Camelot Press Ltd., 1978, p.79.

Paul did not say sexual intercourse is a sign of two people sharing life and the joy which comes from it is a gift from God.¹⁸

I do not agree with Hargreaves' arguments on both points, because the passage does not put that way. "Except for a season" in verse 5 is a reference Paul makes to a Jewish custom, by which husbands and wives did not have intercourse on the Day of Atonement. So in this verse, he probably meant any plan by which husband and wife agreed, for example to put aside the night for prayer. However, he said that it was 'unwise' for married couples to withhold sexual intercourse for a long time 'lest Satan tempt'. Husband and wife should soon 'come together again.' If they remained apart for too long, one of them might say, 'I could not pray, I spent all the time struggling against the wish for intercourse.' Or one of them might be tempted during this 'season' to have intercourse with someone else, which can lead to a lot of problems emotionally and spiritually. Paul evidently understood how powerful sexual needs can be. Does Paul who prefers to celibacy qualifies to offer such advice, or was he married before his ministry?

In 1 Corinthians 7:6, Paul say, 'I say this... not of command.' This refers to what Paul had suggested in 1 Corinthians 7:5. It means, 'I do not say that you should abstain from sexual intercourse. I am telling you to do so only if you both agree that there is a good reason for abstaining. He did not want anyone to think that he regarded the physical activity of intercourse between husband and wife as wrong even though elsewhere he appears to suggest otherwise. 1 Corinthians 7: 7a reads, 'I wish that all were as I myself am.' This could mean, 'I wish that you were all unmarried, as I am.' But it is more like, Paul is saying, 'I wish that you were all as free as I am to make the right choice, to remain unmarried if you believe that is right. Here, can we say that those who marry cannot have time for God?

¹⁸ Hargreaves, *A Guide to 1 Corinthians*, p.79.

In 1 Corinthians 7: 7b Paul says 'each has his own special gifts from God.' The meaning is, 'God has given to each of you the gift of his grace which is suited to your own situation. For example if you are unmarried he has given the gifts which an unmarried person needs. Whatever situation you are in, you can rely on him to meet your need.

1 Corinthians 7: 9 reads 'It is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.' As we have already indicated, Paul wrote this because there were unmarried Christians in Corinth who could not control themselves and so yield indiscriminate sexual relations. Some people had told them that: it was not 'spiritual' to get married; and that the end of the world was coming soon; and it was too late to get married. So some of them may have intercourse with prostitutes and strangers, to satisfy their physiological needs. This will be dangerous and scary. Elizabeth Fiorenza views Paul's advice to be free from marriage bond as a "frontal assault on the intentions of existing law and the general cultural ethos, especially since it was given to people who lived in urban centres of the Roman Empire."¹⁹ Paul's advice to women to remain unmarried was a severe infringement of the right of the *paterfamilias* since, according to Roman law; a woman remained under the tutorship of her father and family, even when she married.' Fiorenza continues her argument by saying that Paul's advice was to widows who were not necessarily "old" - because girls were usually married between twelve and fifteen years of age. Thus Paul's advice offered a possibility for "ordinary" women to become independent.²⁰ At the same time, it produced disagreement for the Christian community in its interaction with society.

Paul's theological argument that those who marry are "divided" and not as devoted to the affairs of the Lord as the unmarried, indirectly limited married women to the bonds of the patriarchal family. Paul may

¹⁸ Hargreaves, *A Guide to 1 Corinthians*, p.79.

¹⁹ E Fiorenza, *In memory of her - A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, London: SCM Press 1983, p. 224.

²⁰ Fiorenza, *In memory of her - A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, p. 225.

have been thinking about the married woman having to serve both God and the husband and therefore disqualified married women theologically as less engaged missionaries and less committed Christians. So, we ask ourselves, by serving our fellow humans, which us an important factor in marriage, are we not in a way serving God even in marriage? One can also look at it this way, that by serving our fellow humans it may create a breach between the married woman concerned about the husband and family, and the unmarried woman who is pure and holy and therefore may receive every advantage of virginity. The fact remains that if you remain single you are not a better Christian than the married one; it actually depends on the context.

Christians in Paul's time were too confident of their own powers. They were living in a city where there were a great many temptations. Hargreaves, interpreting the situation in Corinth says that unmarried people, who thought that if one remained single, one would be a better Christian, could not stand these temptations and so fell prey to promiscuity.²¹ Hargreaves' interpretation based on a background study of Corinth is insightful. Interpreting marriage in Africa, Oduyoye looks at Western women, some African men, and even some African women interpretation of the ceremonies leading up to marriage in terms of trade - where the women are thought as "sold into marriage."²² This is where elaborate exchanges of gifts are demanded from the man. Some men believe after paying this, the woman had therefore been bought and is theirs. According to Oduyoye, feminist voices in Africa insist that they are intended to emphasize the worth of women, to provide community participation and social witness to the coming together of the two people and so I agree with her that it should not be taken as an economic transaction in which a man buys a woman and she sometimes has to

²¹ Hargreaves, *A Guide to I Corinthians*, p. 78.

²² M Oduyoye, "African Marriage" in E Guibelini, *Paths of African Theology*, London: SCM Press. 1994, p. 168.

suffer some domestic violence.²³ Fiorenza wonders how Paul could have made such a theological point when he had Priscilla as his friend and knew other missionary couples that were living examples, and could not see that his theology was wrong.

Moreover, in some cultures like the Ghanaian one, women, especially those whose husbands are not strong Christians, tend to find it difficult to be devoted and committed to missionary work because their time and energy is taken up with hard physical work. Therefore, Paul's argument could be considered valid to some extent. Nevertheless, a woman can be a very good missionary for God in her own house, because she sets an example for her family through her life and action, which sends a more powerful message than simply talking about God. An example can be Susana, John Wesley's mother, who was a great mentor to her children. In the Bible, Lois and Eunice helped Timothy to become a great Christian Leader. When the potential of women to influence others is considered, Paul's argument seems narrow, because he does not mention the important role a Christian woman plays within the family.

Paul argued also that the married woman, especially to an unbeliever, had a potential of influencing the unbeliever. As one continues to look at the marriage rules, Paul deals with specific classes, those without marriage ties (1 Cor 7: 8, 9, 10). 'I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, to those in a state of virginity or widowhood, it is good for them if they abide even as me.' The guidance is a restatement of 1 Corinthians 7:1 and 2. 'The unmarried' (*tois agamois*), perhaps refers to men-bachelors and widowers. The case of virgins is looked at in 1 Corinthians 7: 25-38. Leon Morris maintains that the term includes all not bound by the unmarried state. "Stay unmarried, as I am' (verse 8). The verb 'stay' (*meinōsin*) is an aorist, and it suggests a permanent and final decision. The suggestion that Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin and therefore must have been married is hard to believe. It is by no means

²³ Oduyoye, "African Marriage" in E. Guibelini, *Paths of African Theology*, p. 168.

certain that he was a member, nor is it certain that every member of the Sanhedrin in the period before A.D. 70 was married.

But if Paul had once been married, he could now have been a widower, or his wife may have left him at his confession. 'But if they cannot contain, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with lust' (verse 9). This is God's remedy for lust. The fire may be quenched by some of the means he has appointed, meeting the sexual needs of married partners, but not by masturbation. And marriage, with all its conveniences, is much better than to burn with impure and lustful desires. This makes marriage honorable because God Himself instituted it and wants it to be pure and clean. On the other hand, when one looks at Paul's commands on sexual relationship within marriage, however mutual they seem to be, they are based on concern for self-control (1 Cor 7: 2, 5, 36, 37). Moreover, Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:10-16 gives them direction in a case which must be very frequent in that age of the world, especially among the Jewish convert. In general, he tells them that marriage, by Christ's command, is for life; and therefore those who are married must not think of separation.

'The wife must not depart from the husband...the husband put away his wife' (verse 10). This means that there should not be divorce in marriage. In verse 11, Paul writes, 'I give charge, not I but Lord, that the wife should not separate from her husband.' Here, it seems that the Christians in Corinth had put another question to Paul, 'should married Christians cease to live as husband and wife in order to prepare themselves for the coming of Jesus?' So how about 'Borger' marriages in Ghana where a woman stays for twenty years without seeing her husband who is perhaps in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. Can she have some 'interim husband' or remarry to quench her sexual needs? Paul's answer is found in 1 Corinthians 7: 10-12: 'No, they should not. What Jesus said about marriage applies to you.' In view of the reply, one can note the following:

- That Paul based his reply on what 'the Lord' had said. This probably refers to Jesus' words according to Mark 10:9: 'What God has joined together, let no man put asunder.' Paul had not read Mark's Gospel, which was written ten years after he wrote to

the Corinthians-but it must be that Christians had handed down by word of mouth some words of Jesus which contained the teaching, 'No divorces'.

- Paul may not have known the rather different teaching which Matthew has recorded. In Matthew 19:9 we read-'Whoever divorces his wife except for unchastity, and marries commits adultery'. The problem is how do people deal with the question of unchastity? Should marriage be a do and die affair?

1 Corinthians 7: 14 reads: 'The unbelieving husband has been sanctified through the wife.' This meets the fear of the Christian partner that the believer is going to be defiled in terms of 1 Corinthians 6:15 where it is stated. But there is nothing unholy in such a marriage where the unbeliever decides to stay with the Christian partner. Such consecration has nothing to do with personal consecration as understood in terms of conversion and salvation, but of sanctification of the unbeliever for the purpose of the marriage union. On the analogy of whatever touches the altar shall be holy (Exo 29:37; Lev. 6:18), the unbelieving husband, in becoming one flesh with his believing partner, is sanctified in the wife for the purpose of marriage. On this basis the children of such a marriage are also not unclean (*akatharta*), a word used for ceremonial impurity, but the very reverse; meaning that as far as the marriage is concerned the children are holy, that is, clean. Verse 16 reads: 'How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?' It is the plain truth that those who are so near in a relation seek the salvation of those to whom they are related.

Paul according to Fiorenza bases his argument not on the social order, but on a word of the Lord that prevents divorce.²⁴ The eschatological ideal of Jesus' revelation on marriage is here turned into an instruction or perhaps command of Jesus against divorce.

²⁴ Fiorenza, *In memory of her - A feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, p. 221.

Conclusion

The study has argued that there is an inherent tension between married couples regarding the frequency of sex in marriage. Some husbands and wives deny their partners sex for a long time because of spiritual exercises. This tension existed at the time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 7, especially verse 5 which has been interpreted variedly. Paul understood how powerful the sexual needs are, even though there is no evidence that he was married. His advice is that, a husband and wife should not ignore sexual relations for a long time, for fear that Satan may tempt them. With this, Paul is following the teaching and behavior of Jesus, who treated the physical body as a very important part of the whole person. This advice, when taken seriously, will prevent some of the issues in marriages that hinge on the frequency of sex. It will prevent lust and unfaithfulness among married couples.

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