

TEMPORARY ASSIGNMENTS

By Steve Zeisler

Thanksgiving is a season that evokes in us visions of Norman Rockwell-type family gatherings. We can all imagine the scene: happy children playing with grandparents while mom and dad are busy preparing the feast. Soft, early winter colors, warm fires, laughter and joy all blend together to evoke an air of contentment and thankfulness.

It has been my experience, however, that most family Thanksgivings do not quite turn out anything like this ideal version. That is because most normal families have to struggle with their share of difficulty and uncertainty. Last week, for example, a woman asked me for counsel on what to do with her family situation. It seems her son has been living with a woman for several years, and they were both coming to stay with her over the holidays. She was unsure about what to do about sleeping arrangements during that time. She wanted her decision to be both wise and godly.

Here is another (somewhat augmented) family situation that came up in a discussion of Thanksgiving. I will read it in the form of a letter. "Mary, our son John's former wife, will drop by with his children and Ted, her new husband. John and his new wife Bonnie will be there with her children and their new baby. Bonnie's oldest boy is actually Ted's son from the time years ago when they lived together, before either of them married for the first time. What do you think I should do?" Hardly the ideal scene as the family gathers around the Thanksgiving table.

When the family net is thrown wide enough, it is sure to draw in many who are hurting or struggling in various ways. Some will have made bad relationship decisions in their past. Others will be involved in difficulty at work. Some will be struggling in their marriages. Real people will always be seen to have real problems. While there very well may be examples around us of the Norman Rockwell-type family, surely they are not the norm.

Things were no different in the Corinth of the first century. The apostle Paul opens the seventh chapter of his First Corinthian letter with the words, "Now concerning the things about which you wrote,..." In this section, the apostle will give his counsel on some problems which his Corinthian family had brought to his attention. We will find that the concerns that are raised are not unlike many of the problems which some of us perhaps had to deal with during this Thanksgiving time. Certainly, they resemble some of the family difficulties I was asked for advice on in the past few days.

Here, then, the apostle takes on the role of a counselor. In earlier studies we considered his words as a preacher, as we looked at the theological ramifications of marriage and human sexuality. But here in chapter 7 we find Paul the counselor dealing with untidiness and difficulty in the Corinthian family. In 7:8,9, he addressed words of counsel to unhappy singles who longed to be married. The apostle, in effect, urged them to investigate what it was about them that had prevented their marrying. Then, when they had done that, his advice was--get married.

Beginning in verse 10 today, Paul will speak to married couples who were unhappy with their lot. These verses illustrate that the apostle had a very deep knowledge of marriage and how it worked. Christian marriage is a profoundly valuable relationship because marriage is an arena in which God is committed to work. We will find Paul's inspired instructions to be very profitable. 1 Corinthians 7:1-16:

A WORD TO THE MARRIED

But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (but if she does leave, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her

husband), and that the husband should not send his wife away. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, let her not send her husband away. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace. For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?

The essence of the truth which Paul is at pains to impart in these verses is that no Christian believer should be responsible to see his or her marriage come to an end. We all know, of course, that some marriages end in divorce. But Paul's admonition here is that Christians should not seek to end their marriages.

In verse 10 the words of Jesus are quoted and are applied to believing partners in a forthright manner. Then, realizing that he is talking to real people who have real problems, the apostle concedes that if married Christians do indeed separate, they must remain unmarried or be reconciled to each other. Paul is agreeing that there may come a time when a therapeutic separation is necessary for some Christian marriages. The level of tension and stress may dictate a period of separation so that the union may be saved. But that is no excuse to close the door on the marriage and end it entirely.

Do not take the ultimate step of divorce and remarriage. God is in the business of saving marriages. Do not make that impossible by your decision to take that final step. If you must separate for a time, use that period as a bridge to further your ultimate reconciliation. Do not be responsible for the final break-up of your Christian marriage.

Recently I heard the testimony of a Christian woman in this church who had been separated from her alcoholic husband for a number of years. For some of that time, the husband had been living what amounted to a Skid Row-type of existence. But despite that, the wife had maintained her trust in God through tears and struggles. The Lord at last put her husband back on his feet and the couple reconciled. He had restored their marriage, in spite all the odds.

This is what Paul is counseling the Corinthians to do. They should not make it impossible for God to act in their troubled marriages. Thus separation, except for purposes of ultimate reconciliation, was out of the question. Some of the best marriages I know of had very stormy early years; others have had even stormier middle-aged years. Despite pain, difficulty and various other problems, however, and because of these couples' commitment to obey God and learn together, their marriages have, like fine wine, aged wonderfully well.

Here is the apostle's opening word of advice in this section. Married Christians must not feel that merely because there are storms and stresses in marriage that God is not committed to working through these circumstances to build something that is extremely worthwhile and valuable.

"But to the rest,..." continues the apostle in verse 12. He has dealt with the married, singles, the previously married, and the remarried. Now he turns his attention to marriages in which one of the partners is a Christian and the other a non-Christian.

First, we must point out that Scripture (see 2 Cor.6:4) teaches that believers should not marry unbelievers. We have such a reference here in verse 39 of this chapter when, referring to widows, Paul says, "...if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord." Obviously, however, there are many instances where one partner in a non-Christian marriage later comes to faith in Christ. What, then, is the believing partner to do? Should he or she separate from the non-believing spouse? This is what the Corinthians are asking Paul.

Paul's answer beautifully illustrates once more his conviction that even if only one of the partners in a marriage is a believer, we should expect God to be at work that marriage. Our God is a God of salvation. He can bring harmony and hope where formerly there was none. Thus Paul's counsel to the believing spouse is, remain on

in your marriage. God can use your situation to his honor and glory, and he may yet bring about salvation.

In verse 14, the apostle gives his reasons for saying this:

"For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy."

The believing spouse's very presence in his or her family is accomplishing some wonderful things in that family. The unbelieving spouse is in daily contact with one who is a member of Christ. They eat, sleep, talk and work together. In this way, the unbelieving spouse, says Paul, is "sanctified." They have close daily contact with the Lord. A form of sanctification for the unbelieving spouse--not saving faith, as Paul makes clear in verse 16--is the result of such a union. Thus a one-flesh relationship with one who is a member of Christ brings tremendous blessing, one which should not be underestimated, to the unbelieving partner.

The believing spouse's commitment to remaining faithful to such a marriage also ensures that the children of that union do not become "unclean," says the apostle (verse 14). In this reference to Judaism, Paul is recognizing that at times, Jews were denied entry into the temple for various reasons. Temple worship was the primary way in which Jews drew near to God and learned of forgiveness for sin. Touching a corpse, eating forbidden foods, etc., renders one unclean, and results in one's being refused entry into the temple. Jewish parents therefore had quite a say in whether their children were permitted entry into the temple. Their action on behalf of their children would open doors of opportunity for spiritual growth and a sense of belonging to a community of worshipers.

Timothy, whose mother was Jewish and his father Greek, was brought up to know Scripture and to love Judaism. Though he was the offspring of a spiritually mixed marriage, his mother's faith and example was the perfect foundation for Timothy's life of faith and Christian service. Perhaps Paul has something like this in mind here in verse 14. Although married to an unbeliever, a believing spouse who acts in Christian conviction, and resists the temptation to waffle back and forth, being swept off his or her feet by changing philosophies, will discover that both the unbelieving partner and the children of their union will be helped. In such a case, who knows what kind of blessing will ultimately be showered upon that family?

Paul is careful to point out that, even if the believer in such a marriage acts in this way, there is no guarantee that the unbelieving spouse will be saved. But for a Christian to neglect and abandon such a marvelous opportunity would be wrong.

While the apostle points out that the believing spouse should not be the one responsible for the breakup of his or her marriage to a non-believer, Paul nevertheless recognizes that unwanted spiritual conviction may be the unbeliever's excuse to depart the marriage. In that case, says Paul, "let him leave." The believing partner should not resort to extraordinary, manipulative efforts to force the unbelieving spouse to remain married. That would be dishonoring to God. It is clear from the text then that Paul realizes that in some marriage situations, the marriage is terminated by the non-Christian's decision to leave. In that case, says Paul, "the brother or the sister is not under bondage." He or she is free to remarry, in other words--but "only in the Lord," as we noted earlier with respect to believing widows.

We need to recognize that the Bible has more to say about marriage and divorce than we see in these verses alone. Jesus' words about a lifestyle of immorality are applicable in some cases. Yet, Paul's marriage counsel here is unsurpassed in its wisdom and is needed by the church today every bit as much as it was in Corinth.

To summarize, Christians should never underestimate what the Lord can do in a marriage. No matter how stormy the relationship, and even if they have been separated for a time, believing partners should resist the temptation to feel that reconciliation is impossible. Rather, they should have faith that God is great enough to find a way so that they may resume their marriage. Furthermore, if even one of the married partners is a believer, he or she should look for God to bring blessing both to the unbelieving spouse and the children of the marriage. Our God is a powerful Savior and life-giver. He can bring life to even the most lifeless unions.

A WORD ON GAINING REAL FREEDOM

In verses 17 through 24, a wider principle, which in many ways governs the counsel Paul has offered heretofore, and also that which follows, is alluded to.

Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And thus I direct in all the churches. Was any man called already circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Has anyone been called in uncircumcision? Let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God. Let each man remain in that condition in which he was called. Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that. For he who was called in the Lord while as a slave, is the Lord's freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ's slave. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. Brethren, let each man remain with God in that condition in which he was called.

The general principle which Paul is seeking to apply is this: people do not have to change their circumstances in order to be happy. It is not due to a mistake that you find yourself in your present circumstances. God knows your situation, and he is not calling upon you to change your circumstances in order to bless you.

Fulfillment in life, freedom in Christ, personal integration, growth and confidence do not depend on whether you are married or not. It doesn't matter whether we have the right job, whether we're making enough money, whether we have the right friends or not.

The apostle is careful to note, however, that there is nothing wrong with walking through doors of opportunity which have been opened. ("If you are able to become free, do so.") While he is certainly not advocating slavery, he is saying, however, that even if you are a slave, you are the Lord's freedman. It doesn't matter whether you are rich or poor, married or single, whether you live in the city or the suburbs, whether you went to college or not, you are a child of the King. No matter what your circumstances, you can find joy and contentment in Christ.

"Do not become slaves of men," is Paul's powerful word of advice. This is what happens--you become a slave--when you give to somebody the power to make you happy or unhappy. If fulfillment for you comes only when your boss promotes you, then you have become a slave of men. If you set your sights on marriage to a particular person, and if that determines your fulfillment or lack of it, you have become a slave of men.

Along this line it's fascinating to watch the political process in action. Polling plays such a large part in these modern times. The pollsters go ahead of the candidates, visiting various regions of the country to poll voters and learn of their concerns. Then the candidate arrives and parrots back the thinking of the people polled. When the candidates must speak nationally, the trick is to speak in the blandest terms and really say nothing that can later be construed as controversial. What else is this but slavery? The candidates cannot speak to what they really believe, but must address themselves to what people want to hear.

Believers, says Paul, must not act this way in any sphere. As sons and daughters of the King, having been bought with a price, they are freedmen. This thought underlies everything Paul has been saying in this chapter.

The final section, verses 25 through 40, is difficult to interpret. Some of the words utilized in this passage are used in a peculiar fashion. Furthermore, Paul makes reference to things which were part of the letter he had received from the Corinthians, a communication which is lost to us. Reading this chapter therefore is a little like listening to one part of a telephone conversation. A knowledge of what questions were asked would shed a lot of light on Paul's responses. As we shall see, however, the points which he makes are clear enough.

WORDS FOR 'TIMES OF DISTRESS'

Now concerning virgins I have no command of the Lord, but I give an opinion as one who by the mercy of the

Lord is trustworthy. I think then that this is good in view of the present distress, that it is good for a man to remain as he is. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you should marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin should marry, she has not sinned. Yet such will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you. But this I say, brethren, the time has been shortened, so that from now on both those who have wives should be as though they had none; and those who weep, as though they did not weep; and those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice; and those who buy, as though they did not possess; and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it; for the form of this world is passing away.

One of the difficulties in this passage is determining what Paul means by the phrase, "the present distress." And, furthermore, what does he mean in verse 31, "the form of this world is passing away"? Some feel that the apostle is referring to the imminent return of Christ. But I don't agree with that. In 1 Thessalonians, where Paul makes direct reference to the second coming, he counsels believers to go about their normal business and makes no suggestion about any disengagement from life. Here in chapter 7, however, he seems to be suggesting action along those lines.

Apparently there was something afoot in Corinth which he (and the Corinthians who wrote to him) considered serious enough to require special counsel. If Paul had been writing to Jews in Germany in the 1930's, during the rise of Nazism, he probably would have advised they not buy property, make long-term investments, or get married. The apostle is giving the same kind of counsel to the Corinthians. He was convinced of a coming upheaval ("the form of this world is passing away"), and gave advice accordingly.

Paul's counsel relates to marriage in this way. Marriage is such an important step that it must be undertaken with a whole heart. Becoming one flesh with someone requires such an investment of time and commitment that taking on that responsibility may not be the wise way to act in given situations or circumstances. Of course, if you are contemplating a me-first type marriage in which one partner lives in New York and one in San Francisco, and you meet for skiing twice a year in Colorado, then perhaps this word is not for you. But if you are committed to a oneness in a relationship that will grow with the years, then there may come a time of upheaval when your plans to marry should be postponed.

During my senior year in college, Leslie (my wife) and I realized we were in love and the possibility of marriage grew more attractive all the time. When I graduated (in 1967), the first draft lottery, for which I was eligible, took place. I sat down to watch the 6 o'clock news one evening I discovered, about three seconds into the newscast, that my birthday was lottery number 4, and I was eligible to be drafted without delay. Had I been called into military service and sent to Viet Nam, our path toward marriage would certainly have been very different. This is what Paul is counseling the Corinthian believers to consider. Because of the impending upheaval, they should seriously think about postponing their marriage plans.

Verse 32:

But I want you to be free from concern. One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and his interests are divided. And a woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband. And this I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is seemly, and to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord.

Here again, the context is the expected turmoil and upheaval the Corinthians would soon be called upon to face. Paul is not saying that singleness is a holier state than marriage. What he is saying, rather, is that Christian marriage requires quite an investment of time.

In Ephesians 5 and other places we read that Christian marriage is a wonderful arena for fellowship with the Lord. We are to trust him, pray to him and be guided by him in our marriages as well as in our ministry elsewhere. But the single person has only one set of responsibilities. The apostle is not saying there is

anything wrong with being caught up in the things which cry for our attention in the home, but that married life becomes even tougher when the world is in a state of upheaval.

In verse 29 the apostle is definitely not saying that those who have wives should ignore them and pretend they are not even married. What he is getting at is that married people must make certain long-term plans to, for instance, buy a home, save for their children's education, and so on. Here Paul is counseling that married people in Corinth not make these kinds of plans--to not think like married people, in other words--because of the impending trouble. In that sense "those who have wives should be as though they had none." That would be the wiser course of action.

Because of language and cultural difficulties, the closing verses of chapter 7 are similarly obscure.

A WORD ON UNMARRIED DEPENDENTS

But if any man thinks that he is acting unbecomingly toward his virgin...

The interpretive issue here is whether the "virgin" is an individual's betrothed or his daughter, niece, or some other young woman for whom the individual was responsible. The second possibility seems more likely to me.

if she should be of full age, and if it must be so, let him do what he wishes, he does not sin; let her marry. But he who stands firm in his heart, being under no constraint, but has authority over his own will, and has decided this in his own heart, to keep his own virgin daughter, he will do well. So then both he who gives his own virgin daughter in marriage does well, and he who does not give her in marriage will do better. A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. But in my opinion she is happier if she remains as she is; and I think that I also have the Spirit of God.

The final category of people for whom Paul has words are the unmarried, dependent women. In the first century, it was usually the case that a woman who had never been married was dependent upon her father, brother, or some other male relative. An unmarried woman could not, in that society, easily support herself. Here Paul counsels men who have responsibility for such single women to follow through on their responsibilities, trusting God to provide, rather than encouraging the woman in question to marry and then have to face heavier responsibilities in the coming times of turmoil.

But, having said that, Paul adds that it is not wrong to get married. He was not pushing his point of view on anybody. There was nothing wrong with getting married, so they were free to take his advice or not. The apostle is at pains to give his best counsel in the face of difficult circumstances.

His final word, in verses 39,40, is to widows, who were also financially dependent upon others for their support.

I find it encouraging to see that when Paul was faced with human problems, he was quite willing to recognize the untidiness of human affairs. People make mistakes, especially in the areas of marriage and human sexuality, despite their desire to make good choices and good decisions. This is why Paul, in replying to questions posed to him by the believers in Corinth, offers the best advice he can, given the circumstances. In this he takes real human problems and endeavors to apply the mind of God to solving them.

Underneath this advice all the while, Christians are left with some excellent foundation blocks upon which to build their lives. The first has to do with the apostle's vision for marriage. Marriage is a commitment of the heart. It cannot be taken lightly or half-heartedly. Thus it may be wise to postpone marriage for a time because you may find the commitment for the moment to be too demanding.

Once married, however, Paul strongly encourages Christians to do nothing that might terminate their marriages. As long as one of the partners is willing to remain on and trust God for the circumstances there is no knowing what God can do. Marriage is a critically important state. It is not for everybody. Singleness too is a gift of God. But if you are married, and even if the relationship is a stormy one, make sure your commitment is heartfelt, not shallow. No matter how serious your marriage problems may seem, the resurrection power of Jesus Christ is capable of breathing life into what may seem to be a dead relationship.

A second foundation block upon which Christians may build their lives is Paul's word that we don't necessarily need to change our circumstances in order to be happy. A trusting relationship with God, fulfillment and self-worth are not dependant upon circumstances. They depend only on the truth of the gospel. You are "the Lord's freedmen."

Most of us have more acquaintance with the human struggle of 1 Corinthians than we do with the unchallenged warmth and happiness of a Norman Rockwell-type Thanksgiving. But we serve a life-giving Lord who is preparing us for an infinitely greater feast.

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