

**Where have all the good men gone?
1 Corinthians 7:1 – 16
Fairview Presbyterian Church
May 10, 2009**

The state of things today – v. 1a

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote:

Paul begins this section of the letter referring to questions or issues that had been raised by the people at Corinth regarding sexual matters and marriage. Paul's answer is addressing the state of things as they were in ancient Corinth. We will see how, in many ways, the world of ancient Corinth is not that different from the world of modern America. Paul addresses the place of marriage in Corinth. I want us to begin our examination of these verses by addressing the state of marriage in America today.

They call it *creeking*. If you become engaged to be married while a student at **Grove City College**, the groom-to-be will be creeked. A small stream runs through the north end of campus. When word of the engagement is leaked, the groom-to-be's friends will carry him to the creek, and toss him in. The latest creeking at Grove City College occurred just this past week. The bride-to-be is a sophomore at GCC. Interestingly, there are some who have criticized this girl for becoming engaged during her sophomore year. "*She should wait until she is out of school and established in her career,*" the critics say. This comment is an accurate indication of the prevailing attitude today. It is assumed that "*one should reach a certain (though unspecified) level of maturity and financial stability, with a completed education and established career, before settling down.*"¹ People still desire to get married. Every year since 1976 a survey of high school seniors has found that the percentage of young people expressing a desire to get married has remained constant, with about 80% of young women and 70% of young men saying that having a good marriage and family life is extremely important to them. However, the age of marriage is growing later and later. And this is a problem. To understand why, I want to talk a bit about men.

The male problem – it is tough to enter honorable adulthood – v. 1b

"It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."

It appears that the question posed by the Corinthians to Paul revolved around the place of sexual intimacy in life. Corinth, like the modern world, was a place where every philosophy was promoted and every activity was permitted. Corinth was a philosophical and sexual smorgasbord. The ancient Jews considered adult singleness – to not be married – a sin, taking seriously God's command to Adam and Eve to "*be fruitful and multiply.*" At the other end of the smorgasbord, some in the ancient world viewed the human body as corrupt and burdensome, advocating absolute abstinence, even between husband and wife. Some Greek philosophers argued that wise men find sexual release through the services of prostitutes, but certainly not be bothered with a commitment to a wife and marriage. Abortion and child abandonment were widely

¹ Salvo, Issue 8, Spring of 2009, p 18.

practiced. Like today, a child did not have legal rights as a person until its father accepted him or her – today it is the mother who must accept the child. Homosexuality was accepted and promoted, said by some to be the *highest* form of love. The question posed by the Corinthian Christians was this: “*How do we faithfully navigate our own actions in a world where anything goes? What is pleasing to God regarding our sexual lives?*”

Men and women are different. The modern world foolishly denies or downplays the differences between men and women. The Bible is wiser. Men and women are different because Adam and Eve were not made in the same way. Adam is a mixture of the low and high: fashioned from the dust of earth and inspired with life by the breath of God. Eve’s creation is more complex. She is formed from living flesh, taken from Adam. Men are simple creatures. Sex, food, sports and work – pretty much in that order – and men are happy. Women are much more complex. Women want and desire sexual intimacy at certain times. Men want and desire sexual intimacy all the time. Women want and need commitment to find sexual fulfillment. Men just want sex.

There is, however, one facet of human life where men typically face a greater and more complex challenge than women face: the entry into honorable adulthood. When a child is born, there is a natural bonding between mother and child. A child receives life and emotional nourishment from his mother. Boys are natural **Peter Pan’s**: they do not wish to grow up. What happens to boys who do not grow up? What are the boys who hang out with **Peter Pan** called? They are “**The Lost Boys**” – lost because they never enter adulthood. For girls, the entry into adulthood is less problematic because a daughter’s sense of identity remains focused upon her mother. For boys, entering adulthood is challenging because at some point in adolescence the boy must transfer his sense of identity from mom to dad. Making this transfer of identity is not easy. At this same time the physical and hormonal changes are taking place that turn boys into men. It is a greater challenge to civilize men, to harness masculine strength, competitiveness and sexual desires in a positive direction to move a man into honorable, productive adulthood. The process of civilization does not end with a high school or college diploma. It ends when a man takes his place in society as a productive, law abiding, responsible adult. Marriage is part of the process of civilization. Marriage civilizes men. In marriage a man learns to take his natural initiative, strength, and desires and turn them to serving his wife and the needs of his family. In English we say it is time to *settle down*, focus upon caring for your wife, your children and your work. For this reason, marriage is the norm. The goal is to raise men to the point where they “*leave their father’s home and hold fast*” – that is, make the commitment, say the vows – to their wife.

And yet, the modern world has adopted all sorts of habits and philosophies that undermine the motivating factors intended by God to move young men to the altar. Numerous articles ask, “*Where have all the good men gone?*” or “*Why won’t men commit?*” There is no single answer, though the most significant factor is the rise of cohabitation. From a man’s perspective, it makes perfect sense, “*Why get married when*

you can just live with someone?" You get the benefits of marriage, without the commitment. Therein lies the problem.²

Against these attitudes is the biblical message: marriage is the norm. It is the goal we seek.

Marriage is the norm – v. 2 – 5

² But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. ³ The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. ⁴ For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. ⁵ Do not deprive one another,

This is a high view of marriage. There is equality between husband and wife in duty and privilege. It reflects an expectation of mutual service and equality. It is in and through marriage that sexual satisfaction is to be sought and found. Each partner has rights and duties in marriage. Paul speaks of *conjugal rights*, a reference to sexual intimacy. It is also a realistic view of marriage. One reason for marriage is, as the old **Anglican Book of Common Prayer** puts it, a *remedy for sin*. This is not the *only* reason for marriage, but it is a reason. Our world today is awash with sexual sin, sexual misconduct and sexual perversity. Is it possible that one reason for this state of affairs is the very low view of marriage held by so many in our world? Would there be less sexual misconduct in our world if marriage were honored, uplifted, and embraced?

The high Christian understanding of marriage today is largely the product of the **Protestant Reformation** in general and the teaching of the **Puritans** in particular. Briefly, prior to the **Reformation**, the **Catholic Church** celebrated celibacy and virginity. A common interpretation of Jesus' parable of the **Sower and the Seed** was that marriage represented the thirtyfold increase, widowhood the sixtyfold increase and virginity the one-hundredfold increase. The curious doctrine of the perpetual virginity of **Mary** is another expression of this anti-marriage attitude infecting the medieval **Catholic Church**. The Catholic scholar **Erasmus** argued that the ideal marriage was when husband and wife lived together without intercourse.

In contrast, the **Puritans** celebrated the companionship of marriage and the accompanying intimacy between husband and wife. It was the **Puritans** who promoted the concept of *friendship* between husband and wife. The idea of husband and wife's fondness and friendship was quite foreign to the ancient world. Modern readers of the **Puritans** may miss the fact that the **Puritans** talk quite a bit about sexual intimacy in marriage. A modern reader needs to know the euphemisms, the code words, used. The **Puritans** speak of,

- "matrimonial duty"
- "act of matrimony"

² A flier that was included in the Fairview Presbyterian Church morning bulleting, listing the top ten reasons why men are commitment challenged, is attached at the end of this message.

- “due benevolence.”

They took Paul’s words in this passage from 1 Corinthians 7 seriously, even excommunicating a man who would not give his wife her conjugal rights. The **Puritan** poet **John Milton** argued that Genesis 2:24 “*they shall become one flesh*” was included in the Bible to “*justify and make legitimate the rites of the marriage bed.*” Married sexual union was to be exuberant. According to the **Puritan** view, God has given the physical world, including sex, for human benefit and welfare. The **Puritans** would have said “*Amen!*” to the late actor Paul Newman’s response, when asked why he had remained faithful to his wife through their many years of marriage, replying, “*Why would I order hamburger, when I can have steak at home?*”

Marriage is the norm. Celibacy is a gift.

Celibacy is a gift v. 6 – 7

⁷ I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.

When Paul says “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman,” he is referring to the virtue of being free to pursue God’s ministry and calling without having to be burdened with the normal and appropriate responsibilities of caring for a wife and children. Paul at one time would have been married. He was trained as a rabbi and rabbis were *required* to be married. At the time of this writing though, Paul was single. Was he widowed? Did his wife leave him after his conversion to Christ? We do not know. But we do know Paul’s missionary schedule. It would have been impossible for Paul to have preached and traveled as he did while also carrying the responsibility for caring for a wife. I would argue that the greatest living Bible expositor today is an English man named **John Stott**. His physical health failing, Stott is now retired, having preached his last sermon a couple of years ago. Early in life, Stott made the commitment to singleness. He would be free to study, preach and travel throughout the world teaching the scriptures. The interns hired to assist him were always sternly instructed to do the job given them, but not to try and keep up with Stott’s personal schedule. Stott rose early and worked late into the night. His travel commitments, together with his level of scholarly and preaching production were phenomenal. A married man could not have done what Stott did.

This is Paul’s point. If you have the special calling to singleness, follow it. At the same time, Paul is quick to add that marriage is the norm. Celibacy is not superior to marriage. It is a special gift: celibacy in service to the Lord. There are three great streams of tradition within the Christian world: **Roman Catholic**, **Eastern Orthodox**, and the **Protestant**. The **Roman Catholic** tradition, with a few exceptions, requires celibacy of its clergy. If you wish to be a Catholic priest, you make a commitment to be celibate. The **Eastern Orthodox** churches take a different perspective. The rule for the Orthodox priest is this: whatever you are when you are ordained, you must remain: if you are married, you must remain married; if single, remain single. In addition, married priests in the Orthodox churches serve only as pastors in local parishes. The higher

offices of the church – the offices of bishop, archbishop, metropolitan, and patriarch – are available only to single clergy, men who are free to devote their entire attention to the needs of the greater church. **The Protestants**, on the other hand, rejected the concept of clergy celibacy and instead embraced and celebrated marriage – epitomized when the former **Augustinian** monk, **Martin Luther**, married the former **Cistercian** nun, **Katharina von Bara**. The ordination standards of our denomination, the **Presbyterian Church (USA)** reflect this Protestant view celebrating marriage, while recognizing the possibility of celibacy as a special calling. **The Book of Order** of the Presbyterian Church requires ordained officers to

live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness. (G-6.106b)

This standard has been under repeated assault in our church in recent years, but it is still the standard we affirm.

This affirmation makes clear that, since marriage is the vehicle provided by God for sexual expression, therefore, all other sexual alternatives are rejected.

All other sexual alternatives are rejected -- v. 8 - 9

⁸ To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. ⁹ But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

There is great freedom in marriage. Occasionally I am asked about the permissible boundaries of married sexual expression. There is great freedom in the intimacy a married couple can share. The boundaries are the marriage vows. In marriage we promise to forsake all others. Let the memories of old boyfriends or girlfriends, or ex-spouses, recede into the forgotten past. We seek to fulfill the words of Randy Travis' song, *Forever and Ever, Amen*.

They say time can play tricks on the
memory;
Make people forget things they knew.
But it's easy to see it's
happening to me:
I've already forgotten every woman but you.

Husband and wife have great freedom in marriage, as long as that freedom is focused upon each other. Paul says that it is better to marry than to burn with passion. Burning with passion within marriage, when the passion is focused upon your spouse, is a good and positive thing. The biblical model is simple and clear – self control or marriage.

This is a message about marriage, not a message about sexual sins. But, to be clear, I need to briefly name the various sexual alternatives, sexual sins, that are rejected. **Adultery** is rejected, because it is a violation of the marriage vows. **Fornication**, that is sex outside of marriage, is condemned because it is not putting

things in their proper order. The proper fruit of sexual intimacy is children. The stability of a marriage commitment is needed in order to welcome the child that may be conceived. Premarital sexual intimacy can compound into all sorts of additional sins such as abortion, or difficulties, such as shotgun marriages or single parenting. Pornography is rejected for sexual intimacy is intended to be private. **Homosexuality** and **lesbianism** are rejected for in these practices the participants do not meet the *sexual other*. Men and women are different. There is something mysterious at work in the sexual intimacy between husband and wife, because of their sexual difference, that is absent in a same sex encounter: men burning with passion for other men only brings out the worst in us. Also rejected is **concubinage** and **cohabitation**. A concubine is a woman who lives publicly with a man without being married to him. The rise of concubinage in America is a mystery to me, for concubine is a much lower status than that of wife. People say that living together is preparation for marriage. No, it is not. It is the opposite. The essence of living together is the absence of commitment. The essence of marriage is the presence of commitment, symbolized and expressed in public marriage vows made before God, family, and community. Everything in the wedding day revolves around the vows and solemn promises the couple makes to each other, binding themselves to one another. There is no comparison between marriage and living together. **Beyonce's** pop song, *Single Ladies*, is absolutely right, "*If you like it, you ought to put a ring on it*. Lastly, also rejected are the extra-marital **Bill-Clinton**-alternatives: intimate sexual practices intended as sexual substitutes in order to claim a technical innocence. This is an argument only a politician could dream up. In contrast to our former commander and chief, we all know what the definition of *is*, is.

I know that I may have hit close to home in this list. My intention is not to be condemnatory. I am not here to judge. No one in this room – except my family members – is answerable to me, but only to God. If you are sensing that there is an area of your sexual life where you are not doing what you ought and are not pleasing God, and you are thinking, "*What should I do?*" The answer is clear: get married. It is better to marry than to burn with passion. Chastity in singleness and fidelity in marriage: these are the goals. These are the standards.

Paul continues in his emphasis upon a high view of marriage by next writing that even difficult marriages ought to be preserved.

Even difficult marriages ought to be preserved – v. 10 - 13

¹⁰ To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband ¹¹ (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife. ¹² To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. ¹³ If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.

In the ancient world marriages were, for the most part, arranged by couple's parents. The ancient world, like ours, made divorce easy. In **Judaism**, a wife could leave her husband, but could not divorce him. **Roman** law permitted either part to

unilaterally divorce the other, much like today. The **New Testament** is unique in its view that divorce should not happen. Note how Paul underscores his words by adding “*not I, but the Lord.*” Paul’s words prohibiting divorce are simply echoing the teaching of the Lord Jesus. There is no evidence in the New Testament period of a Christian knowingly and deliberately marrying a pagan. However, it was common that after the contract for marriage had been established that one party to the marriage might come to faith in Christ and the other remain a pagan. Apparently one of the questions put to Paul was whether or not a Christian should remain in such a marriage. Obviously, these would be difficult marriages. Marriage is challenging enough when a Protestant marries a Roman Catholic – and we share more or less the same faith. Imagine being married to a Muslim, or Hindu, or an atheist. Paul’s instructions are clear: seek to preserve the marriage. Paul does not minimize the difficulty. In v. 15 he recognizes that the unbelieving partner may take the initiative in divorce, but the believing partner should not. The preservation of the marriage is a high priority.

Some may be wondering at this point: why? Does not God desire my own sense of satisfaction and fulfillment? Should I not be free to pursue my own desire and self interest? Could I not serve God better if I were divorced from this difficult marriage partner and be married instead to a fellow believer? Paul anticipates these objections. He reminds us of a key biblical truth: the family is the basic building block of human relations and children matter.

The family is the basic building block of human relations and children matter -- v. 14 – 16

¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. ¹⁵ But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. ¹⁶ For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

This is not something that modern Americans, folk who emphasize our rugged individualism, particularly wish to hear. Paul’s point is that by staying in the marriage the believing spouse may one day lead the unbelieving spouse to confession of faith in Jesus Christ. Paul’s interest is in the service that the Christian spouse can perform toward the unbelieving spouse.

In addition, Paul is also concerned regarding the impact the believing spouse can have upon the children in the marriage. The home is the primary sphere of disciple-making. A child born into a home where at least one parent is a Christian is a *covenant child*. The child is blessed to have the influence of a believing parent in his or her life. Paul is saying that a Christian should not initiate divorce because the Christian spouse has a key role in raising the children in the knowledge of the Christian faith.

Note that Paul’s view is not individualistic. He is not concerned about the individual’s feelings, sense of self – satisfaction, or emotional state. Paul is concerned

for the family. It is the family that matters. The individual serves the marriage and the family. The family does not serve the individual.

In v. 15 Paul recognizes that divorce may be initiated by the unbelieving partner. If that happens, the options for the believing spouse are limited. The marriage is probably going to be dissolved. In this event, Paul says that the believing partner is “*not enslaved*” (ESV). The Greek word used is a technical word and it means that the divorced party is free to remarry. There is no negative judgment upon the divorced partner. There is now no barrier to remarrying a believing partner.

Close

In review: in these verses Paul is answering specific questions that have been raised regarding how to properly honor God in respect to our sexual lives. We have seen how marriage is the norm, a key element of our entry into honorable adulthood. Some are specifically given the gift and calling of celibacy, but they are the exceptions. All other sexual alternatives other than celibacy or fidelity in marriage are prohibited. Marriage is the proper arena for sexual knowledge. Paul recognizes that Christian people can find themselves in difficult marriages. His teaching is that even difficult marriages should be preserved, for even in difficult marriages it is possible that the unbelieving spouse or the children of the marriage will be touched by and respond to the message of the gospel of Christ. Paul teaches that if a Christian spouse is divorced by an unbelieving spouse, then the Christian believer is free to remarry within the faith.

We have touched upon difficult matters today. The biblical message stands in contrast to the spirit of our age. Our world shares more in common with ancient Corinth than it does with Puritan New England. But the question for each of us is this: Who is lord of your life? Who is Lord of your sexuality? Are you honoring Christ in your sexual relationship?

Say “Amen!” somebody.

Commitment Challenged

Men are afraid of marriage. This is no stereotype, but rather a finding rooted in scientific data. Just ask Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and David Popenoe of Rutgers University. Their 2002 report, titled "Why Men Won't Commit," drew from focus-group discussions among unmarried heterosexual men (ranging in age from 25 to 33) in New Jersey, Chicago, Washington, DC, and Houston. What the two researchers found was that "men see marriage as a final step in a prolonged process of growing up" – as an irreversible rite of passage into adulthood that they are in no hurry to experience. Of course, there are other factors involved as well. Indeed, according to Whitehead and Popenoe, there are actually ten main reasons why today's men refuse to commit.

1. They want to enjoy single life as long as they can.
2. They want to own a house before they get a wife.
3. They are reluctant to marry a woman who already has children.
4. They face few social pressures to marry.
5. They are waiting for the perfect soul mate, and she hasn't yet appeared.
6. They fear that marriage will require too many changes and compromises.
7. They want to wait until they are older to have children.
8. They want to avoid divorce and its financial risks.
9. They can enjoy the benefits of having a wife by cohabitating rather than marrying.
10. They can get sex more easily than in times past.

Principles for Marriage

7 Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” ² But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. ³ The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. ⁴ For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. ⁵ Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

⁶ Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. ⁷ I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.

⁸ To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. ⁹ But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

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