

“TO THE CHURCH OF GOD – CHRISTIANS TOGETHER”

6. JOINED TOGETHER

1 Corinthians 7:1-40

In what we have read so far in this letter of Paul to the newly formed Christian church in Corinth, we have seen him responding to what he has heard of the situation there. Various reports have reached him of goings-on which have not been helpful, either for the people involved or for the witness of the church to the wider community. You'll remember that that community was a cosmopolitan mixture of races, religions and backgrounds, such as you'd find in any busy seaport, with the strong influence of a religious cult that put a great deal of emphasis on sexual experience.

Now Paul turns to matters which the Corinthian Christians themselves had raised with him in various letters that they'd sent to him in Ephesus. Over the next few chapters he will deal with these issues, which concern marriage, food offered to idols, worship, the resurrection, and the collection that was taking place for famine-affected Christians in Jerusalem. He begins with the subject of marriage and celibacy and this long chapter covers a good deal of ground, which we can't really consider in any detail this morning (another good reason for going along to one of the house groups that is discussing this letter). There is advice here about marriage in general, about marriage between believers and unbelievers, about celibacy within and outside marriage, about widows, virgins and divorce. In the middle section (vv17-24), there are even some examples of what Paul is saying drawn from the areas of circumcision and slavery. So this morning we're not going to be able to do much other than give an overview of the chapter and draw from it a few of general principles.

To begin with, though, we need to remind ourselves of the context in which these things were written. As we've said, Corinth was a city that was notorious for its immorality. The word "Corinth" itself was used as a euphemism for sexual promiscuity and the Temple of Aphrodite, Greek goddess of love, in which there were 2,000 cultic prostitutes, physically dominated the city from its position on the high rock overlooking the port. Those people who turned to Christ and became part of the church there were used to a very licentious environment, even if they didn't themselves practise the lifestyle. And it was very difficult to get that out of their system.

It's clear, though, that there were some in the church who were advocating a very clear distinction between the Christian community and the wider life of the city. So, reading between the lines of Paul's letter and taking into account other contemporary writings, we discover that there were some strong voices in the Corinthian church calling for complete celibacy. Because sex was such a prominent issue in the city, they felt that the church should have nothing to do with it whatsoever. If people weren't married, either because they had never been married or because they were divorced, they should remain single.

Those who were married to unbelievers should leave their partners. And those who were already married should refrain from sexual activity. It was quite a radical idea – and has had its proponents down through the centuries. Origen – one of the great theologians of the early church – actually castrated himself, which didn't please Mrs Origen too much! Most movements that have advocated this particular path have died out after one generation, which is a bit of a weakness of it, really.

Paul's concern, though, comes from the fact that sexual activity is very much part of God's creation. As human beings we all have that kind of desire built into us. If you just ban any kind of sexual activity, then there are going to be a lot of frustrated people around and they're going to end up falling prey to temptation and doing just the kinds of things that Paul and the others hope they won't – indeed, the things that are specifically forbidden by God anyway: promiscuity, infidelity, adultery. Far better, says Paul, to keep sex very much within the confines of marriage, which is what God intended. Don't give it up, but use it in the right context. That's what lies behind what he writes in v9. (I don't think he's saying that you should get married and that will put paid to any thoughts of passion!)

There was another complication, too, but one which is tantalisingly unclear. In v26, Paul writes of “*this present crisis*”, which no-one is entirely sure about. Was there something happening in Corinth which affected Paul's judgement on this issue? As we don't know what it was, we can't really say how it affected his thinking. Some have suggested that it is the expected return of Jesus, which the early Christians always believed was imminent and would render pretty insignificant most of these issues for many people.

So Paul is replying to these people who want Christians to abstain from all sexual activity and he's doling out some fairly straightforward advice. How we take that advice will depend very much on how we interpret what Paul is actually saying anyway – and that holds good for other issues which will arise in the following chapters. Here we see things that are clearly Paul's own personal opinion – he says as much in vv12,25. Some of it is inspired by God (vv10,40 – although the last phrase might be a sarcastic reference to some of the more arrogant Christians in Corinth). Some of it is drawn directly from the Old Testament and the words of Jesus. And some of it is very much conditioned by the context in which it was said – he is answering a direct question, although we don't know exactly what the question was.

In the final analysis, we need to ask for the help of the Holy Spirit in finding our way through all this, but Paul's main concern here – as throughout his letters – is that his readers should be prepared to think *Christianly* about it all. Life in general, and Christianity in particular, is full of grey areas, issues that don't fit neatly into the categories we would like them to. For a lot of things there isn't any hard and fast Biblical guidance, and this is the first general principle at work here. As Tom Wright puts it in his

comments on this chapter, “*Paul is not laying down hard and fast rules. He is trying to teach the Corinthians to think clearly, wisely and above all Christianly about delicate issues where there is no absolute right and wrong.*” Despite what different people have thought, written and imposed down through the centuries, there is no particular biblical commandment about whether Christians should get married. As some people have pointed out, the Roman Catholic Church decrees celibacy for its priests and other religious orders, whereas in some other churches these days single people are not considered really fit for ministry.

And that’s our second general principle here. Both singleness and marriage are valid options for Christians. Paul was single at this point in his life. We have no idea whether he had once been married, but he certainly wasn’t when he wrote this letter, and he does seem a bit jaundiced about it. Look what he says in *v7*, and, more insistently, in *v28b*. He can see certain advantages to singleness from a spiritual point of view – it means that single people don’t have the same distractions as married people, he says. But there’s no suggestion that he is trying to forbid Christians from marrying, so long as they marry other believers. Paul sees both states as a gift from God (*v7b*): some are granted by God the gift of fulfilment as single people, others are granted by God the gift of a partner. Neither single person nor married couple has the right to consider the other somehow inferior or weaker or “less Christian”.

Paul’s concern here – and our third general principle – is that we should be satisfied with the situation we were in when God called us. He states that explicitly in *vv17, 24* and illustrates it with the examples of circumcision and slavery. (Of course, if you have been circumcised, there’s not a lot you can do about it anyway!) We may well feel (particularly with the current bandwagon of the abolition of slavery trundling noisily through our society) that something different should have been said about slavery other than the words of *v21*, but we need to face up to the context in which Paul was writing and also recognise that his main point here isn’t about slavery. His underlying point is that God has called you as you are. He loves you whether you are single, married, divorced, widowed, enslaved, free, Jewish, Gentile or whatever. So rejoice in that and don’t try to change to fit in with other people’s ideas and expectations of you. Jesus has saved you and he will continue to love you whatever. Of course, there are certain things that you might need to change about your lifestyle if they are clearly in contravention of what God asks of you – if you are a thief or a drunkard or a wife beater or a prostitute or a gangland boss you will need to get yourself sorted out.

And that’s where our final general principle comes in – the one which I believe is the most important, the one which is fundamental to all Paul is saying here and in his other letters, and that is fundamental to the whole of our Christian life. It’s stated clearly *v19b* – “*Keeping God’s commands is what counts.*” In other words, as we’ve seen several times already in this letter, Paul is acknowledging that the Christian

community is made up of all kinds of very different people, people who have been drawn together by the love of Jesus Christ and the effect that he has had on their lives. They will come from all manner of different backgrounds, with many different experiences in their past. No one person is better or worse than any other – whether they're married, single, divorced and so on. No-one has the right to look down on anyone else. No-one needs to look up to anyone. No-one can impose rules on anyone else, other than the commands God has given us all – but it is vital that we keep to those..

As we said earlier on, there are all kinds of grey areas in our Christian lives – in our daily lives anyway – but there are also some very clearly defined black and white areas, too. They are the ones we need to be taking care over. Neither marriage nor singleness is wrong – but adultery and sexual activity outside the confines of marriage are. And there are plenty of other things that are just as clear cut. If we want to remain distinctive as a Christian community within the wider society of which we are a part, then we need to be sticking as faithfully as we possibly can to the commands God has given us, because only then can we hope to enjoy life as God wants us to enjoy it.

(House group notes on the next page)

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There were some strong voices in the Corinthian church calling for complete celibacy. Because sex was such a prominent issue in the city, they felt that the church should have nothing to do with it whatsoever. If people weren't married, either because they had never been married or because they were divorced or widowed, they should remain single. Those who were married to unbelievers should leave their partners. And those who were already married should refrain from sexual activity.

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Our second general principle is that both singleness and marriage are valid options for Christians. Paul can see certain advantages to singleness from a spiritual point of view – it means that single people don't have the same distractions as married people, he says. But there's no suggestion that he is trying to forbid Christians from marrying, so long as they marry other believers. Paul sees both states as a gift from God (*v7b*).

Our third general principle is that we should be satisfied with the situation we were in when God called us. He states that explicitly in *v17, 24* and illustrates it with the examples of circumcision and slavery. His underlying point is that God has called you as you are. He loves you whether you are single, married, divorced, widowed, enslaved, free, Jewish, Gentile or whatever. So rejoice in that and don't try to change to fit in with other people's ideas and expectations of you. Jesus has saved you and he will continue to love you whatever.

Our final general principle is stated clearly *v19b* – "*Keeping God's commands is what counts.*" No-one can impose rules on anyone else, other than the commands God has given us all – but it is vital that we keep to those. There are all kinds of grey areas in our Christian lives but there are also some very clearly defined black and white areas, too. They are the ones we need to be taking care over.

Questions for discussion

1. Why do you think sex has been such an important issue in the Church down through the centuries? Why is it so prominent in our society?
2. What does Paul mean by "*burn with passion*" in *v9*?
3. In this chapter Paul makes clear that some of his comments are his own personal opinions. How much weight should they carry for us as Christians? Should we assume that everything else he writes is directly from God?
4. Why do you think so many churches treat single and married people quite differently? How could we do things better in our own church?
5. How do you interpret "*this present crisis*" in *v26*?
6. Some of what Paul writes seems very strange to us today. Why do you think that is?
7. Is there anything in this passage that has particularly struck you?