

This section is probably in response to a further question from the Corinthians, different from but related to the question to which Paul had responded in vv 1-24. Interpreters and translators understand “virgins” differently, resulting in two different interpretations. Either Paul is speaking to unmarried, chaste men who are engaged or he is addressing the issue of fathers giving their daughters in marriage (cf. v 36).

Although verses 27-37 address more than fathers or their daughters, to understand these verses as counsel to the unmarried makes it a repetition of issues in verses 1-9 and suggests an unwholesome and uncharacteristic view of marriage in the form of some “perpetual engagement.” On the other hand arranged marriages was the cultural norm. The standard lexical meaning of word translated “marry” in v. 38 (NIV) is “give in marriage” not “marry.” Therefore, the second interpretation is preferred. (See NIV marginal notes.)

Although Jesus had taught on divorce and the basic principles of marriage, he had never touched on this topic. Paul admits that, but in v. 25 and again in v. 40 he claims that his counsel is trustworthy and of the Spirit. Beginning with principles of broader application (26-35), he finally narrows the discussion to the actual question (vv 36ff). In general Paul’s thesis is that troublesome times should give cause to re-think the advisability of the “normal” practices of marrying and giving in marriage. There are five keys truths which Paul uses in the development of this thesis.

1. An impending crisis for the Corinthian believers promised increased trouble especially for the married (vv 26-28).

“The present crisis”(NIV) refers probably to specific trouble that was about to come upon the Corinthians. The instructions of v 27 (to the “bound” and “released”) emphasize the process of seeking. In essence it appears to say, do not invest a lot of time in the attempt to change your marital status. The coming crisis would make the problems of an unfaithful spouse less significant and would bring such further problems with it that even marriage itself would add significant trouble to life.

Paul’s advice is not based upon moral imperatives. Marriage would not be sinful. However, marriage would add to their troubles. It is wise to caution people that marriage can increase the stress that outward circumstances bring.

2. Opportunities were being limited, so they shouldn’t get engrossed in temporal things (vv 29-31).

“The time is short” or “the time has been shortened” has been interpreted as 1) the imminent return of Christ, 2) the time until the “present crisis” comes upon the Corinthians, and 3) the general transitory nature of life. Since the word for “time” emphasizes more the idea of season, the sense appears to be a mix of the last two suggestion. Because of the impending crisis the season has been shortened, i.e., the time of opportunities to serve the Lord. Temporal things should be kept in perspective.

This is supported by the list that follows. The married should remember that marriage is temporal. (It is not a call to abandon marital responsibilities.) Those who mourn, rejoice or buy should not become so absorbed in those things that they are distracted from the eternal.

The final item hits the problem squarely: don’t become engrossed in things of this world. We must use the things necessary for life, but we should not become engrossed in them. This world, as we observe it, is passing away. Why invest so much time in things that have no eternal substance?

3. Marriage, though given by God, was one of those temporal things that would absorb attention (vv 32-35).

Paul is not devaluing marriage or saying that the single person can be more holy but that celibacy allows for greater devotion to the Lord. Paul is facing the God-ordained facts of married life. The married person will and should be concerned about the spouse. These proper responses take time and energy and that means less time and less energy for serving Christ.

Troublesome times will take even more from our available time and energy. It will not be time taken at first from our spouses, but from our service to the Lord.

Although the parallel is not identical, it is good counsel to young people to spend more time on becoming the right person than on finding the right person. The former is an eternal value and is significantly more important than finding the right person.

4. A father had moral freedom to give his daughter away in marriage or to keep her, but the latter had more advantages (vv 36-38).

Paul first presumes that a father has determined not to give his daughter in marriage, but then reconsiders it, possibly because he recognizes that she is not “gifted” to be celibate. He may change his mind and give her away in marriage without sinning. In the second case (v 37) the father has reached the opposite conclusion, i.e., not to give his daughter in marriage. This is okay if he is clearly convinced himself and has the freedom to do so. (Slaves often did not have this freedom.) In both cases they could act without sinning.

5. Similarly a widow, by the death of her husband, is free to marry again, but current conditions advised against it (vv 39-40).

This freedom was conditioned by the requirement that she marry a believer. Her happiness in remaining single appears conditioned by the current situation (cf 1 Tim 5:14).

The counsel of these verses is good for anyone considering marriage: Marriage is normal and celibacy is okay, but celibacy may be advisable if there are troublesome times. But the truths here also have certain general application. This life is temporal and eternity is so much more important. Our lives need to become more and more Christ-centered with our hearts and minds set on things above, not on things of the earth.