

Marriage and Staying Single for God

The aim of this article

In this article we describe how God intended the relationship between man and woman to be and contrast it with the distorted use of sexuality today. We would like to point out the value of staying single for the sake of God's kingdom and show what the Bible says about the relationships between married and unmarried people in the Christian community based on brotherly love, which transcends the love between husband and wife.

Table of Contents

- [1 Introductory Thoughts About the Value of Staying Single for God](#)
- [2 A Life of Following Jesus](#)
- [3 "It Is Not Good That the Man Should Be Alone...": Thoughts Concerning Marriage and Sexuality](#)
- [4 On the Question of Purity](#)
 - [4.1 How Should We Understand "to Burn" in 1 Corinthians 7:9?](#)
- [5 On Remaining Unmarried](#)
- [6 Testimonies from Early Christian Writings](#)
- [7 On "Clerical Celibacy"](#)
- [8 "For Whoever Does the Will of God, He Is My Brother and Sister and Mother": How Brotherly Love Changes Families](#)

⚓ **1 Introductory Thoughts About the Value of Staying Single for God**

In this article we wish to touch on a topic that has great significance for people's personal lives. For most, it is a self-evident matter to start a partnership or to look for one—a wish which is often connected with great expectations, and hence great disappointments are not uncommon, which plunge people into a deep crisis, even in religious circles.

By contrast, there is hardly anyone who decides to renounce partnership, sexuality and family life freely and consciously, and to devote their lives to another aim. To the New Testament, however, this thought is not alien. Jesus and Paul both speak about it. Early Christian writings tell us that it was not a seldom thing for people to decide to remain unmarried for the sake of God's kingdom.

We have gathered some thoughts concerning the value and significance which marriage and remaining single have in God's eyes, and what the Bible says about them. This article is primarily addressed to readers with a Christian background because we would like to waken the awareness that scripture does not speak about marriage as the only option. Choosing to stay single for the sake of God's kingdom is a reality in the Bible which is often ignored.

At this point we would like to make clear that the decision of a Christian to remain unmarried is not to be confused with the vow of celibacy taken by priests, monks and nuns and which is a mandatory requirement of taking up one of these so-called religious vocations. More about that later.

We are well aware that this issue is an extensive one, and that we have to limit ourselves to some of the

most essential ideas. We would be glad to hear from anyone with further interest so that we can explain the thoughts on a personal basis and in greater depth that we can only touch on here.

✚ 2 A Life of Following Jesus

Jesus called people in various situations of life to follow him. We know about Peter, for example, that he was married ([Mark 1:29-31](#)). Others were still young and therefore single when they were called by Jesus, as we can suppose in the case of the apostle John.

Quite independently of what personal situation these individuals were in, Jesus placed the same call on their lives:

Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate [1] his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. ...So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple." (*Luke 14:25-27,33*)

Luke places these words directly after the parable of the great banquet:

But he said to him, "A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. And at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused.' And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.' *And another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.'* So the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, 'Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.' And the servant said, 'Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.' And the master said to the servant, 'Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.'" (*Luke 14:16-24*)

Jesus cites various instances in which people were not ready to respond to God's invitation. The marriage partnership also finds a mention here. Jesus shows that even marriage and family must be submitted to the call to discipleship.

The apostles accompanied Jesus for the duration of his public ministry. From the very beginning, following their master's example, they learned to put their private life behind the service for the kingdom of God. Without this readiness they would not have been worthy of following Jesus. We can learn what the right priorities are from them, namely, that God, and things relating to the kingdom of God—things that have eternal value—are what are most important. Even if other things are good in themselves, they are not what matters most in life, and should therefore take second place, because they do not last forever.

This is also visible from a discussion between Jesus and some Sadducees:

The same day Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection, and they

asked him a question, saying, “Teacher, Moses said, ‘If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up children for his brother.’ Now there were seven brothers among us. The first married and died, and having no children left his wife to his brother. So too the second and third, down to the seventh. After them all, the woman died. In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her.” But Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. *For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.* And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living.” (*Matthew 22:23-32*)

Obviously there will be no especial relationship between marriage partners in heaven; otherwise Jesus would have had to admit to the Sadducees that they were right.

Given that marriage is an institution just for this world, we must not seek our fulfilment in life in it. There is a much higher aim—the eternal fellowship with God. There, the marriage relationship will no longer play a role. The love for God fills the relationships one has in eternity with the same love for each person. It is possible to reach this aim only when one loves God more than everything else, and nothing and no-one can keep me from following Jesus and obeying his commandments.

You can find more detailed explanations about this point in the articles [“Repentance”](#) and [“What Does It Mean to Be a Christian?”](#).

3 “It Is Not Good That the Man Should Be Alone...”: Thoughts Concerning Marriage and Sexuality

In the creation story we read:

Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” ...So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed. (*Genesis 2:18,21-25*)

God made woman as a helper for man. Both should give mutual support to one another and complement one another in all areas of life. When they marry, they become “one flesh”, which means that a union is created that before God, is indissoluble in this world. They have deeply entrusted themselves to one another, which means that they have obliged themselves to mutual faithfulness.

The trust that two people give each other in the act of marrying, is connected with a serious responsibility, that is, the partaking in the act of creation through begetting offspring, and the education of children to love God and live in awe of him and his commands.

“One flesh” cannot be separated. Despite the fact that there are examples in the Old Testament for

polygamy, the expression “one flesh” nevertheless shows that in these cases, they had departed from the original plan of God, and that monogamy is the will of God. Man cannot leave his mother and father and be united with his wife more than once. Marriage partners should be faithful to one another, until death parts them.

Even if there are situations in which a separation of marriage partners cannot be avoided, this does not mean that their being “one flesh” is annulled and that a new marriage is possible. It is only possible to remarry if the marriage partner dies.

At this point we will not deal with this issue in greater detail. You can find a separate article on our website about “[Divorce and Remarriage](#)”.

Further to this, we read in the story of the fall of man:

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. ...But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” ...To the woman he (God) said, “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” (*Genesis 3:6-7,9-12,16*)

Through the fall, many things in this world took a change for the worse. Man turned his back on God. He gave up the loving, trusting relationship with his creator—a decision which brought with it a fundamental change for the relationship of the sexes. We read that the eyes of Adam and his wife were opened and that they realized that they were naked. Previously, they had not been ashamed in each other’s presence. Now they sought to hide their nakedness. The pure, natural and undisturbed relationship that God had intended for man and wife was destroyed.

The wife then began to seek her security in her husband, and to depend on him, because she had lost the refuge and sense of safety that she had found in God. Likewise man, having rejected God as his master and head, changed his attitude towards the woman, from that of a caring, brotherly protector to a ruler.

In the world around us we see that the realm of the relationships between the sexes is laden with potential for sins and temptations. The area of sexuality often brings suffering, degradation and division into the lives of people. Although it is well known that such sins often occurred throughout the history of man, at no time did the abuse of sexuality reach the extent it has today. Just one example: statistically, more than one third of the total content on the Internet is pornographic and every 4th search performed using Google is a search for pornographic websites [2] ...and what can be found there is unimaginably detestable.

How corrupted must the character of a person be, that he finds pleasure in such material rather than finding it sickening and turning away in disgust? To what extent must people have lost their sensitivity for the fact that these things have nothing to do with love, but are rather an expression of the deepest degradation of human dignity?

Unfortunately, the majority of young people today step into such sins very early on, and soon become

enslaved by them. This is accompanied by a deadening of their conscience and losing respect for the opposite sex. It destroys their sense for faithfulness and the ability to love purely and selflessly—a fact that is testified to by changing partners, divorces and “patchwork” families—which are a part of everyday life in our society. When someone abuses sexuality for the gratification of their own desires, or they use their partner as an object for their own satisfaction, they are governed by an ugly egotism that has particularly severe consequences for their character and conscience—a selfishness which, because it can never give a person what he is seeking, develops into such perverse forms as sexual violence within or outside of the marriage, prostitution, paedophilia.

The practice of homosexuality, that is, of same-sex relationships, also belongs to the sphere of the abuse of sexuality. Sexual drive is given to humans in order to procreate and maintain the human race. This is not possible in a homosexual relationship, and the satisfaction of the desires is therefore the central focus of such a relationship. Scripture condemns such practices as the result of man’s turning away from his creator, together with the arrogance and conceit that follow such a decision:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. (*Romans 1:18-27*)

A person with an uncorrupted mind guards a deep sense of shame in themselves against using sexuality as an end in itself and from divorcing it from lifelong faithfulness, that is from the bond of marriage, which grants the sexual union its proper dignity and protection.

Young girls and women who make a degrading offering of themselves to men in the name of “free love” destroy the spirit of motherliness within them. Among other indicators, this fact is most visible in the millions [3] of women who kill their defenceless children before they ever see the light of day—a crime of insufferable magnitude. This shows the destructive character of this egotism especially clearly. A further indicator of the hostility towards children can be seen in the various methods of artificial contraception. Many people are perhaps unaware that the pill has severe health risks for women. The most serious moral problem with the pill, however, is that it is abortive. It does not only prevent fertilisation of the egg. Should the egg have been fertilised, the pill also prevents the embryo—that is, the person who just begun life—from finding its first essential harbour in the womb, and it dies.

Population explosion is an argument often raised in answer to criticism of abortion and artificial methods of contraception. From a Christian perspective, we cannot accept this argument, especially in the western

world, where many abortions are performed despite low birth rates.

The real cause for mankind's problem is that the vast majority of people don't ask our creator how he intended us to lead life here on earth. Many, who would have the possibility to make a change to this world, are led instead by an addiction to their own advantage. They live without thought or conscience and irresponsibly with regard to the needs of others. The resulting social injustice and irresponsible use of sexuality cannot and must not be answered with inhuman means or means hostile to life. To do so would mean heaping one injustice on another.

The only real solution is to return to the good commands of God, as we know them from the Bible—selfless love for one's neighbour that seeks the best for everyone rather than personal advantage.

We are well aware that most people are not ready to live this love, and that we can therefore not expect any global changes. Nevertheless, for those who want to live with a good conscience before man and God, there is no other way. Throughout the history of man, it has unfortunately generally been the case that the masses do not ask what the truth is and what is really good. In this important question, then, we must not let ourselves be influenced by the views of the majority.

The selflessness of love and giving of oneself within the ordinances and boundaries of a lifelong covenant of marriage is the only thing that can allow the relationship between husband and wife to flourish. It is God himself who teaches us this love. For this reason, the marriage partners should not be orientated toward one another, but together, and individually, orientated towards God. Whoever expects fulfilment from their marriage partner, places an unbearable burden on them. Many relationships fall apart under the burden of such false expectations that God alone can fulfil. It is HE alone, who should be most important in a person's life and the aim towards which he is orientated. A person is only then able to give themselves without selfish motives if they live out of the relationship with God. A marriage governed by this selfless love has neither the partner, nor sexuality as its focus. It will be characterized by an earnest sense for the purity and holiness that is willed by God, and which forms the foundation for the relationship between man and wife, based in the awareness of the momentous responsibility connected with the sexual union, as partakers in God's creation.

That is why God gave man very clear commands especially for this area—commands that precious few people even think about today: **ONE** man and **ONE** woman belong together until death. Sexuality belongs within marriage, and **ONLY** there, and is connected with the openness for children, as and when God grants them. For us as Christians, abstinence is the only possible means of contraception if there are reasons to believe that this be God's will. The "natural method" can also be considered morally responsible. It is only when these ordinances are recognized and held holy, that the marriage bond can be given the value that it deserves in God's eyes.

An additional thought concerning unmarried partnerships: The missing marriage certificate is not a licence to change partners at will. When a man and a woman decide to live together and practically consummate the marriage, they are bound to one another for the rest of their lives, as if they had married. Such "free" relationships are nevertheless not legitimate marriages, because the public confession of commitment to the partner is missing (which in our society consists of signing the marriage certificate at the marriage registry office).

⚓ 4 On the Question of Purity

...there is a [separate topic](#) on this website. Here we would like to add some thoughts especially concerning the issue of purity within marriage.

Some people believe that people with problems concerning sexual purity can solve them by getting married. 1 Corinthians 7:8-9 is sometimes used for this:

I say therefore to the unmarried and widows: It is good for them if they remain even as I. But if they cannot contain themselves, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn. (*King James Version KJ21*)

The text in the New International Version and English Standard Version is particularly misleading: “For it is better to marry than to burn *with passion*.”

It is degrading for marriage to be considered as the solution for someone not being able to control their sexual drive. Such considerations reveal a low moral standard that Paul would certainly not support. He often speaks against sexual sins, and that the spirit determines the life of a Christian and not the flesh (i.e. [Galatians 5:16](#)). The deeper the wish and decidedness of a Christian to serve God and love fellow believers is, the less space there will be for fleshly desires. How could Paul give such advice, to more or less legitimize the living out of untamed sexual desires in a marriage?

In 1 Corinthians 6:13,17-20 he writes:

“Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food”—and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. ...But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. ”

⚓ 4.1 How Should We Understand “to Burn” in 1 Corinthians 7:9?

Paul can only have seen marriage as possible where the reasons and motives for it are good in God’s eyes. He must have thought of such believers who inwardly had deeply identified themselves with married life with a specific person, and were “inflamed” with the wish to give fatherly/motherly care to a family, and who saw their responsibility in educating children in the ways of God and in giving themselves to their marriage partner in pure love, as a God-willed supporter and helper.[4]

It is good to remember the standard of Jesus regarding purity. In Matthew 5:27-28 he says:

You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Sin begins in the heart, in thoughts and wishes. That is where the purification must take place. In the following verses, Jesus shows the path to this aim:

If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell. (*Matthew 5:29-30*)

Whoever is clearly decided to deny sin any space in their thoughts, and to separate from everything that can tempt them to sin, will be given freedom by Jesus from all impurity.

Concerning the marriage relationship, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7:1-6:

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." [5] But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. 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. 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. Now as a concession, not a command, I say this.

Here Paul answers a question made to him. Regarding its content we are not exactly informed. In verses 2-6 he speaks about the married Christians. Although he advises that it is good for a man not to touch a woman, he tells those who are married not to deprive each other. He emphasizes that they no longer belong only to themselves, but also to their marriage partner. For this reason, it would not be in accordance with love for one partner to deprive the other of marital relations. Paul sees the danger of temptations for the partner that does not agree fully, from the heart, with renouncing the sexual relationship. He warns them of this.

He says however, that it is of benefit to the marriage relationship when both partners mutually decide to renounce the sexual relationship for a time, in order to take time for prayer and directing their attention towards God, and in doing so, to maintain the right priorities.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5 we read:

For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; (NASB)

The word "vessel" stands for a man's wife. [6] The man is to behave in a holy and honourable way with his wife, in contrast to how it is generally among unbelievers. This clear warning shows that marriage does not serve in itself as a protection from sexual sins. Also here, where sexuality is lived out, the challenge to give the desires the correct limits is great, and not to allow oneself to be led by them.

Peter writes about this matter:

Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honour to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered. (*1 Peter 3:7*)

Here too, the married men are called to be considerate and deal in an honourable way with their wives. If they do not behave decently with their wives, their ability to turn to God will be disturbed.

We find a further verse in Hebrews 13:4:

Let marriage be held in honour among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.

Striving for purity must be a fundamental duty of every Christian, regardless of whether they are married or not.

For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you. (*1 Thessalonians 4:7-8*)

⚓ 5 On Remaining Unmarried

By rejecting divorce and remarriage, and testifying to one life-long marriage as the original plan of God, Jesus made clear what value and dignity marriage has.

However, he shows his disciples another way that goes beyond this—a way that he himself went: to renounce marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, and to find fulfilment in God alone and in service for him.

The disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” But he said to them, “Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.” (*Matthew 19:10-12*)

To become a eunuch for the sake of God’s kingdom means to freely decide to renounce marriage. “Not everyone can receive this saying”: For people of that time and indeed of today, who do not know the power of God, and whose way of thinking is directed towards material life, the thought of making such a sacrifice is inconceivable. Whoever turns their gaze towards eternity, however, and, with this perspective, to how lost this world is, understanding will be “given” that it is better to be free for service in God’s kingdom.

Jesus encourages whoever has this possibility to take it.

When Jesus gave priority to remaining unmarried for the sake God’s kingdom, he did not do it out of disregard for marriage, such as was the case of Gnostics:

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the

insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. (1 Timothy 4:1-3)

The ideology of the Gnostics was characterized by hostility towards the body and rejection of the material world as bad in itself. This led some Gnostic movements to practise strict asceticism and forbidding marriage, for example, in order that, according to their way of thinking, no further souls were locked up in the body—that is, in the prison of the material world.

When set against this backdrop, Paul's words in 1 Timothy 2:15 become more understandable: "Yet she (the woman) will be saved through childbearing [7] —if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control." When a married woman accepted the role of wife and mother and took it seriously and bore children, she showed by this her rejection of Gnosis as a false teaching—a step which was as essential for her salvation as faith, love, holiness and propriety.

When Christians decide to remain celibate, then they do it out of love for God and thankfulness for the salvation they received—choosing what is better in comparison to what is good.

God said to the first man, "Be fruitful and multiply." In our world today, there are now very many people who do not know God, and who have lost their way in false philosophies and religious views. By contrast, there are few people who are ready to follow Jesus with their whole heart, and to bring the light of the gospel to the world.

Paul's love for the lost motivated him to give his life untiringly for their salvation. This love is what motivated many Christians after him, including us, to be as free as possible from such material obligations and cares as are inherent in marriage, in order to spiritually serve as many people as possible.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 7, Paul repeats the principle three times, that each should remain in the situation he was in when he was called (see verses 17, 20, 24). He wants to encourage the believers to direct their attention wholly to the world to come, which is imperishable.

For those who were single when they repented, it normally meant remaining single:

Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. (1 Corinthians 7:27)

By this encouragement Paul did not want to exclude the possibility of getting married, but such cases should be sincerely tested before God. Such is the case Paul treats in verses 36–38:

If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly towards his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin.

The expression "**his** betrothed [8]" shows that it refers to two people who were promised to one another before they became Christians, and who had already prepared themselves for married life together. Paul's opinion that they can marry, is to be understood in the sense of a concession, as he further states:

But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.

A Christian who is married can serve in many ways, as is testified to in the New Testament, but due to the commitments that are naturally connected with the tasks and responsibilities of family life, he is divided (see [verses 33–34](#)). That is what Paul was referring to when he speaks of “worldly troubles” (literally: trouble in the flesh) in [verse 28](#). It is a good and important task to care for children and educate them, but it is nevertheless connected with problems, difficulties and worries that Paul wants to spare them, in view of what it means for the many spiritual tasks.

It is possible that some Christians in Corinth wanted to discontinue their existing marriage partnership in order to be freer for spiritual tasks. Paul counters this by stating that, although he would wish that everyone were unmarried as he is, the brother who is married is also blessed with gifts from God with which he can serve ([verse 7](#)), and should not seek to separate from his partner ([verse 27](#)).

On the other hand, he urges married Christians to be conscious of the passing nature of marriage, and to put married life behind the things which are connected with the imperishable world.

This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none,...and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away. (*1 Corinthians 7:29,31*)

Some hold the opinion that Paul appealed to the Christians to remain celibate because he thought that the end of the world was near. Verses 26 and 29 are referred to:

I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is....
This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none....

What Paul writes to the Thessalonians about this matter, excludes this interpretation:

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. [9] Let no one deceive you in any way. (*2 Thessalonians 2:1–3a*)

Paul did not expect the imminent return of Jesus. The “present distress” he writes about much rather refers to the spiritual need that rules the world. It is therefore, a “need of manpower”, for the labourers are few. Jesus was untiring in his dedication for people’s eternal lives. He saw that they were like sheep without a shepherd. Many people wander aimlessly through life, not knowing the way to true life. We can help such people in need, and for this reason, it is good to be as free and available as possible. That is why Paul encourages unmarried brothers and sisters to remain as they are.

Paul’s instructions to Timothy in [1 Timothy 5:11–15](#), that young widows should marry, is by no means a contradiction to 1 Corinthians 7. Here too, he does not give marriage priority over remaining single, but

recommends it in contrast to the dubious and harmful activities mentioned in [verse 13](#). We cannot assume that all young widows were the same (there will not have been very many of them either), but obviously, there were cases in which the care of their needs by the Church led to a disorderly way of life, even to the point of their abandoning Christ. It is in this context that Paul writes that it is better for them to marry again, and to devote themselves to the obligations of housewife and mother, in keeping with the original decision they made for their life.

⚓ 6 Testimonies from Early Christian Writings

In early Christian literature we find indications that a great number of Christians served God by remaining unmarried.

Justin Apology I, 15:7: "...And many, both men and women, who have been Christ's disciples from childhood, remain pure at the age of sixty or seventy years; and I boast that I could produce such from every race of men. For what shall I say, too, of the countless multitude of those who have reformed intemperate habits, and learned these things?"

Athenagoras, A Plea for the Christians 33: Nay, you would find many among us, both men and women, growing old unmarried, in hope of living in closer communion with God. But if the remaining in virginity and in the state of an eunuch brings nearer to God, while the indulgence of carnal thought and desire leads away from Him, in those cases in which we shun the thoughts, much more do we reject the deeds. For we bestow our attention; not on the study of words, but on the exhibition and teaching of actions,—that a person should either remain as he was born, or be content with one marriage; for a second marriage is only a specious adultery. "For whosoever puts away his wife", says He, "and marries another, commits adultery"; not permitting a man to send her away whose virginity he has brought to an end, nor to marry again. For he who deprives himself of his first wife, even though she be dead, is a cloaked adulterer, resisting the hand of God, because in the beginning God made one man and one woman, and dissolving the strictest union of flesh with flesh, formed for the intercourse of the race.

Tertullian, Against Marcion I, 29:1-4: "...Let us see, then, whether it be a just one: not as if we aimed at destroying the happiness of sanctity, as do certain Nicolaitans in their maintenance of lust and luxury, but as those who have come to the knowledge of sanctity, and pursue it and prefer it, without detriment, however, to marriage; not as if we superseded a bad thing by a good, but only a good thing by a better. For we do not reject marriage, but simply refrain from it. Nor do we prescribe sanctity as the rule, but only recommend it, observing it as a good, yea, even the better state, if each man uses it carefully according to his ability; but at the same time earnestly vindicating marriage, whenever hostile attacks are made against it is a polluted thing, to the disparagement of the Creator. For He bestowed His blessing on matrimony also, as on an honourable estate, for the increase of the human race; as He did indeed on the whole of His creation, for wholesome and good uses."

Minucius Felix, Octavius 31:5: "...But we maintain our modesty not in appearance, but in our heart we gladly abide by the bond of a single marriage; in the desire of procreating, we know either one wife, or none at all. We practise sharing in banquets, which are not only modest, but also sober: for we do not indulge in entertainments nor prolong our feasts with

wine; but we temper our joyousness with gravity, with chaste discourse, and with body even more chaste (divers of us unviolated) enjoy rather than make a boast of a perpetual virginity of a body."

⚓ 7 On "Clerical Celibacy"

We think that it is not in accordance with human nature, that monasteries and convents are made up of single sex communities in which they attempt to curb their desires through a life strongly determined by formalisms.

It is also problematic to demand of priests, who through their office are somewhat isolated from their parishioners, to live celibate lives, given that they have had to renounce the brotherly and sisterly care which Christians experience through their fellowship. This unbiblical and unnatural lifestyle is the result of combining the pursuit of a Christian virtue with a non-Christian church structure, and has unfortunately led many clergy to hypocrisy and grave sins.

It must be mentioned here, however, that the main reason for forbidding Roman Catholic priests to marry was not an endeavour for Christian virtues. The introduction of mandatory celibacy in the 11th century was much rather an instrument of church politics. It was intended to ensure that the church real estate remained in the hands of the Roman Catholic Church rather than being distributed among the children of the priests. The Roman Catholic Church did not wish to relinquish her position as the largest land owner.

⚓ 8 "For Whoever Does the Will of God, He Is My Brother and Sister and Mother": How Brotherly Love Changes Families

And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you." And he answered them, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother." (*Mark 3:31-35*)

Unfortunately we find a common occurrence in our society that we can only describe as family egotism.^[10] Here, the "well-being" of one's own family (often just the immediate family) takes highest priority. There is little readiness to open up to outsiders, because the aim is to dedicate oneself to one's closest relatives in order to ensure that the family holds together.

By contrast, a family is actually bound more strongly by working together to share with and help those in need, independently of how closely related someone is, and of how much and how often this help is required. In addition to this, family egotism has a bad effect on the development of children. By it, they are trained to direct themselves toward their own needs instead of practising selfless love. They hardly learn to open themselves for the rights of others, or to partake in the sufferings and joys of outsiders.

We often hear from religious people that it is not possible for them to meet together with their fellow believers more often than once or twice a week because more fellowship would be detrimental to family life. By this, they do the very thing Jesus criticizes in the parable of the great banquet. Their personal family/private life is given priority, and the eternal things thereby relegated to second place. The sorry result is that “church” life today is essentially reduced to the attending of meetings which are separated from people’s private life.

Jesus taught us that the spiritual connection between those who follow him and do the will of God is of greater value than family ties (see the passage quoted above). In the religious world, this fact is mostly ignored. Even when people officially call one another “brother” and “sister”, they do not put brotherly love into practice. Each person goes back to their private life after the meeting is over. They hardly know what is in each other’s hearts, what they believe, or how they use their time. Through the lack of fight for personal holiness, the foundation is missing to be able to help others in it. This indifferent and unloving attitude is justified by saying that each person has to know for himself what is right for him—no one wants to “interfere” in other people’s lives....

In New Testament times it was normal for Christians to meet for daily fellowship and to share their material possessions.

And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (*Acts 2:42–47*)

When they understood that Jesus gave his life for the redemption of mankind, they also realized that sharing their lives in loving, selfless devotion is the path he set us free to take.

By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. (*1 John 3:16*)

Trust and transparency can be fostered when we are able to see what is going on in our brother’s life and can see that he doesn’t seek his own benefit, but the will of God.

Through their daily fellowship the Christians were able to get to know each other deeply and to help one another to remain on the narrow path by encouraging, admonishing and comforting one another. Their readiness to share didn’t stop there—they also shared their property. The people in their surrounding were able to see this love as a clear sign that a different Spirit was at work, and that God’s love formed the foundation for their common life.

Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. (*Acts 4:32–33*)

We can presume that a high percentage of the thousands of people who repented at that time in Jerusalem

were married. The Christian families shared their lives in community with all the other believers. In this way, no one had to carry the burden of his spiritual, family or financial problems alone. Sadly, Jesus' words in [Matthew 18:19](#) are often taken as a kind of definition of church life. In those days no one thought that a gathering of 2 or 3 family members constituted church life. In the New Testament we read of a number of "house churches" where a church gathered together in the house of a certain believer or believing family. [11]

For a child's development, growing up in this kind of environment is a great blessing. From an early age they can learn not to put themselves in the centre and not to be put in the centre by their parents or grandparents. They are brought up to be submissive, modest and generous. This is the best preparation for them to do God's will with a serving attitude as they develop the ability to make their own decisions.

A reason that many people in mainstream and free churches find the thought of making a decision to remain unmarried so alien may be the fact that brotherly love, as the distinguishing mark of Christians, is generally absent there. The result is that unmarried people remain alone and lonely. "Singles social events" are sometimes offered as a "solution", usually with the intention that a few of the singles might still manage to find a partner. "Church" activities are thus organized to provide a kind of dating service—another proof of the worldly character of these "churches".

We regard this as a cheap and easy way of calming one's conscience while avoiding the real solution, namely to open up our lives out of love for every brother and sister, thus returning to the biblical example of church life.

A Christian community is guided by the spirit of Christ's love and devotion. As Christians we offer ourselves to serve our brothers and sisters with everything we have and with our whole being. In this way everyone can receive the help he needs in his walk with God. We also share the burden of the earthly worries and needs commonly. Even those who do not have any believing family members or are unmarried are involved in the daily sharing and support of our extended family of faith, the church, and everyone participates in mutual giving and receiving. Thus we experience the fulfilment of Jesus' promise to his disciples:

And Peter said, "See, we have left our homes and followed you." And he said to them, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life." (*Luke 18:28-30*)

The pursuit of the same brotherly love for all is what distinguishes us as brothers and sisters in faith ([1 Corinthians 12:25](#)). We experience deep spiritual relationships which develop as a result of God's work in and among us. Consequently, despite facing some struggles, it is much easier to decide to renounce marriage, to remain faithful to this decision, and thus to be able to dedicate ourselves freely and unhindered to the ministry for the sake of other people's eternal life. It strengthens us and makes us grateful when we see how God transforms our renunciation into a blessing.

We know well from our own experience that this decision is not an easy one, not least because of the glorification of sexuality which permeates our society, promising ultimate satisfaction in a sexual relationship. Unfortunately most people are exposed to this influence from their childhood and it is not easy to avoid.

This motivates us all the more to invite every person to get to know the alternative which Jesus offers us in his church. The extent to which the church differs from the world, and the depth of Jesus' connection and identification with the church is well expressed in Ephesians 5:25-32:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. ...For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

Your Email*

Your Message*

Send

Footnotes

1. The parallel passage in Matthew 10:37-38 explains in which way Jesus uses the word "hate": Our closest relatives and even our own life must not be more precious for us than he.
2. Source: [TopTen Reviews: Internet Pornography Statistics](#). 2020.06.04.
3. See: [Gutmacher Institute](#).
4. The Greek word "to burn" (*pyroō*) occurs more than 20 times in the Bible, but never in the sense of sexual passion. Paul uses it figuratively once more in 2 Corinthians 11:29, where it expresses his deep sense of responsibility, his concern for and sympathy with his brothers and sisters in faith.
5. NASB: not to touch a woman.
6. Some refer it to one's own body. We do not consider it to be so fitting to say that someone should know how to possess his own body.
7. Darby: preserved in childbearing.
8. lit.: virgin.
9. KJV: is at hand.
10. In his book "Lebensführung", written at the beginning of the 20th century, Fr. W. Foerster formulated the following thoughts on this topic: "Family life carries with it not only the potential for great educational forces, but also great dangers for the inner development of a person.... Family life *can* educate a person to develop a higher sense of moral responsibility—though for people who have not set themselves any higher aims it frequently becomes nothing other than a breeding ground for the all-consuming egotism and naive boasting and self-mirroring in one's own offspring. ...The idolatry of the self, which is at the root of the excessive cult of the ego, is unconsciously transmitted to one's children, poisoning their whole emotional life through smugness, destroying the modesty, without which moral character and conscience cannot develop." (1922, p.86).
11. See Romans 16:3-6,10,11,14,15; Colossians 4:15, Philemon 2.

Permission is granted to reproduce this article for personal use unchanged and complete only. Content may not be reproduced in any other form without written permission from www.christians.eu

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked "NASB" are taken from the NASB

Scripture quotations marked "NIV" are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com