

**DOES THE SCRIPTURE TEACH THAT A PERSON WHO  
IS COVERTED AFTER HAVING BEEN DIVORCED  
AND REMARRIED IN THE ABSENCE OF FORNICATION  
IS TO “REMAIN AS CALLED”?**

**AN OVERVIEW OF 1 CORINTHIANS 7**

In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul is apparently answering questions from the Corinthians concerning marriage. He deals with the issue in a very practical manner. His answers are, for the most part if not in whole, based upon the “present distress” which the Corinthian Christians were enduring at the time of his writing. The chapter divides naturally as follows:

Section 1 -- General instruction concerning marrying or remaining unmarried - vv. 1-7.

Section 2 -- Specific instruction to specific groups regarding marriage – vv. 8-24.

Subsection 1 - The unmarried and widows - vv. 8-9.

Subsection 2 - Married Christians - vv. 10-11.

Subsection 3 - Mates in mixed marriages - vv. 12-16.

Subsection 4 - Discussion of the principle involved - vv. 17-24.

Subsection 5 - Instructions concerning virgins - vv. 25-38.

Subsection 6 - Instruction concerning remarriage - vv. 39-40.

This discussion concentrates on Subsection 5.

In the context of 1 Corinthians 7 Paul is answering questions which had been asked by the Corinthian Christians. Paul is responding to certain of those questions in which the Corinthians were apparently inquiring whether it was necessary, after conversion, to remain in a marriage with an unbeliever. In response to such an inquiry, Paul instructs that they do need to remain if the unbeliever is willing to remain.

Paul’s second question in the passage is in v. 27 - “Are you released from a wife?” The perfect tense of the verb “released” refers not to freedom from marriage by the divorce of a spouse, but rather a state of freedom from matrimonial ties. Paul is addressing his comments in verses 25-35 to unmarried persons - precisely virgins (7:25). The Greek term *parthenos* signifies maiden or virgin, and Paul’s use of the feminine article excludes all reference to a bachelor. The term is used only rarely to refer to an unmarried man. In the N.T. it is so

used in Rev. 14:4 where the context makes it clear. While these “maidens” belong to a general class of the unmarried considered by Paul in vv. 8 and 9, they also constitute a distinct class to which Paul gives an extensive and particular treatment. His teaching here would apply as well to widows and widowers (cf. 7:39). Paul’s main point set forth in v. 26 is the principle of marital status quo. Whether you are married or single, Paul says stay that way! To argue that Paul is advocating the remarriage of divorced persons, and that this may be done without sin, is to violate the context of the passage and contradict the clear teaching of Paul elsewhere and the teaching of Jesus in the gospels.

If it is better for a man to remain unmarried, some may press this to the extreme and seek release from existing marriages. “Art thou bound to a wife? Do not seek release.” The two perfect tenses in the two questions refer to present conditions as the result of a past act. The questions are direct, personal, and thus stronger than mere conditional clauses would be. But if a person is unmarried, Paul advises not to seek a marriage because of the present distress. Paul’s judgment and his advice concerning the unmarried lie in the realm of expediency and cannot be transferred into the realm of moral right or wrong. Paul is stating what is best and most expedient under certain circumstances and not what is right or what is sin under these circumstances. Therefore he adds that if the unmarried marries, it is not sin. The matter of marrying or remaining single in the present distress has nothing to do with committing or with avoiding sin, and no such idea should be entertained or conclusion drawn concerning such. The marriage which Paul discourages is not sin, but will bring suffering from which he would spare them.

It is true that difficult questions are created by the question of what to advise persons who are baptized after unscriptural divorces and remarriage, particularly in the realm of how it may affect those otherwise innocent, such as children. However, sympathy for children or others, however admirable, does not affect God’s law. If sympathy for those who are affected by obedience to the gospel (either their own obedience or that of others) allows God’s law of marriage to be disregarded, then will it not allow one to disregard God’s law of baptism, self-denial, or any of His other commands? If not, why not? Would not such passages as “Whoso cometh after me and hateth not his own father and mother...,” or “How shall we that are dead to sin live any longer therein...,” or “If we sin willfully... there remaineth no more sacrifice for sin...,” find application in this context?

If it is argued that God would not require couples to live a celibate life under these conditions, it need only be responded that He does require it in the case of separated or divorced believers remain unmarried or be reconciled to your husband.

Some suggest that those baptized after unscriptural divorces and remarried may remain so because baptism takes away all sin. However, such is not the case.

All agree that baptism takes away only those sins of which the sinner has repented. Even if baptism takes away past sin, no one contends that baptism permits one to continue in sin. Further, no one contends that, if adultery is a sin before marriage, baptism somehow changes the relationship so that it is no longer adultery after baptism. The issue is thus clear: What is necessary to repent of an adulterous relationship?

A usual response to this question is that repentance does not involve terminating the relationship because adultery cannot be “undone.” The common analogy is to murder of which it is said that repentance does not require the impossible - the dead cannot be raised, murder cannot be undone. It is true that a murdered person cannot be brought back to life. Does that mean that the murderer is without obligation to repent? Must he not repent of the spirit that led to the act? Must he not manifest genuine remorse over taking a life without justification? Must he not make whatever restitution is possible, which may include providing for the family of the deceased, as well as a prison term? The truth is that murder is not a true parallel to adultery. In the case of murder, there is a past fact of history which cannot be altered. In the case of adultery, a continuing relationship is involved. While a murder cannot be undone, a relationship can be discontinued.

Stealing is a better analogy. If a person repents of stealing money from a bank, is he not required *to* restore it? His obligation is not lessened if he has spent the money, it is only made *more* difficult. So with adultery. It is the difficulty of the restoration, not its impossibility, which gives rise *to* the argument.

But does Paul not instruct those who have been baptized after unscriptural divorces to “remain in the state wherein they were called”? Paul’s advice is contained in v. 27 - “Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free [other translations, “loosed”] from a wife [other translations, “woman”]? Do not seek marriage.” (RSV) The language, being “loosed from a woman,” is so highly unusual that it leads to the questions: 1). Who is being addressed? and, 2). How do the questions relate to the immediate context?

The nearly universal view is that Paul is speaking in general terms to the married and the unmarried. Thus the NIV: “Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife.” In this view what Paul does at the outset, in light of the formula “stay as you are,” is to speak once again on both sides of the issue. First, he repeats what he has already said to the married: “No divorce.” But that is not now his concern; rather, he uses that question to set up the second, which speaks to their present circumstances: “Do not seek marriage.” What favors this view is the language “bound to a woman (= wife),” which is Paul’s ordinary usage for the indissolubility of marriage as long as a mate is living (v. 39; Rom. 7:2). The difficulty lies with the word “loosed,” which is otherwise unknown to denote divorce. If Paul had intended divorce, therefore, why did he use this strange word? To which the answer is that Paul had

both situations in mind, so he chose a word that could express “being loosed” (=divorce) for the married, whose corresponding verb could mean to “be free from” (=never married) for the case at hand - although the second question would then be a word to singles in general, rather than a specific word to the betrothed. On the other hand, it is possible that both questions speak directly to the present situation. The clue lies with the word “loosed,” which is found throughout the papyri as a technical term for discharging someone from the obligations of a contract. If it means that here, then he is speaking first to the betrothed (the “virgins”): “Are you bound (=under obligation) to a woman? Then do not seek to break off the obligation.” The second question would then expand the point to include all singles: “Are you free from such obligations? Do not seek a wife.” To those who would argue that if Paul intended that, why did he not use “virgin” in the first question (i.e., “Are you bound to a virgin? Do not seek release”), the answer is the same as above. The one term that could cover all possibilities is “woman,” which may refer both to a “woman” to whom one is engaged and a “wife” that one is encouraged not to seek. Either of these is possible, but on balance the second one seems to fit the immediate context better. Otherwise the questions really are generalities, and only indirectly address the matter at hand. But if the second view is correct, then the balanced sentences in v. 28, which qualify what is said here, speak to both questions; and the subjects “you” and “the virgin” refer in particular to those who are already under obligation to one another. Paul immediately qualifies v. 27 by allowing its opposite. In this case, however, what is said is so clearly a full qualification that it renders the imperatives of v. 27 to be strictly advice.

Furthermore, what is said is so nearly identical to vv. 36-38 that it is difficult to believe that the two are not the same piece of advice to the same people. As throughout the preceding section, even though the final form of the advice in w. 36-38 speaks directly to the man, the word of exception here is to both parties: “If you (i.e., the man spoken to in vv. 26-27 do marry, you have not sinned; and if the (not “a”) virgin marries, she has not sinned. This reflects the Corinthian view, which was either specifically suggesting that marriage might be sin or else implying it by the obligatory way they were pressing their ascetic slogans.

Even assuming that, when he is addressing issues relating to virgins, Paul is still instructing the Corinthians to “remain where called,” one must consider whether the principle is qualified or unqualified. If it is unqualified, may a pagan continue to live with 10 wives (a form of adultery) if he is called in that situation? May homosexuals continue to live together (a relationship) if they are in that relationship when they first hear the gospel?

Some urge that those who are divorced in the absence of fornication and remarried prior to conversion may remain in that state because there is no biblical example of two persons separating after obeying the gospel. Neither is there an example of a polygamist or a homosexual discontinuing a relationship. The lack of specific examples of every specific sin repented of does not mean that those

sins could be continued. We do have the example of Herod who had taken Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, of which John the Baptist said, "It is not lawful for you to have her." Apparently God's law was applicable. If it was unlawful for Herod to have Herodias before baptism, why would it be lawful after baptism? Why did not John simply tell Herod to be baptized? In 1 Cor. 6:9-11 Paul listed many of the Corinthians' sins and said that some of them had lived in these sins? Why is this not a specific example of persons leaving those sins? Were the adulterers the only ones whose relationship was "sanctified" by conversion? What about the homosexuals and the thieves? They were in the same list. If one of the relationships was "sanctified," why not all of them? If one group had to leave their relationship, *e.g.*, the homosexuals, why not all of them? Again, why is this not a specific example of the termination of an adulterous relationship?

Other questions which must be considered are:

1. Must one who is called as a divorced person remain in that state? Is he or she free to undo the relationship, or is it sin to do so? If the marriage is acceptable after baptism, why would it not be sin to break it up and sin to advocate such?

2. What if only one spouse is baptized - would the baptized spouse have a sanctioned marriage while the unbaptized spouse had an unsanctioned marriage? Would the baptized spouse be approved of God while, regarding the same marriage, the unbaptized spouse was an adulterer or an adulteress?

3. Does the "remain where called" principle apply only when a marriage is involved, or changes a sinful practice into a righteous one or a sinful relationship into a righteous one? All admit that baptism must be preceded by true repentance. Repentance requires not only change of mind; it also requires heart amendment. [Thayer, p. 406]. There is no passage on baptism which states or implies that it sanctifies a sinful relationship. If baptism (or conversion) sanctifies an otherwise sinful marriage relationship, will it sanctify all or any other relationships? An extortion relationship? A criminal relationship? A different kind of immoral relationship?

To ask these questions and answer them in light of God's word will lead to the inevitable conclusion that an adulterous marriage before conversion remains so after conversion. To take special teaching in 1 Corinthians 7 and teach otherwise in contradiction to Matthew 19 is to teach error. Those who refuse to correct such teaching, especially elders when it is taught to those over whom they are overseers, support and endorse error. God will hold them responsible for their failure.