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UNMARRIED "FOR THE SAKE OF THE KINGDOM" (MATTHEW 19:12) IN THE EARLY CHURCH

WILLIAM A. HETH

The possibility of remaining unmarried because of the claims and interests of the kingdom of God was clearly a desirable option for many of the early Christians. The practice of celibacy in the early church cannot simply be attributed to the ascetic atmosphere of the day. Both the concepts and terminology of Matt 19:12 stand behind this practice. The ability to remain continent in singleness was considered to be a gift from God, and the one entrusted with that gift was exhorted to remember the Giver of it and not to think that his abilities were found in himself. The single person who feels called to a life of singleness for the sake of serving the Lord more fully may even be thought of as a sign that Christians are living in urgent times: the time between Christ's resurrection and his return.

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INTRODUCTION

To Marry or Not to Marry?

ALTHOUGH the majority of God's expectations are self-evident, a particularly disconcerting scriptural counsel concerns the advantages of remaining unmarried.[1] This option is especially intriguing for

[1]"The traditional [Roman Catholic] understanding of commands-counsels might be summarized as follows. Command has as its object a duty, i.e., an unconditional obligation. The fulfilment of such a command is an *opus debitum*; its nonfulfilment is a sin. Counsel is an invitation or suggestion which does not oblige, but leaves the decision up to the one invited (*consilium in optione ponitur ejus cui datur*). The fulfilment here is a work of supererogation and its nonfulfilment is a positive imperfection" (J. W. Glaser, "Commands-Counsels: a Pauline Teaching?" *TS* 31 [1970] 275). Glaser's study focuses on statements made by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7. He argues that 1 Corinthians 7 does not support the traditional commands-counsels teaching, and that it is doubtful that this teaching harmonizes with the major lines of Paul's theology (p. 286). Note in our overview of Paul's statements on singleness and marriage the

two groups: those married Christians who are serious about the role they play in advancing the claims and interests of God's kingdom and, secondly, those Christians still contemplating marriage. The "singleness passages" in the NT lead the former group to struggle with the challenge of being effective disciples while maintaining a strong commitment to the demands of leading a family. For the latter group, these passages present either a personal dilemma or challenge: to marry or not to marry. The single person faces a dilemma because the single and the married state appear to be equally satisfactory lifestyles for the Christian. Not knowing which to choose, the single person, on the one hand, is confronted with the prospect of remaining single in a society—whether inside or outside the church—that considers marriage the norm. On the other hand, the scriptural counsel to remain single, found primarily in 1 Corinthians 7, may contain a challenge: those contemplating marriage[2] are implicitly urged to view this question not primarily in the light of the "norm," but in the light of the contributions that they can make as Christ's disciples in a world that entangles married men and women in worldly concerns and troubles that could have been avoided had they remained single (cf. 1 Cor 7:28, 32–35).

The Protestant Reaction to Celibacy

The NT passages that advance the option of singleness are the very texts to which the Christian church has appealed from earliest times to encourage celibacy among its ministers (Matt 19:10–12; 1 Cor 7:1–9, 25–40).[3] But "celibacy" is a word that makes modern

different words he employs to encourage or command a course of action. See further the study by P. W. Gooch, "Authority and Justification in Theological Ethics: A Study in I Corinthians 7," *JRE* 11 (1983) 62–74.

[2]We could also include here those considering remarriage after the death of or divorce by a spouse. Paul's personal preference for the single state seems to extend to believers who find themselves in these situations as well (cf. 1 Cor 7:8–9, 39–40, 10–11 [when reconciliation is not possible]).

[3]Cf. E. H. Plumptre and I. G. Smith, "Celibacy," *A Dictionary of Christian Antiquities* (ed. W. Smith and S. Cheetham), 1:323–27; G. Cross, "Celibacy (Christian)," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (ed. J. Hastings), 3:271–75; P. Delhaye, "Celibacy, History of," *NCE*, 3:369–70; B. J. Leonard, "Celibacy as a Christian Lifestyle in the History of the Church," *RevExp* 74 (1977) 21–32. P. Schaff (*History of the Christian Church* [6th ed.; New York: Scribner's, 1892], 2:397) writes that "The old catholic exaggeration of celibacy attached itself to four passages of Scripture, viz. Matt. 19:12; 22:30; 1 Cor. 7:7 sqq.; and Rev. 14:4; but it went far beyond them, and unconsciously admitted influences from foreign modes of thought." Less than adequate interpretations of Luke 14:26–27 (cf. Matt 10:37–38), 18:29 (cf. Matt 19:29; Mark 10:29), and esp. Luke 20:34–36 (cf. Matt 22:29–30; Mark 12:24–25), which played no small role in Marcionite asceticism (cf. D. E. Aune, *The Cultic Setting of Realized Eschatology in Early Christianity* [NovTSup 28; Leiden: Brill, 1972] 22, 195–219), also resulted in certain unhealthy practices among Christian ascetics.

Protestants uncomfortable. Ever since the Reformation when Martin Luther boldly broke from the Catholic Church, denounced compulsory clerical celibacy as the work of the devil, and abandoned monastic vows for married life, Evangelicals in the Reformed tradition have associated celibacy with unscriptural excess. Did not Roman Catholicism forbid its clergy to marry? Paul told Timothy that forbidding marriage was demonic (1 Tim 4:1–3). And is not celibacy often an unnatural state, productive of grave disorders of the psychological variety, and symptomatic of a self-centeredness that is antisocial?[4] Though criticisms of the celibate lifestyle could be multiplied, these are sufficient to suggest that Protestants may have yielded to an opposite extreme.

The average Christian has lost the context of the vicious—and probably well-motivated—Protestant attack on Catholic celibacy at the time of the Reformation. These criticisms primarily were made in the face of the Catholic practice of enforced clerical celibacy,[5] and not on celibacy/singleness as a state in which the Christian might serve his Lord with fewer distractions. Calvin's perspective is found in his summary of Paul's statements about marriage and singleness in 1 Corinthians 7:

> The whole discussion amounts to this. (1) Celibacy is preferable to marriage, because it gives us freedom, and, in consequence better opportunity for the service of God. (2) Yet no compulsion should be used to prevent individuals from marrying, if they want to do so. (3) Moreover marriage itself is the remedy which God has provided for our weakness; and everybody who is not blessed with the gift of continency ought to make use of it. Every person of sound judgment will agree with me in saying that the whole of Paul's teaching on marriage is summed up in these three sentences.[6]

[4]Apologists for celibacy as a vocation in life have felt compelled to refute such accusations. See the foreword by T. Worden in L. Legrand, *The Biblical Doctrine of Virginity* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1963), ix–x.

[5]"The Reformed tradition, in its criticism of the celibacy that is compulsory for the priesthood in the Western Church, was led without noticing it to consider Christian celibacy as something quite out of the ordinary and decidedly odd" (M. Thurian, *Marriage and Celibacy* [trans. N. Emerton; Studies in Ministry and Worship; London: SCM 1959] 85; cf. Cross, *ERE* 3:275; Leonard, "Celibacy as a Christian Lifestyle," 28). Though the tendency towards clerical celibacy set in very early, the absolute prohibition of clerical marriage did not come in the Western Church until the twelfth century.

[6]J. Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* (trans. J. W. Fraser; Calvin's Commentaries; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960) 167. Calvin is wrong, however, when he states that Paul sees marriage as a remedy against incontinence for the never-before-married. In 1 Cor 7:1–7 Paul is addressing married couples who are abstaining from normal marital relations, as Origen ("Origen on I Corinthians," ed. C. Jenkins, *JTS* 9 [1907–8] 500–501) understood long ago. Cf. also Thurian, *Marriage and Celibacy*, 90–91.

By focusing on the negative aspects of celibacy within Catholicism, Protestants have neglected to define how Jesus' saying about "eunuchs" for the kingdom's sake and Paul's counsels to singleness in 1 Corinthians 7 apply to the believer today. One writer remarks that "in Protestantism, where marriage has been more nearly normative for clergy as well as for laymen, little scholarly attention has been given to celibacy or the larger subject of the single person."[7]

Singleness: Problem or Potential?

It is not surprising that evangelical seminaries train their future pastors in the discipline of marriage counseling. Yet scarcely a word is said about counseling someone to remain single, if they are able,[8] for the express purpose of rendering a more devoted service to the Lord. Both the secular society at large and the Christian church as a whole treat singleness, practically speaking, as something of an accursed condition (to overstate the case). The same seems to have been true in ancient times as well. A Sumerian proverb from ca. 2600 B.C. states: "He that supports no wife, he that supports no son, may his misfortunes be multiplied."[9] We read in the intertestamental Jewish literature that

> He who acquires a wife gets his best possession, a helper fit for him and a pillar of support. Where there is no fence, the property will be plundered; and where there is no wife, a man will wander about and sigh [Sir 36:24–25].
>
> A daughter keeps her father secretly wakeful, and worry over her robs him of sleep; when she is young lest she do not marry, or if married, lest she be hated [divorced]; while a virgin, lest she be defiled or become pregnant in her father's house; or having a husband, lest she prove unfaithful, or, though married, lest she be barren [Sir 42:9–10].[10]

In the Talmudic period, at the end of the first century A.D., Rabbi Eliezer Ben Hyrcanus stated that "Anyone who does not engage in

[7]F. Stagg, "Biblical Perspectives on the Single Person," *RevExp* 74 (1977) 5.

[8]We cannot discuss here the question of how a Christian can discover whether or not God has enabled him to live a life of singleness for the sake of the kingdom. On this subject see Thurian, *Marriage and Celibacy*, 86–88, 92–94. L. M. Weber ("Celibacy," in *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi* [ed. K. Rahner; New York: Seabury, 1975] 183) believes that "celibacy is probably not one of the charisms which is either there or not, but one of those which may also be striven for, according to the counsel of the Apostle Paul (1 Cor 12:31)."

[9]Cf. W. G. Lambert, "Celibacy in the World's Oldest Proverbs," *BASOR* 169 (1963) 63.

[10]*RSV* (*The Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha* [ed. H. G. May and B. M. Metzger; New York: Oxford, 1965]). Cf. A. Cronbach, "Ethics in Noncanonical Jewish Writings," *IDB*, 2:164.

the propagation of the race is as though he sheds blood" (*b. Yebam.* 63*b*). Another rabbi said, "Any man who has no wife lives without joy, without blessing, and without goodness" (*b. Yebam.* 62*b*). The rabbis unanimously taught that it was a duty for every Israelite to marry and have children. There is only one known instance of a celibate rabbi: Ben ᶜAzzai. Yet even Ben ᶜAzzai proclaimed the duty to marry as a command.[11]

Throughout the history of man it has been assumed that one of his foremost duties is to marry, an assumption based largely on the command that men and women "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Gen 1:28).[12] In the OT the institutions of marriage and the family were extremely important because in that period God used a particular race, the Israelites, as a vehicle for accomplishing his redemptive purpose.[13] The Messiah was destined to come through the seed of Abraham (Gen 17:8; Gal 3:16) and the line of David (Matt 1:1–16; Luke 1:32–33, 68–70; 2:4; 3:23–38; John 7:42). But the religious importance of physical descent (cf. Rom 9:5, 3*b*) has ended with the coming of Jesus (cf. Gal 3:26–29; 6:15). We have entered a new era in which marriage—though still spoken of as a sacred institution (Matt 19:4–6; Eph 5:22–33; Rev 19:7–9)—is not as decisive for the coming of the Kingdom as it was in the OT. Paul states clearly that marriage belongs to the form of this world that is passing away (1 Cor 7:29–31).[14] Jesus said that in the world to come the institution of marriage would no longer exist (Matt 22:30; Mark 12:25; Luke 20:34–36). And though "for the sake of the kingdom" the people of God in the OT married and bore children, a new economy has been inaugurated by the life and words of Jesus Christ: there are Christians who will remain unmarried "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept this let him accept it" (Matt 19:12*c–d*).

[11]Cf. J. Jeremias, "Nochmals: War Paulus Witwer?" *ZNW* 28 (1929) 321–23, esp. p. 323. Also J. Schneider, "εὐνοῦχος," *TDNT* 2 (1964) 767.

[12]*NASB* translation and so throughout unless indicated otherwise.

[13]Note that Isa 56:3–5 prophesies of a time when eunuchs will no longer be excluded (cf. Deut 23:1) from God's kingdom blessings. The eunuch in this passage calls himself "a dry tree" (v 3), because everyone in Israel would complain that he is not able to contribute offspring to the community of God.

[14]In Paul's teaching, Jesus' messianic reign began with his resurrection and exaltation. So the Christian lives in the tension of the *already* of Christ's resurrection (in which the blessings of the age to come are now partly available) and the *not yet* of his parousia (when the fullness of our promised salvation is realized) (cf. G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974] 369–73, 479–94; H. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* [trans. J. R. De Witt; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975] 52–53). Thus in this age of the church, singleness for the kingdom's sake could be considered as a prophetic (eschatological) sign, a reminder that the Christian should not become too attached to the things of this world (cf. Thurian, *Marriage and Celibacy*, 112–15).

So in the eyes of Paul, in light of the coming eternal state, and because of the intercalary character of the kingdom in these last days (cf. Heb 1:2), marriage should not be the *only* possibility that Christian leaders set before unmarried believers eager to serve Christ. Goppelt makes a provocative remark about the new state of affairs introduced by the coming of Jesus Christ.

> Things do not merely revert back to the first creation [cf. Matt 19:4, 8*b*]. The kingdom of God brings the consummation as a new creation, and does not simply reinstate the original one. It is for this reason that Jesus summoned people then and there on behalf of the kingdom of God to forsake not only evil, but also the forms of existence bound to the first creation. There are men, e.g., who "become eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven," i.e., they forgo marital union as did Jesus himself (Mt. 19:12).[15]

What place does the single person have in the Christian church today? Evangelical Protestants have not answered this question adequately. Little attention has been given to developing a biblical theology of singleness. Evangelicals also have seemingly overlooked a great potential for advancing the cause of Christ in this age, namely, a life free from matrimonial ties. Some may well choose not to marry because the claims and interests of God's kingdom have so captivated their lives (cf. Matt 13:44–46) that they desire to invest their time and energy in that kingdom to the maximum extent possible.

The Purpose of This Study

This study is concerned with certain passages in the NT that seem to counsel a life of singleness for the sake of better serving Christ in this age, and in particular, how these texts were understood and applied by early Christian writers prior to A.D. 220. A brief survey of a number of Paul's statements on singleness and marriage will be presented in an attempt to surface some of the problems they raise. It will become clear that at an early date individual Christians were voluntarily taking up the challenge couched in the words of Jesus in Matt 19:12 to become "eunuchs" because of the claims and interests of God's kingdom. The accuracy of the statement by Baus, found in the first volume of Jedin's superb *History of the Church*, should become evident: "Christians of both sexes who renounced marriage, who dissociated themselves more than others from secular life, yet remained with their families and put themselves at the

[15]L. Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament* (trans. J. E. Alsup; ed. J. Roloff; 2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981–82), 1:73.

service of the Christian community, are not found for the first time in the third century."[16]

PAUL'S STATEMENTS ON SINGLENESS AND MARRIAGE

1 Corinthians 7:1–7, 25–28

Some of Paul's remarks about remaining single seem to place the celibate/single person on a higher spiritual plane than the married. Some writers plainly say that Paul thinks of marriage as a "lesser of two evils,"[17] or that celibacy is the ideal condition,[18] and marriage is a concession to man's sinful inability to rise above his lower instincts and realize the ideal.[19] Schillebeeckx claims that "anyone who denies that Paul, deeply concerned as he was for the kingdom of God, did not regard a life of complete abstinence as the ideal state is bound to do violence to these texts."[20]

Take for example 1 Cor 7:1–2, translated by the *NIV* as follows: "Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry. But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband." It appears from this translation that Paul begins with the assumption that singleness is to be preferred over marriage. But if a single person is likely to fall into immorality, what course of action should the Christian take? Many would likely say that in this situation the Christian should avoid immorality (the greater evil) and go ahead and marry (the lesser evil) if he is not able to accomplish the ideal, celibacy.[21]

Consider the contrast between Paul's statement that "it is good for a man not to marry" and God's creation statement, "It is not good for a man to be alone; I will make a helper suitable for him" (Gen 2:18). Some might ask whether Paul feels that the coming of God's kingdom in the Messiah has somehow affected the normal creation order. (Note the remark by Goppelt above.)

[16]K. Baus, *From the Apostolic Community to Constantine* (vol. 1 of *History of the Church*; ed. H. Jedin and J. Dolan; New York: Crossroad, 1982) 295.

[17]Cf. E. Stauffer, "γαμέω," *TDNT* 1 (1964) 652; D. L. Dungan, *The Sayings of Jesus in the Churches of Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 86. For a good overview of primarily French and German works on Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 7 see A. Peters, "St. Paul and Marriage," *African Ecclesiastical Review* 6 (1964) 214–24.

[18]Cf. Legrand, *Virginity*, 98; C. H. Giblin, "1 Corinthians 7—A Negative Theology of Marriage and Celibacy?" *TBT* 41 (1969) 2839–55.

[19]Cf. D. Daube, "Concessions to Sinfulness in Jewish Law," *JJS* 10 (1959) 11–12.

[20]E. Schillebeeckx, *Marriage: Human Reality and Saving Mystery* (trans. N. D. Smith; 2 vols. in 1; New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965) 130.

[21]For a proper understanding of 1 Cor 7:1–7 see V. P. Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979) 30–39; and G. D. Fee, "1 Corinthians 7:1 in the *NIV*," *JETS* 23 (1980) 307–14.

Then after Paul encourages those who are married to render to one another full conjugal rights (1 Cor 7:3–5), another problem arises. He adds that what he says is "by way of concession (κατὰ συγγνώμην), not of command (κατ' ἐπιταγήν)" (7:6). What is Paul conceding here? Some believe that he is conceding sexual relations to the married person who lacks self-control—that is, who ideally should abstain from marital relations—as Jerome believed.[22] That some married Christians were encouraged to remain continent or exercise self-control (ἡ ἐγκράτεια) to the extent that they lived together with their wives as sisters is found as early as the *Shepherd of Hermas* (ca. A.D. 90–140).[23] And what does Paul mean when he sums up his remarks in 1 Cor 7:1–7 by adding that he wishes (θέλω) that all men could remain single or continent like himself (v 7)? Yet he recognizes that each man is given a different gift or ability by God.

Though Paul has much to say about the practical benefits of remaining single, he states in 1 Cor 7:25 that he has no "command" or "disposition" (ἐπιταγή) from the Lord on this subject. Since Paul has already appealed to the Lord's command not to separate or divorce (vv 10–11), commentators appropriately ask why Paul did not, if he knew of the Lord's saying in Matt 19:12, allude to it here in support of his apparent preference for the single state. One answer to this question is given by Balducelli:

> The grammar of the text [Matt 19:12] is declaratory ("there are eunuchs . . ."), not exhortatory or prescriptive. And the parting words, "Let anyone accept this who can" (v. 12d), which are exhortatory, are

[22]Jerome, *Against Jovinianus* 1.7 (NPNF, 2nd series, 6:352). Cf. Schillebeeckx, *Marriage*, 126–27; and W. Grundmann, "ἐγκράτεια," *TDNT* 2 (1964) 342. Furnish (*Moral Teaching*, 36), however, understands Paul better: "In 1 Corinthians 7:5 Paul recognizes that sexual abstinence may have a place within marriage, but only under three conditions: that it be temporary, that it be by mutual agreement, and that it be for prayer. Otherwise, as in the more extreme case of celibate marriages, one may be tempted to seek the fulfillment of one's sexual desires elsewhere, and that would be immoral. It is probable that this allowance for temporary sexual abstinence within marriage is the 'concession' (RSV) of which the Apostle speaks in verse 6, even though many have taken that as a reference to marriage itself."

[23]I believe a reading of the following passages in *Hermas* should confirm this: *Herm. Vis.* 1.1.1–9; 1.2.4; 2.2.3; 2.3.1; 3.8.4; *Herm. Sim.* 9.2.3; 9.10.7; 9.11.1–8; 9.15.2 (on the twelve virgins), and *Herm. Sim.* 9.9.5; 9.13.8–9; 9.15.3 (on the twelve evil women clothed in black). The women are allegorized in the Similitudes and represent key virtues and vices. Note that the names of the second virgin (Ἐγκράτεια, cf. *Vis.* 3.8.4) and the second woman clothed in black (Ἀκρασία) are subjects Paul discusses in 1 Cor 7:5, 9. When we consider that Hermas is told that he will live with his wife as a sister (*Herm. Vis.* 2.2.3; cf. 2.3.1), it looks very much like the faithful, temperate Hermas is being told to abstain from marital relations. On the date of *Hermas* see J. Quasten, *Patrology* (3 vols.; Westminster, MD: Newman, 1950–60), 1:92–93. J. A. T. Robinson (*Redating the New Testament* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976] 319–22) would date Hermas ca. A.D. 85 at the latest.

not an exhortation to accept celibacy but to "accept" what has been said about it ("this"), namely, that it has happened. This explains why Paul, who so outspokenly promotes his own appreciation of celibacy (1 Cor 7:1, 7–8), is not in a position to canonize that appreciation by tracing it back to a direct endorsement ("disposition") of the Lord (1 Cor 7:25).[24]

Nevertheless, if Paul knew of a saying of the Lord similar to that contained in Matt 19:12, one may ask why he did not say "I have no command from the Lord, but I do have his counsel to all who can take it."[25] This, of course, assumes that the topic (cf. περὶ δέ, v 25) to which Paul responds in 1 Cor 7:25–38 concerns single men (vv 27–28*a*, 32–34*a*) and women (vv 28*b*, 34*b*) who are questioning whether they should marry.

Paul proceeds to say that even though getting married is not a sin (v 28*a*; cf. v 36) for these "virgins" (τῶν παρθένων, gen. pl.; v 25), he strongly discourages it "in view of the present distress" (v 26), the shortening of the time (v 29), and because of the simple fact that the married state brings with it cares and concerns for the things of the world (vv 32–34).[26] Paul's supreme desire in all of this is brought out in v 35: "And this I say for your own benefit (σύμφορον);[27] not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is seemly, and to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord." The degree to which Paul's counsels on marriage and singleness are influenced by his eschatological expectations remains to be seen. But whatever he means by "the present distress" (τὴν ἐνεστῶσαν ἀνάγκην),[28] one of Paul's

[24]R. Balducelli, "The Decision for Celibacy," *TS* 36 (1975) 225–26.

[25]Cf. Q. Quesnell, "'Made Themselves Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven' (Mt 19,12)," *CBQ* 30 (1968) 341, n. 10. In response to Quesnell, if Paul had appealed to a saying of the Lord that suggested refraining from marriage it could have been used by the sexual ascetics in Corinth (cf. J. C. Hurd, Jr., *The Origin of 1 Corinthians* [new ed.; Macon, GA: Mercer University, 1983] 155–68) to support their extreme practices. 1 Tim 4:1–3 and the Corinthians' position reflected in 1 Corinthians 7 is evidence that those who frowned upon marriage did not wait to make their appearance until the Apostles passed away.

[26]"It is not that celibacy is a peaceful state in which one lives far from the world's worries; it is just a question of choosing between a life exclusively devoted to the cares of the Christian ministry . . . and a life divided between two sorts of preoccupations, both willed by God, that of the cares of marriage and that of the cares of the Church" (Thurian, *Marriage and Celibacy*, 106–7).

[27]Stauffer (*TDNT* 1:652, n. 27) believes that Paul himself is conscious of being one of the εὐνοῦχοι διὰ τὴν βασιλείαν (Matt 19:12) and finds the συμφέρει of Matt 19:10 here in 1 Cor 7:35. "It is a technical term for the orientation of ethics to the final goal of calling. Cf. Mt. 5:29 f.; 1 C. 6:12; 10:23; 10:33."

[28]I am inclined to believe that Paul is simply referring to the "afflictions which derive from the tension between the new creation in Christ and the old cosmos" (W. Grundmann, "ἀνάγκη," *TDNT* 1 [1964] 346), a tension all believers face in the present church age. Cf. Ridderbos, *Paul*, 310–11.

primary reasons for advocating singleness is for the sake of the Lord's work: more can be accomplished by the single person. (Indeed, Christians today often expect their married pastor to do the work of a single person, i.e., as if he did not have the obligations of a married man!) The fact that the time is short (v 29) simply means that the work is urgent. Therefore, remaining single for the sake of the Lord's work is a valid motive for Christians today however one might understand Paul's eschatological perspective.

The problem of whom Paul is addressing in 1 Cor 7:36–38 further complicates the status of the married in Paul's thinking.[29] According to traditional exegesis, Paul is giving advice to Christian fathers who are anxious about their unmarried daughters (cf. *NASB*, *JB*).[30] Should they arrange marriages for them or not? Others believe that Paul is describing a kind of spiritual or celibate marriage in which couples live together without having sexual relations.[31] Moffatt's translation reflects this view:

> At the same time if any man considers that he is not behaving properly to the maid who is his spiritual bride, if his passions are strong and if it must be so, then let him do what he wants—let them be married; it is no sin for him. But the man of firm purpose who has made up his mind, who, instead of being forced against his will, has determined to himself to keep his maid a spiritual bride—that man will be doing the right thing. Thus both are right, alike in marrying and in refraining from marriage, but he who does not marry will be found to have done better [cf. *NEB* also].

Still another view has been argued by Ford.[32] She offers linguistic evidence[33] to support her contention that παρθένος in 1 Cor 7:25–38

[29]Hurd (*Origin*, 169–81) discusses these verses in detail and provides good bibliographical material for three of the four views mentioned here. The references I give in the next few notes are not found in Hurd.

[30]Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata* 3.12.79; LCC 2:76) seems to understand the passage in this way.

[31]Cf. H. Achelis, "Agapētae," *ERE*, 1:179; Thurian, *Marriage and Celibacy*, 73–77; R. H. Seabolt, "Spiritual Marriage in the Early Church: A Suggested Interpretation of 1 Cor. 7:36–38," *CTM* 30 (1959) 103–19, 176–89; G. Delling, "παρθένος," *TDNT* 5 (1967) 836; Hurd, *Origins*, 169–82.

[32]J. M. Ford, "Levirate Marriage in St Paul (1 Cor vii)," *NTS* 10 (1964) 361–65; and "St Paul, the Philogamist (1 Cor. vii in Early Patristic Exegesis)," *NTS* 11 (1965) 326–48. I know of no other writer who champions Ford's position.

[33]Ford's ("Levirate Marriage," 363) appeal to the use of the cognate noun in Ign. *Smyrn.* 13:1 is initially convincing. Ignatius concludes his letter by saying: "I salute the families of my brethren with their wives and children, and the maidens who are called widows (καὶ τὰς παρθένους τὰς λεγομένας χήρας)" (*The Apostolic Fathers*, LCL 1:267). But neither Ford nor C. C. Richardson, whose translation of this text and appended note (LCC 1:116) seem to support Ford's understanding, refer to J. B.

should be translated "widow" and that vv 36–38 discuss the case of a widowed sister-in-law. The Corinthians want to know if they are bound by the Jewish custom of levirate marriage.[34] Finally, the view recently argued by Baumert is that the whole of vv 25–38 refers to engaged couples (cf. *RSV, NIV*).[35] The question the engaged men are asking Paul (most likely because they have come under the influence

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Lightfoot's extensive discussion of this problem (*The Apostolic Fathers* [Part II, 2: *S. Ignatius S. Polycarp*; London: n.p. 1889; reprint; Hildesheim/New York: Georg Olms, 1973] 322–24). The texts that Lightfoot cites in support of his interpretation of Ign. *Smyrn.* 13:1 ("I salute those women whom, though by name and in outward condition they are widows, I prefer to call virgins, for such they are in God's sight by their purity and devotion") show that the self-control associated with the literal state of virginity finds expression in other states. Virginity or celibacy has long been associated with the graced-ability to remain continent in the sexual area (cf. Paul in 1 Cor 7:1–9), and now other states (continency within marriage and in widowhood) are likened to the literal condition of virginity. "Virgin" and "virginity" can be used figuratively in Scripture (cf. 2 Cor 11:2; Rev 14:4). One passage from Clement's *Stromata* (3.16.101; LCC 2:88) will help to illustrate these ideas: "There are also some now who rank the widow higher than the virgin in the matter of continence (ἐγκράτειαν), on the ground that she scorns pleasure of which she has had experience."

[34]Tertullian (*To His Wife* 1.7; ACW 13:20) does understand 1 Cor 7:28 to say that a widow does not sin in remarrying even though there is no explicit reference to widows in this text. Ford devotes 11 of nearly 23 pages in her article ("St Paul, the Philogamist," 331–42) to Tertullian's works and the possible Jewish background of Montanism, which he later adopted. Though Tertullian could be cited in favor of the father-daughter view of 1 Cor 7:36–38, Ford thinks his exegesis of 1 Corinthians 7 is inconclusive and that what he does say lends credence to her understanding that 1 Cor 7:25–38 concerns widows, and in particular, the question of levirate marriage. But Ford should probably not press too far Tertullian's use of this passage in support of her levirate marriage view. What Paul says in 1 Cor 7:25–35 *could* be applied to the situation of a widow who is completely free from matrimonial ties. Tertullian's own principle of interpretation is that "No enunciation of the Holy Spirit ought to be (confined) to the subject immediately in hand merely, and not applied and carried out with a view to *every* occasion to which its application is useful" (*On the Apparel of Women* 2.2.5 [ANF 4:19; cf. FC 40:132]).

[35]N. Baumert, *Ehelosigkeit und Ehe im Herrn: Eine Neuinterpretation von 1 Kor 7* (Forschung zur Bibel; Würzburg: Echter, 1984) 161–310. Cf. W. F. Beck, "1 Corinthians 7:36–38," *CTM* 25 (1954) 370–72; C. S. C. Williams, "I and II Corinthians," *PCB* §834e; G. Schrenk, "θέλημα," *TDNT* 3 (1965) 60–61; J. K. Elliott, "Paul's Teaching on Marriage in 1 Corinthians: Some Problems Considered," *NTS* 19 (1973) 219–25; and D. E. Garland, "The Christian's Posture Toward Marriage and Celibacy: 1 Corinthians 7," *RevExp* 80 (1983) 351–62. A fifth view is defended, unsuccessfully in my opinion, by J. F. Bound ("Who Are the 'Virgins' Discussed in 1 Corinthians 7:25–38?" *Evangelical Journal* 2 [1984] 3–15). Vv 25–28 and vv 36–38 are talking about "male virgins," and in vv 36–38 the issue is whether they are able to control their own sexual passions and keep their condition of "virginity" (τὴν ἑαυτοῦ παρθένον). Early support for this allegorical interpretation of a man keeping his own "flesh virgin" is found in Methodius of Olympus (ca. A.D. 270), *The Symposium: A Treatise on Virginity* 3.14 (ANF 6:322–23; ACW 27:73–74).

of the ascetic teaching current in Corinth) is whether or not they should fulfill their promise of marriage.

1 Corinthians 7:8–9, 39–40 and 1 Timothy 5:14

As if the status of the married were not complicated enough, Paul takes up the issue of the remarriage of widows (and widowers). Paul's closing comments in 1 Corinthians appear to be an afterthought to 7:8–9, a passage in which Paul gives directions to widowers[36] and widows who cannot control their sexual desires: they may marry again. In 1 Cor 7:39–40 Paul adds a final counsel that the widow, whom he permits to remarry, would in his opinion (γνώμη; cf. v 25) be happier if she remained in a state of singleness. Yet in another context (1 Tim 5:14) Paul says that he wants (βούλομαι) younger widows to get married, bear children, and keep house.[37] Here Paul seems to say the exact opposite of his clearly stated preference in 1 Cor 7:40 that widows would do better not to marry again. Does Paul's preference for the single state extend even to widows and widowers?

Scholars like Dibelius and Conzelmann, who are convinced that the Pastoral Epistles are deutero-Pauline documents, offer one solution to this apparent inconsistency: Paul's attitude in 1 Corinthians 7 is eschatologically determined and is completely different from the point of view in 1 Timothy 5. There "the world is expected to endure, and taking root in it is desirable."[38] This, of course, is not an acceptable option for those who accept the Pastorals as Paul's letters and assume that Paul maintained a consistent eschatological viewpoint throughout his ministry.

On the other hand, the 1 Tim 5:14 passage is often cited by Evangelicals to show that Paul happily permits second marriages after the death of a spouse (despite his judgment to the contrary in 1 Cor 7:40), thereby distancing him from the early fathers like Hermas and Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–215)[39] who discouraged second mar-

[36]The fact that ἄγαμος is masculine in v 8 and linked with "widows," that neither the LXX or the NT use the Greek term for "widower," and that Paul does not discuss the never-before-married until v 25, suggests that τοῖς ἀγάμοις should be translated "widowers," and γαμέω in v 9 means "marry again." Ἄγαμος ("*unmarried, single*, prop. of the man, whether bachelor or widower," *LSJ* 5) is a fluid term for Paul (1 Cor 7:8, 11, 32, 34) and must be contextually defined.

[37]R. Kugelman ("The First Letter to the Corinthians," *JBC* 2:266) states that Paul's advice in 1 Cor 7:40 "does not contradict 1 Tm 5:14, which treats of young widows of unstable continency."

[38]M. Dibelius and H. Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) 76.

[39]*Stromata* 3.12.82 (LCC 2:78–79). Clement notes that the death of a spouse may indicate God's purpose for an individual "by which he has become free from distraction for the service of the Lord."

riages but did not call them sinful. Hermas writes in Mandate 4.4.1-2:

> Once more I spoke and asked him: "Sir, since you have borne with me once, make this also clear to me." "What is it?" he said. "Sir," I said, "if a wife or husband is deceased and either one of the survivors marries again, does he or she sin by remarrying?" "There is no sin," he said. "But, anyone who remains single achieves greater honor for himself and great glory before the Lord. But, even in remarriage, there is no sin."[40]

The question that must be asked of the usual evangelical estimate of Paul's attitude toward second marriages is how does it compare with Paul's own words on the subject?

Evangelical commentators who cite 1 Tim 5:14 as evidence of Paul's unqualified approval of second marriages after the death of a spouse have neglected to study the wider context of 1 Timothy 5 where Paul expresses his desire that young widows should remarry. Paul's words in 1 Tim 5:11-12 suggest that (some/all?) young widows made "an express renunciation of second marriage, ratified by a vow"[41] (cf. v 12, ἡ πρώτη πίστις). Paul says that certain frivolous younger widows "set aside" (ἀθέτω) "this pledge" when they feel sensual desires in disregard of Christ and wish to get married (v 11), thereby "incurring condemnation" (ἔχουσαι κρίμα). Kelly observes that the language of v 11 "suggests that Christ is thought of as a spiritual bridegroom (cf. 2 Cor xi. 2). Hence the desire to marry again, natural enough in young women who have lost their husbands, is in effect an act of unfaithfulness to him."[42]

In addition to Paul's negative estimation of such sensual desires, he says that these young widows become gossips and busybodies, going from house to house (their duty as congregational widows?).[43]

[40]FC 1:265. This is not the only place where Hermas seems to encourage works of supererogation (cf. *Herm. Sim.* 5.2.7; 5.3.3, 8).

[41]G. Stählin, "χήρα," *TDNT* 9 (1974) 454 and nn. 136-37. Cf. S. Solle, "χήρα," *NIDNTT* 3 (1978) 1075.

[42]J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (N.p.: 1963; reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 117. Cf. C. J. Ellicott, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (2nd ed.; Boston: Draper and Halliday, 1861; reprint; Minneapolis: James Family, 1978) 88-89; A. T. Hanson, *The Pastoral Epistles* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 98-99. W. Hendriksen (*Exposition of The Pastoral Epistles* [NTC; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979] 176) believes the pledge the young widows made was "to the church, namely, to continue in the work of the Lord." But Kelly's interpretation is more probable.

[43]Cf. Stählin, *TDNT* 9:456-57; Dibelius and Conzelmann, *Pastoral Epistles*, 75; Kelly, *Pastoral Epistles*, 118. A. Oepke ("γυνή," *TDNT* 1 [1964] 788), however, does not believe that the "house to house" remark in v 13 is a reference to pastoral visitation duties performed by the qualifying members of this group. C. C. Ryrie (*The Role of Women in the Church* [N.p., 1958; reprint; Chicago: Moody, 1970] 83-84) discusses

This is the point at which Paul says that younger widows should marry (v 14*a*). The result of this course of action is that the enemy will be given no occasion for reproach (v 14*b*; cf. 1 Tim 3:7). Thus the context of Paul's recommendation that young widows should marry again hardly seems to support the contemporary evangelical opinion (often supported by an indiscriminate appeal to 1 Tim 5:14) that Paul happily approves the remarriage of widow or widower.[44] Various commentators have stated that the principle of the lesser of two evils lurks in the background, namely in the motive provided in v 14*b*: "give the enemy no occasion for reproach."[45]

Some Final Remarks

This has been but a cursory survey of Paul's remarks on marriage and singleness, touching on his attitude toward remarriage after the death of a spouse. It is possible that Paul's personal preference for the single state extends even to someone who was once married.[46] This subject arises repeatedly in the writings of the fathers and the councils in the early Christian centuries. Half of Tertullian's treatise *To His Wife* (*Ad Uxorem*; ca. A.D. 200–206) is devoted to expound-

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the question of what ministry widows may have had and comes to no definite conclusion outside of what Paul says about them in v 5. Ryrie also examines the role of widows in the church in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. See his index (p. 151) under "Widows." To it should be added Polycarp, 100.

[44]We must remember that Paul, in 1 Timothy 5, is not discussing the remarriage of any young widow, but only of those in this group who have made a pledge to Christ not to marry again (so that they can serve their Lord to the fullest extent possible as Paul mentions in 1 Cor 7:28*b*–35?). Paul's attitude toward the remarriage of any widow, young or old, ought to be determined by specific statements and principles gleaned from 1 Corinthians 7.

[45]Stauffer, *TDNT* 1:652. It appears that Paul's personal preference is that it is better for anyone whose partner has died to avoid a second marriage. But Paul's good sense and realism make him encourage second marriages where the strain (1 Cor 7:8–9) or dangers (1 Tim 5:14) involved in remaining single would be too great.

[46]Paul also requires the elder (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:6) and the deacon (1 Tim 3:12) to be "the husband of one wife," and the widow who is put on the official list must have been "the wife of one man" (1 Tim 5:9; cf. Luke 2:36–37; see also Jdt 16:22–23). In the first century this may well have excluded from these particular positions those who remarried after the death of their spouses (cf. Kelly, *Pastoral Epistles*, 75–76, 115–16; C. Spicq, *Les Épitres Pastorales* [Études Bibliques; 4th ed. rev.; 2 vols.; Paris, 1969], 1:430–31; Stählin, *TDNT* 9:442, 450–51, 457; B. Vawter, "Divorce and the New Testament," *CBQ* 39 [1977] 529, 537–38; and BAGD, "εἷς," 2*b*; most of the older commentaries). Against this view and for the understanding that divorcees who have remarried are in view, see Oepke, *TDNT* 1:362–63, n. 11, p. 788; J. D. M. Derrett, *Law in the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1970) 374–75; C. Brown, "ἀνήρ," *NIDNTT* 2 (1976) 563–64; and Hanson, *Pastoral Epistles*, 77–78. The view presented by R. L. Saucy ("'The Husband of One Wife,'" *BSac* 131 [1974] 229–40) could scarcely have been Paul's intention.

ing the various reasons why he urges his wife to remain a widow should he die before her.

Before leaving Paul's statements on singleness and marriage it seems appropriate to mention the exegetical consensus that the Corinthians to whom Paul responds in chap. 7 are sexual ascetics who consider their practice mandatory for the Christian life. Whether an over-realized eschatological dualism (cf. 1 Cor 4:8; 2 Tim 2:18), or a gnostic dualism, or a combination of the two lies behind the Corinthian position is still being debated.[47] At any rate, the Corinthian position seems to have led to two different sets of moral implications. On the one hand were the libertines, the licentious group that Paul corrects in 1 Cor 6:12–20 and whose maxim was "All things are lawful" (6:12; 10:23). On the other hand were the sexual ascetics who denied that sexual relations, and consequently marriage, was compatible with the Christian profession at all. Twice in chap. 7 Paul must remind those who have been influenced by this group that to marry is not a sin (vv 28, 36). And though in principle he agrees that it is good for a man not to have relations with a woman (7:1*b*), he radically qualifies the Corinthian premise (7:2; cf. 6:12–13) in the light of the practical difficulties the believer still faces in this world. Thus the believer "must take fully into account his situation in the world (vii. 5, 7, 13, 15, 21, 37), and take whatever course of action enables him to serve God with least distraction (*vv.* 5, 9, 15, 29–35), taking account of his special gifts from God (*v.* 7)."[48]

This means that in all probability 1 Corinthians 7 is primarily a rehabilitation of the marital union in the eyes of the Corinthian ascetics. If Chadwick overstates his case that Paul stands with the ascetics and deprecates marriage (because he dislikes fornication more!),[49] at least Chadwick has hit upon the basic thrust of Paul's remarks in 1 Corinthians 7:

> Paul's aim is to minimize the gulf between himself and the Corinthians, and therefore says nothing directly to challenge their principles. He lays himself open to some misunderstanding by not doing so, and from

[47]Cf. D. R. Cartlidge, "1 Corinthians 7 as a Foundation for a Christian Sex Ethic," *JR* 55 (1975) 220–34; A. C. Thiselton, "Realized Eschatology at Corinth," *NTS* 24 (1978) 510–26; Fee, "1 Corinthians 7:1," 312–14; and the commentaries, of course.

[48]Thiselton, "Realized Eschatology," 519.

[49]H. Chadwick ("'All Things to All Men,' (I Cor. ix.22)," *NTS* 1 [1954–55] 261–75) discusses Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 7 (pp. 263–70), which he thinks illustrates Paul's apologetic technique in dealing with particular situations. Chadwick's estimate of Paul's view of marriage is flawed because he reads vv 1–7 incorrectly (cf. nn. 6, 21–22 above). Paul does not advise people to get married in order to avoid fornication in vv 1–2; but in our view of vv 36–38 he does advise a young engaged man to marry his betrothed if he is not able to channel properly his sexual desire for her

the second century onwards Christian writers (and others) have understood him to be deeply concerned with the superiority of the ascetic ideal and to be directly propagating it in I Cor. vii. When his words are set in their historical context and related to the specific situation, it is clear that the thrust of the chapter is in the reverse direction.[50]

SOME EARLY FATHERS ON SINGLENESS FOR THE SAKE OF THE KINGDOM

Introduction

The early church fathers' exegesis and application of Scripture is not somehow more authoritative or more accurate than that which we find in modern literature. However, they should be given the careful attention deserved by any writer who seeks to speak to or for the church of his day. The earliest Christians did not see the NT texts that deal with singleness through the glasses worn by most Protestants today—glasses tinted with a post-Reformation overreaction to enforced clerical celibacy.[51] If an earlier era of the church has derived more from these texts for their faith and practice than the texts actually teach, the Protestant era has not yet mined them for what they are worth. We often lack a knowledge of the practices and customs of the early churches (cf. 1 Cor 11:2, 16)[52] as well as access to a living oral tradition. Papias, who wrote five books,[53] states that he often questioned those who had followed the apostles, as well as

before marriage (cf. *RSV*; Schrenk, *TDNT* 3:60-61; and Chadwick, "'All Things,'" 267-68).

[50]Chadwick, "'All Things,'" 270.

[51]The early church fathers, of course, wore their glasses tinted with a different shade. Many factors contributed to a growing concern about asceticism in the ante-Nicene church which resulted in an over-estimation of celibacy, a depreciation of sexual relations within marriage, and the belief that marriage is only for the purpose of procreation and not the pleasure of the marriage partners (cf. Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 29.1; Athenagoras, *Plea for the Christians* 33; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 3.6.46; 3.7.58; 3.11.71; 3.12.79). This last view was commonly held by the Stoics (cf. n. 286 by Le Saint in ACW 23:164 for the Stoic references). Schaff (*History*, 2:386) makes the interesting observation that the ante-Nicene excesses of asceticism should not "blind us against the moral heroism of renouncing rights and enjoyments innocent in themselves, but so generally abused and poisoned [in society], that total abstinence seemed to most of the early fathers the only radical and effective cure. So in our days some of the best of men regard total abstinence rather than temperance, the remedy of the fearful evils of intemperance."

[52]For example, see Justin's description of early Christian worship in his *First Apology* 65–67 or the instructions in the *Didache*.

[53]Λογίων κυριακῶν ἐξηγήσεως (Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 3.39.1). For a defense of the translation "Gospels" here see: G. Salmon, "Papias," *A Dictionary of Christian Biography, Literature, Sects and Doctrines* (ed. W. Smith and H. Wace; 4 vols.; 1877), 4:187; and G. Kittel, "λόγιον," *TDNT* 4 (1967) 139-41.

Aristion (another disciple of the Lord; cf. Luke 10:1) and the Apostle John.[54] The fact that Papias was a contemporary of the apostle John, and that the first three writers we will look at were contemporaries of Papias, makes our study all the more interesting. Yet the proximity of the earliest Christian writings to the time of the NT—though we can never accord them the authority of the NT—makes reading them more than a curiosity.

Modern commentators almost unanimously have understood some kind of relationship between Jesus' saying about eunuchs in Matt 19:12 and Paul's statement in 1 Cor 7:7 that continency in singleness was given to him (and others) as a gift (χάρισμα) from God.[55] We want to examine how these two texts, and any pertinent material in their wider contexts, began to influence the lives of early Christians, for better or for worse, and what this can teach us about how these texts should be interpreted and applied today.

Two Apostolic Fathers[56]

Clement of Rome

The first text we will look at is found in Clement's letter to the Corinthians. Clement is a good beginning point because his is the earliest extant Christian writing that is not part of the NT, the date of which is quite certain (ca. A.D. 96). The letter was well known and highly regarded in the early church. It was even being read along with the Scriptures in the church's worship service at Corinth in A.D. 170.[57] The letter is written in the name of the church in Rome in order to deal with a factional dispute in Corinth wherein some of the younger members of the church had ousted certain presbyters from the ministry. Clement uses this situation as an opportunity to impart not a little exhortation to pursue Christian virtues.

[54]Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 3.39.3-4. For this understanding of the passage, as opposed to the one that says Papias is twice removed from those closest to the Lord, see: C. S. Petrie, "The Authorship of 'The Gospel according to Matthew': A Reconsideration of the External Evidence," *NTS* 14 (1967-68) 15-33; and R. H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 611-16.

[55]Cf. A. H. McNeile, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* (London: Macmillan, 1915) 275; Stauffer, *TDNT*, 1:652; H. B. Green, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (NCB; Oxford: University Press, 1975) 169; N. J. Opperwall, "Celibacy," *ISBE: Fully Revised* (ed. G. W. Bromiley), 1:627; O. G. Oliver, Jr., "Celibacy," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (ed. W. A. Elwell; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 203.

[56]The Greek text used for the Apostolic Fathers is the one by K. Bihlmeyer, *Die Apostolischen Väter* (SAQ; Zweite Reihe; Erstes Heft; Erster Teil; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1970).

[57]Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.*, 4.23.11.

The reference most pertinent to the issue of singleness is found in *1 Clement* 37–38, and it communicates the same point that Paul does in 1 Corinthians 12. Clement exhorts the Corinthians to let their whole body be preserved in Christ Jesus, and tells them that each one should be subject to his neighbor (cf. Eph 5:21) according to the special gift that God has bestowed upon him (καθὼς ἐτέθη ἐν τῷ χαρίσματι αὐτοῦ) (38:1).[58] The strong must take care of the weak, and the weak should respect the strong. The rich man should help the poor, and the poor man should thank God that He has given him someone to meet his needs. The wise man should show his wisdom not in words but in deeds, and the humble should not draw attention to his own good deeds but should let others mention them. Lastly, Clement says that "He who is continent must not put on airs. He must recognize that his self-control is a gift from another."[59] Or, to translate this last sentence in *1 Clem.* 38:2 more literally: "Let not the one who is pure in the flesh (ὁ ἁγνὸς ἐν τῇ σαρκί) grow proud, since he knows (γινώσκων = causal ptcp.) that *another* (i.e., God), is the One who grants continence to him (ὅτι ἕτερός ἐστιν ὁ ἐπιχορηγῶν αὐτῷ τὴν ἐγκράτειαν)."

To whom is Clement referring when he includes this exhortation to those who are "pure in the flesh"? It initially appears that nothing clear is said about the sphere in which these individuals exercise "self-control" (Latin, *continentia*). Paul uses the verbal form of this word (ἐγκρατεύομαι) in 1 Cor 9:25 where he talks about the athlete who "exercises self-control" to achieve his goals. Also, in addition to speaking to Felix and Drusilla about faith in Christ Jesus, Paul discussed righteousness, self-control (ἐγκρατείας), and the judgment to come—topics that caused Felix's interest in Christianity to wane (Acts 24:25). Self-control, as Clement of Alexandria later says, is something that applies to other matters besides sexual abstinence.[60]

What is clear is that Clement is aware of the danger that the one who possesses this self-control may be tempted to think that he stands on a level above the average Christian. Clement has to remind these Christians that what they are able to do, they are able to do by God's grace.[61]

[58]D. A. Hagner (*The Use of the Old and New Testaments in Clement of Rome* [NovTSup 34; Leiden: Brill, 1973] 197–98, 245) argues that this phrase may be derived from 1 Pet 4:10; 1 Cor 7:7; or Rom 12:6 (cf. 1 Cor 12:4).

[59]Trans. by C. C. Richardson (LCC 1:61).

[60]Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 3.1.4.

[61]Cf. Hagner, *Old and NT in Clement of Rome*, 209, 212. Clement says elsewhere that "continence in holiness" (ἐγκράτεια ἐν ἁγιασμῷ) is one of the gifts (τὰ δῶρα) of God (35:1–2; cf. 30:3; 64:1).

The question remains: who are the ones who are "pure in the flesh"? Clement, by this phrase, *does* seem to indicate that the sphere in which this "self-control" or "continency" is exercised is "in the flesh." But in what sense is the flesh kept pure? Two passages come to mind. The first is Rev 14:4, which suggests the antithesis of "pure in the flesh," namely "defiled" in the flesh. In this passage the 144,000 who are standing with the lamb on Mount Zion are described as "the ones who have not been defiled (μολύνω) with women." The explanation given for this is "for they are virgins (παρθένοι, masc.)." Possibly the men described here are men who have never committed immorality, but is it likely that none of the 144,000 were married? If any were married, the word "defile" could scarcely have been used to describe the relations that godly men have with their wives. There are other interpretive options for this verse that we cannot discuss here,[62] so it seems best to leave Rev 14:4 out of our consideration of *1 Clem.* 38:2.

The other passage that comes to mind is 1 Cor 6:12–20. Here Paul teaches that the Christian's body is a member of Christ, and that he must glorify God in his body. Christians who continue to take part in immoral pagan sexual practices not only defile themselves (v 18), but they sin against Christ because they are members of his "body." It is true that the word Paul emphasizes in 1 Cor 6:12–20 is "body" (σῶμα) and not "flesh" (σάρξ), as in Clement, but we must remember v 16: "Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a harlot is one body (σῶμα) with her? For he says, 'The two shall become one flesh (σάρκα).'"[63] Thus the one who is "pure in the flesh" appears to denote someone who exercises self-control in sexual matters.[64]

[62]For an overview of the various options, see J. M. Ford, *Revelation* (AB; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975) 234–35, 241–46; R. M. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 269–70. Ford once believed that the masculine παρθένοι in Rev 14:4 "may refer to men who have only been married once" ("The Meaning of 'Virgin'," *NTS* 12 [1965–66] 294). Παρθένος should be understood figuratively in Rev 14:4 (cf. Delling, *TDNT*, 5:836; and F. Hauck, "μολύνω," *TDNT* 4 [1967] 736–37) of those who "have kept themselves pure from all defiling relationships with the pagan world system. They have resisted the seductions of the great harlot Rome with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication (17:2)" (Mounce, 270). Ign. *Smyrn.* 13:1 (see n. 33 above) employs παρθένος figuratively with reference to one's sexual self-control.

[63]Cf. E. Schweizer, "σάρξ," *TDNT* 7 (1971) 125–26; and R. H. Gundry, *Sōma in Biblical Theology with an Emphasis on Pauline Anthropology* (SNTSMS 29; Cambridge: University Press, 1976) 62–64.

[64]Schweizer (*TDNT*, 7:147) says there is no doubt that sexual continence is in view in *1 Clem.* 38:2. We find it most probable that Clement is exhorting those who are continent in singleness and not those who are continent in marriage (cf. Titus 2:4–5; 1 Pet 3:1–2; Pol. *Phil.* 4:2).

Does Clement have a passage of Scripture in mind when he exhorts those who are sexually continent not to take pride in their God-given ability? There are two possibilities. First, Gal 5:23 lists ἐγκράτεια as one of the fruits of the Spirit.[65] The "Western" text inserts ἁγνεία ("purity, chastity") after ἐγκράτεια, which may suggest the related word ἁγνός ("pure") that appears only a few words before ἐγκράτεια in *1 Clem.* 38:2 (cf. 64:1). But the textual evidence for this reading is weak.

The other passage that Clement may have in mind is 1 Cor 7:7: "Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that." Remember that Clement is writing to the church in Corinth which most likely would have preserved copies of Paul's letters to them. Clement even names Paul as the author of the First Epistle to the Corinthians and tells his readers to refer to this letter that the Corinthian church had received only forty years earlier.[66] Furthermore, Clement has just used imagery from 1 Corinthians 12 in *1 Clement* 37, and he begins chap. 38 by exhorting his readers to be subject to their fellow-Christians according to the "gift" (χάρισμα) given to each individual. It is important to note that 1 Cor 7:7 is the only passage in the NT that teaches that the ability to live without fulfilling sexual needs is a "gift" from God.[67] In light of the fact that an antonym of ἐγκράτεια, namely ἀκρασίαν ("lack of self-control"), appears in 1 Cor 7:5, and that ἐγκρατεύομαι appears in 1 Cor 7:9, the background for Clement's final exhortation in *1 Clem.* 38:2 must be 1 Cor 7:7. Continency in singleness is a beneficial gift bestowed by God and should not be flaunted as a sign of spiritual superiority.

Ignatius of Antioch[68]

If the preceding analysis of *1 Clem.* 38:2 appears to be somewhat tenuous, the next passage in Ignatius's letter to Polycarp adds some

[65]R. M. Grant (*The Apostolic Fathers: A New Translation and Commentary* [ed. R. M. Grant; New York: Thomas Nelson, 1965] 2:66) thinks Gal 5:23 is the background here. Hagner (*Old and NT in Clement of Rome*, 221–22), I think wisely, does not list this possibility.

[66]Cf. Hagner, *Old and NT in Clement of Rome*, 195–96, 209.

[67]Cf. H. Conzelmann, "χάρισμα," *TDNT* 9 (1974) 404.

[68]According to Eusebius (*Eccl. Hist.* 3.22; 3.36.1–15 [the second reference gives the account of Ignatius's journey to Rome as well as Irenaeus's and Polycarp's references to Ignatius's martyrdom]), Ignatius was the second bishop of Syrian Antioch. He wrote seven letters in two stages on his journey through Asia Minor as he was being conducted to Rome as a prisoner. There he would fight and die among the wild beasts in the Coliseum. Nearly all agree that Ignatius was martyred in the latter half of Trajan's reign (A.D. 98–117).

details that make it most likely that the two texts are referring to the same thing: continence in singleness. The reference in Ignatius not only appears to be an expansion of the one just examined in *1 Clement*, but it may indicate a knowledge of both 1 Cor 7:7 and Matt 19:12. We know that Ignatius reveals a knowledge of several of Paul's letters and that he is probably aware of the contents of *1 Clement*, but Ignatius is clearly most familiar with 1 Corinthians.[69] We should also remember that Ignatius is the first writer to quote from Matthew's Gospel.[70] Finally, a link between Ignatius and Matthew and between Matthew and Paul is further suggested by the fact that Paul was a missionary delegate from the church of Antioch (Acts 13:1–3; cf. 11:19–30). Since many believe that Syrian Antioch is the most likely destination for Matthew's Gospel,[71] "we may suppose that this was primarily the tradition of the 'words of the Lord' which he [Paul] took with him, and it would explain the otherwise rather unexpected affinity in doctrine and in discipline between Paul and Matthew."[72]

Ignatius teaches that Christian wives are to love the Lord and to be content with their husbands in flesh and in spirit and that Christian husbands are to love their wives as the Lord loves the church. He continues:

> If anyone is able to remain continent (ἐν ἁγνείᾳ μένειν) to the honor of the flesh of the Lord, let him do so without boasting (ἐν ἀκαυχησίᾳ μενέτω). If he boasts he is lost (ἀπώλετο); and if he is more highly esteemed than the bishop/it is made known to anyone but the bishop (καὶ ἐὰν γνωσθῇ πλέον/πλὴν τοῦ ἐπισκόπου), he has been corrupted (ἔφθαρται) [Ign. *Pol.* 5:2].

[69]Cf. Richardson, LCC 1:78. Both Grant (*Apostolic Fathers*, 2:5) and B. H. Streeter (*The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins* [London: Macmillan, 1936] 490, n. 2) state that Ignatius had read *1 Clement*.

[70]Streeter (*Four Gospels*, 504–7) discusses about fifteen passages in Ignatius's letters that look like reminiscences of Matthew and the significance of Ignatius's use of the words "the Gospel" as if this were a book. Streeter feels that by *the* Gospel Ignatius means Matthew.

[71]Ibid., 16, 500–528. For a different view (Caesarea), see B. T. Viviano, "Where Was the Gospel According to St. Matthew Written?" *CBQ* 41 (1979) 533–46.

[72]Robinson, *Redating*, 97. Consider also that Matthew is the Gospel common to the two possible synoptic sources closest to Paul's allusions to the sayings of Jesus in 1 Cor 7:10–11 (Mark 10:11–12 or Matt 19:9) and 1 Cor 9:14 (Matt 10:10//Luke 10:7). Paul also quotes a portion of Gen 2:24 (cf. Matt 19:5//Mark 10:8) in 1 Cor 6:16 just before his discussion of Jesus' divorce saying. This, along with the often cited idea parallel between 1 Cor 7:7 and Matt 19:11–12, and Paul's extended discussion of the values of singleness in 1 Cor 7:25–38, suggests that Paul may have been aware of the tradition behind the whole of Matt 19:3–12. The eunuch-saying, of course, is peculiar to Matthew's Gospel.

The last sentence reflects two different readings of Ignatius's text that are made possible by the two potential subjects of γνωσθῇ (the person who boasts about his chastity, or the vow of chastity itself) and whether the correct reading is πλέον or πλήν.[73] The translation, "if he is more highly esteemed than the bishop," would suggest that a comparison is being made in which a married bishop is viewed unfavorably.[74] On this understanding those who are practicing a life of chastity think of themselves as superior to the bishop who is presumably a married man. Sloyan, however, believes this interpretation of Ignatius stems from a faulty translation. He claims that the passive of γινώσκω "is never used to signify 'to be esteemed' but always 'to be made known.'"[75] The alternative translation is defended by Lightfoot: "if it [the continent individual's purpose or vow of chastity] be known beyond the bishop, he has been corrupted." In the same way that Ignatius says persons intending to marry should do so with the bishop's approval (immediately following our text), so single persons who are able to or desire to remain continent in singleness should take the bishop into their counsels, but no one else (cf. Ign. *Magn.* 7:1).[76]

Where do these single persons fit into Ignatius's understanding of the Christian life? The answer to this question is found in Ignatius's definition of discipleship. It is bound up with complete conformity to the life of Jesus.[77] For Ignatius the *chief* mode of imitating Christ is through suffering. This is why he is so anxious to get to the Roman Coliseum to meet his death. One of the other means of imitating Christ is "chastity" in honor of the Lord's flesh.

Ignatius's wording in Ign. *Pol.* 5:2 suggests that the challenge to a life of chastity can only be accepted by some. "If anyone is able"

[73]Πλέον means "more, in greater measure, to a greater degree," and the acc. is used here as an adverb with a gen. of comparison (BAGD, s.v. "πολύς," II2c). Πλήν is an adverb used as a conjunction (BAGD, s.v.) meaning "only, nevertheless, however, but" (cf. BDF §449), and is found in Bihlmeyer's (*Die Apostolischen Väter*, 112) apparatus.

[74]So Kleist's trans. in ACW 1:98; Richardson's trans. in LCC 1:119 (but he makes "his chastity" the subject of ἔφθαρται); and C. Cochini, *Origines apostoliques du célibat sacerdotal* (Paris, 1981) 164–65.

[75]G. Sloyan, "Biblical and Patristic Motives for Celibacy of Church Ministers," *Concilium* 8:8 (1972) 23. Sloyan, however, cites no lexical work of his own to substantiate his statement. He relies on the judgment of "J. B. Lightfoot and A. D'Alès as cited in Roger Gryson, *Les origines du célibat ecclésiastique* (Gembloux, 1968), pp. xi and 228" (n. 20).

[76]Lightfoot (*Apostolic Fathers*, II, 2:349) believes that this is the correct interpretation whether one adopts the πλέον (his preference) or the πλήν reading. Cochini (*Origines*, 165), however, raises some interesting points against this interpretation of Ign. *Pol.* 5:2.

[77]Cf. Aune, *Cultic Setting of Realized Eschatology*, 150–51.

(εἴ τις δύναται) is similar in wording to Jesus' closing challenge in Matt 19:12: "He who is able (ὁ δυνάμενος) to accept *this* let him accept it." In fact, in one of Ignatius's other letters he omits the portion of Matt 19:12*d* that he probably alludes to here and quotes the phrase "Let him accept it who can" (ὁ χωρῶν χωρείτω). In his letter to the Smyrnaeans (6:1) Ignatius makes the statement that judgment will fall upon the glory of the angels and on rulers visible and invisible if they do not believe on the blood of Christ. Then he says: "The one who accepts (this) let him accept (it)." Ignatius applies this phrase from Matt 19:12*d* to a difficult saying or teaching that he does not want his readers to stumble over.[78] He even prefaces this teaching with "Let no one be misled." Jesus had used this "let him accept it" challenge after he made the declaration that some would forego marital life and sexual relations because of the primacy of God's kingdom. Though in Ign. *Smyrn.* 6:1 Ignatius employs part of Matt 19:12*d* in a context foreign to the one in Matthew's Gospel, it seems to *function* in exactly the same way it does in its original context in Matt 19:10–12: it is an exhortation to fruitful reception of a difficult teaching.[79]

Yet to be discussed is the meaning of the phrase "to the honor of the flesh of the Lord." This may be a reference to the literal earthly life of Jesus in that he himself was a "eunuch for the sake of the kingdom" *par excellence.* The believer who has been gifted to live a single life of service in devotion to his Lord and who does so without boasting is an imitator of Christ to his honor. This phrase may also be understood as a figurative reference (cf. our discussion of 1 Cor 6:12–20 and *1 Clem.* 38:2). Lawson writes:

> We observe that the Christian's own body is a part of the Body of Christ, so that a discipline which exalts it exalts "the flesh of the Lord." This conveys to us what a vivid and realistic sense the early Christians felt that they were "members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son."[80]

As in Clement's letter, Ign. *Pol.* 5:2 addresses the temptation of the one who has this gift to think more highly of himself than he

[78]Tertullian (*De Fuga in Persecutione* 14.2 [ANF 4:125; FC 40:306]) uses Matt 19:12*d* the same way in still another context.

[79]W. Bauer ("Matth. 19,12 und die alten Christen," in *Neutestamentliche Studien. Georg Heinrici zu seinem 70. Geburtstag* [UNT 6; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche, 1914] 235–44) feels that Matt 19:12 does not occur in the Apostolic Fathers. He mentions the Pol. *Smyrn.* 6:1 passage (p. 236) but says that because it is out of context it is not necessary to discuss it in his essay. This is to overlook some key aspects of Ignatius's understanding of Matt 19:12. Bauer does not discuss Ign. *Pol.* 5:2.

[80]J. Lawson, *A Theological and Historical Introduction to the Apostolic Fathers* (New York: Macmillan, 1961) 144.

ought to think. When Ignatius says the Christian who boasts about his decision to remain chaste "has been corrupted," he is not necessarily threatening the believer with eternal damnation.[81] A passage from Methodius's *Symposium* aids in understanding Ignatius at this point:

> Again, even though a person may persevere in resisting the desires of the senses, if he should take excessive pride in this very ability to control the impulses of the flesh, considering them all as utterly insignificant, he does not honor chastity. Rather does he dishonor it by his arrogance and pride, *purifying the outside of the dish* [cf. Matt 23:25] and the platter, that is, the flesh, the body, while doing harm to his heart by his domineering conceit.[82]

In other words, Ignatius warns the celibate to beware of the sin of pride. Though there may be some practical advantages in remaining single for the sake of being more fully devoted to the kingdom of God, one cannot speak of any moral superiority in remaining single, "for it is better to be humble without being celibate than to be celibate without being humble."[83]

Justin Martyr and Athenagoras[84]

The next two passages are neither exhortations to those with the gift of sexual self-control nor interpretations of the primary singleness texts under consideration. Rather they are included as evidence of the fact that at an early date Christian men and women were renouncing marital life because of the various benefits they perceived in a life of singleness.[85] Both Justin Martyr and Athenagoras appeal to the existence of men and women in the Christian community who

[81]BAGD (s.v. "φθείρω," 2*c*) lists the meaning of φθείρω in Ign. *Pol.* 5:2 as "*destroy* in the sense 'punish w. eternal destruction.'" As BAGD notes, the parallel with the preceding ἀπόλλυμι might suggest this. But the other references BAGD lists under this meaning (2 Pet 2:12; Jude 10; 1 Cor 3:17*b* [*if* the teacher there is an unbeliever]) all have unbelievers as the object of eternal destruction.

[82]Methodius of Olympus, *Symposium* 11 (trans. H. Musurillo; ACW 27:149-50).

[83]Thurian, *Marriage and Celibacy*, 81.

[84]The Greek texts used for Justin, Athenagoras and Clement of Alexandria are those reprinted in the series ΒΙΒΛΙΟΘΗΚΗ ΕΛΛΗΝΩΝ ΠΑΤΕΡΩΝ ΚΑΙ ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑΣΤΙΚΩΝ ΣΥΓΓΡΑΦΩΝ (Athens). For Athenagoras see also *Athenagoras* (Oxford Early Christian Texts; ed. and trans. Wm. R. Schoedel; Oxford: Clarendon, 1972).

[85]We should not overlook the fact that already in NT times Paul saw certain advantages to the unmarried state (1 Cor 7:7, 29-35, 39-40), and if our interpretation of 1 Tim 5:12 is correct, certain women in NT times were dedicating their lives (free from matrimonial ties) exclusively to Christ. For the possible sociological advantages that women might have found by turning to celibacy, see J. M. Bassler, "The Widows' Tale: A Fresh Look at 1 Tim 5:3-16," *JBL* 103 (1984) 23-41.

had remained continent in singleness in order to prove to pagans what a high standard of morality Christians actually held.

In Justin's *First Apology* (ca. A.D. 150) he begins with an appeal to justice and goes on to refute anti-Christian slanders (3–12). He states and briefly refutes three of the principal charges brought against Christians: atheism, immorality and disloyalty. He tries to show his readers (chap. 12) that if men knew that they were going into either eternal punishment or eternal salvation, depending on the character of their actions, then no one would choose vice, but would restrain himself with virtue that he might avoid punishments and receive the good things that come from God. Neither thoughts nor actions can be hidden from God. Justin points out the difference between the laws made by men and *truth*, namely The Word Himself, Jesus. And speaking of Jesus he says, "we know of no ruler more royal or more just than he. . . . So the sensible man will not choose whatever the Word forbids to be chosen."[86] At the end of chap. 12 Justin says that already he has made his point clear that Christians only seek what is just and true, but he will go on to persuade the lover of truth.

In chap. 13 Justin states that Christians are not godless but honor Jesus in accordance with reason. He asks his readers to give their attention to the mystery of worshiping a crucified man. He then (chap. 14) warns them ahead of time that the demons will try to distort what he says and prevent them from grasping the truth. He begins to give some examples of how the demons "get a hold of all who do not struggle to their utmost for their own salvation—as we do who, after being persuaded by the Word, renounced them [i.e., the demons] and now follow the only begotten God through his Son." First on Justin's list contrasting past sin with present righteousness is this: "Those who once rejoiced in fornication (πορνείαις) now delight in continence (σωφροσύνη) alone" (14.2). Other examples follow, contrasting what Christians used to be with what they now are.

Then Justin makes a transition to chap. 15 by saying that before he makes his defense, that is, gives his demonstration, he thinks it would be fitting to recall some of the teachings of Christ Himself. By doing this, he says, the contrasts he has just listed will not seem to be sophistry. Here chap. 15 begins and the first catena of Jesus' teachings is subsumed under the subject of "continence" (σωφροσύνη), or "self-discipline." Justin writes:

> About continence he said this: "Whoever looks on a woman to lust after her has already committed adultery in his heart before God" [Matt 5:28]. And: "If your right eye offends you, cut it out; it is better

[86] *1 Apol.* 12.7–8 (trans. E. R. Hardy; LCC 1:248).

for you to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven with one eye than with two to be sent into eternal fire" [Mark 9:47 (Matt 5:29)]. And: "Whoever marries a woman who has been put away from another man commits adultery" [Matt 5:32 (Luke 16:18)]. And: "There are some who were made eunuchs by men, and some who were born eunuchs, and some who have made themselves eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven's sake; only not all [are able to] receive this" [Matt 19:11–12].[87]

And so those who make second marriages according to human law are sinners in the sight of our Teacher,[88] and those who look on a woman to lust after her. For he condemns not only the man who commits adultery, but the man who desires to commit adultery, since not only our actions but our thoughts are manifest to God. Many men and women now in their sixties and seventies who have been disciples of Christ from childhood have preserved their purity (ἄφηροι διαμένουσι); and I am proud that I could point to such people in every nation.[89]

Justin says that these particular teachings of Jesus can be grouped under a common theme: σωφροσύνη. In popular usage this word had already acquired a meaning restricted to sexual moderation, and this meaning of "chastity" and a virtuous life in the moral sphere prevailed in the early church.[90] Furthermore, Justin makes it clear that this self-control has to do with sexual desire in both *thought* and *action*. From the way that Justin connects Jesus' teachings and comments on them, his last remark about those who have preserved their purity might possibly include not only those who have not committed adultery in thought and in action (especially by remarriage after divorce, something permitted by the secular law but prohibited by Jesus), but also those who have made themselves "eunuchs" for the kingdom of heaven's sake. On the other hand, Justin's last comment may specifically refer to Christian men and women devoted to lifelong singleness. Elsewhere Justin says "we do not marry except in order to bring up children, or else, renouncing marriage, we live in perfect continence (τέλεον ἐνεκρατευόμεθα)."[91] Thus Justin does not

[87]A. J. Bellinzoni (*The Sayings of Jesus in the Writings of Justin Martyr* [NovTSup 17; Leiden: Brill, 1967] 57–61, 96–97) feels Justin's source for the four passages he cites here (15.1–4) seems to be a carefully composed gospel harmony of elements from Matthew, Mark and Luke.

[88]We cannot discuss here Justin's teaching on divorce and remarriage, for which see H. Crouzel, *L'église primitive face au divorce du premier au cinquième siècle* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1971) 53–56.

[89]*1 Apol.* 15.1–6 (LCC 1:250).

[90]Cf. U. Luck, "σωφροσύνη," *TDNT* 7 (1971) 1100, 1103. This is the same word that Justin had previously used to describe what Christians now pursue instead of "fornications" (*1 Apol.* 14.2).

[91]*1 Apol.* 29.1 (LCC 1:260).

appear to understand Matt 19:12 in the literal sense of physical castration.[92] Those who have made themselves "eunuchs" for the kingdom of heaven's sake are those devoted followers of Christ who never married. Athenagoras's testimony a quarter of a century later will make this identification even more clear.

Two points are worthy of mention with respect to the above passage from Justin's *First Apology*. First, by A.D. 150 Justin is able to point to many Christians who have lived a life of continence as disciples of Christ. The fact that many of them were over sixty or seventy years old pushes the existence of this "because-of-the-kingdom" lifestyle back into the first century, even earlier than the texts we examined from Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch.

The second item of note is the manner in which Justin maintains Matthew's association of Jesus' hard saying on divorce and remarriage with the saying about eunuchs that follows. Clement of Alexandria does the same thing in Book 3 of his *Stromata*, but he comments quite specifically on how these two passages fit together (see below).

Athenagoras answers three current charges brought against Christianity in his *Plea for the Christians* (ca. A.D. 177): atheism, incest, and cannibalism. Chaps. 3–30 are devoted to answering the first charge and chaps. 31–36 take up the remaining two. The passage on singleness is found in the middle of Athenagoras's reply to the charge of incest or promiscuity (chaps. 32–34). Athenagoras, like Justin, appeals to the high moral standards of Christians to refute the charges of immorality.

> You would, indeed, find many among us, both men and women, who have grown to old age unmarried (ἀγάμους), in the hope of being closer to God. If, then, to remain virgins and eunuchs (τὸ ἐν παρθενίᾳ καὶ ἐν εὐνουχίᾳ μεῖναι) brings us closer to God, while to indulge in wrong thoughts and passions drives us from him, we have all the more reason to avoid those acts, the very thought of which we flee from.[93]

[92]Yet in *1 Apol.* 29.2–3 Justin does record the case of a Christian who petitioned the Prefect in Alexandria, asking that a physician be allowed to make him a eunuch. When the request was denied "the young man remained single (ἐφ' ἑαυτοῦ μείνας), satisfied with [the approval of] his own conscience and that of his fellow believers." Eusebius (*Eccl. Hist.* 6.8.1–6) tells the story of Origen's over-literal application of Matt 19:12*c* in his youth and his later attempt to describe to the bishops of the world the monstrous nature of the act he had wrongly carried out. On Origen's literal hermeneutic in his youth see Bauer, "Matth. 19,12," 238. In his later years Origen (*Matt.* 15.4) defended the figurative interpretation of all three classes of eunuchs in Matt 19:12.

[93]*Plea for the Christians* 33.2*b*–3; trans. C. C. Richardson (LCC 1:337). A good study of Athenagoras's life and writings is L. W. Barnard, *Athenagoras: A Study in Second Century Christian Apologetic* (Théologie historique 18; Paris: Beauchesne, 1972).

If this is what Christians really practice, Athenagoras goes on to say, then those who accuse Christians resemble the proverb, "The harlot reproves the chaste (τὴν σώφρονα)." Christians are being castigated for the very things that their accusers are involved in. Those outside the church are the ones who have set up a market for fornication! "Adulterers and corrupters of boys, they insult eunuchs (τοὺς εὐνούχους) and those once married (μονογάμους)."[94]

Athenagoras uses the word "eunuch" essentially as a synonym for "unmarried" and "virgin." The latter two terms occur in Paul's discussion of the value of remaining single in 1 Cor 7:25–38, and "eunuch" has almost certainly been used under the influence of Jesus' saying in Matt 19:12. In fact, celibacy, or the notion of remaining unmarried for the sake of the kingdom, was commonly rendered by the term εὐνουχία from the time of Athenagoras onwards.[95] That Jesus' saying recorded in Matt 19:12 had a strong influence on the lives of Christians in the early church can hardly be denied. Nor can it be denied that Jesus' eunuch-saying was primarily understood in a figurative sense of those who were able to remain continent in singleness. Finally, the writer examined below extends the application of the "eunuch" figure beyond the reference to singles who exercise self-control over their sexual life.

Clement of Alexandria

In Book 3 of the *Stromata* Clement of Alexandria is walking the fence as he refutes the teaching of the libertines on the one hand while he responds, on the other hand, to ascetics like Tatian and Marcion who forbade marriage altogether.[96] Matt 19:12 was one of the proof texts employed by the Gnostic heretics in support of their depreciation of marriage. These heretics argued that marriage was fornication and taught that it was introduced by the devil. Furthermore, they claimed to be imitating the Lord in their practice in that he never married.[97]

[94] *Plea for the Christians* 34 (LCC 1:338).

[95] This is true throughout Book 3 of Clement of Alexandria's *Stromata* (cf. Ford, "St Paul, the Philogamist," 326–27 and n. 5). Eusebius (*Eccl. Hist.* 5.24.5) calls Melito, bishop of Sardis, "Melito the eunuch (τὸν εὐνοῦχον), who lived entirely in the Holy Spirit."

[96] In *Stromata* 3.5.40–44 Clement is replying to the libertines; then in 3.6.45–3.7.60 he replies to the ascetics; in 3.8.61–3.10.70 he again returns to the libertines. The last line in 3.10.70 seems to sum up both extremes: "Accordingly, those who from hatred do not marry or from desire use the flesh as if it were not a matter of right and wrong, are not in the number of the saved with whom the Lord is present" (trans. H. Chadwick; LCC 2:72).

[97] Clement has a threefold response to this argument in *Stromata* 3.6.49. The reasons the Lord did not marry are as follows: "In the first place he had his own bride,

What is most interesting is Clement's response to such an interpretation of Matt 19:11–12. He says in *Stromata* 3.6.50:

> Concerning the words, "Not all can receive this saying. There are some eunuchs who were born so, and some who were made eunuchs by men, and some who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven; let him receive it who can receive it," they do not realize the context. After his word about divorce some asked him whether, if that is the position in relation to women, it is better not to marry; and it was then that the Lord said: "Not all can receive this saying, but those to whom it is granted." What the questioners wanted to know was whether, when a man's wife has been condemned for fornication, it is allowable for him to marry another.[98]

Though some have argued that Clement is here, once again, citing this text in the customary way—that is, by making v 11 a response to the disciples' "It is better not to marry" in v 10[99]—we must admit that Clement recognizes some kind of relationship between the eunuchs of v 12 and those disciples who object to Jesus' teaching that they may not remarry after divorcing their wives for fornication. In what way are the eunuchs in v 12 like those men in v 9 who are now in a state of singleness through the divorce of their wives for fornication?

Arriving at a correct analysis of Clement's exegesis of Matt 19:11–12 involves discovering what Clement says about "eunuchs" elsewhere in his writings. In *Paedogogus* 3.26 Clement speaks out against men and women who cultivate artificial beauty. Then he notes that there are scores of eunuchs who, because they are incapable of sexual pleasure, can minister to those who want to have some love affair and not raise suspicion. He then says: "The true eunuch, however, is not he who is unable, but he who is unwilling to gratify his passions."[100]

In *Stromata* 3.1.1 Clement merely notes how the followers of Basilides interpret Matt 19:11–12 (and it is to this interpretation that Clement specifically responds in the above quote). The key point of the interpretation by the followers of Basilides is that the eunuchs

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the Church; and in the next place he was no ordinary man that he should also be in need of some helpmeet after the flesh. Nor was it necessary for him to beget children since he abides eternally and was born the only Son of God" (LCC 2:63). Then Clement cites Matt 19:6; Luke 18:8; Matt 24:19; and Acts 1:7 to show the Lord's approval of the married state and that he wanted the world to continue from generation to generation.

[98]LCC 2:63.

[99]Cf. J. Dupont, *Mariage et divorce dans l'évangile: Matthieu 19,3–12 et parallèles* (Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1959) 166, n. 2.

[100]FC 23:221.

who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom "derive this idea, . . . from a wish to avoid the distractions involved in marriage, because they are afraid of having to waste time in providing the necessities of life."[101] This sounds very much like some of the remarks Paul makes in 1 Cor 7:25–35 concerning the benefits of the single life.

In another passage (*Stromata* 3.1.4) Clement speaks of continence in the widest sense of a discipline of one's whole life. It is not concerned only with sexual abstinence. Continence (ἐγκράτεια), he says,

> does not only teach us to exercise self-control (σωφρονεῖν); it is rather that self-control is granted to us, since it is a divine power and grace. Accordingly I must declare what is the opinion of our people about this subject. Our view is that we welcome as blessed the state of abstinence from marriage in those to whom this has been granted by God (ἡμεῖς εὐνουχίαν μὲν καὶ οἷς τοῦτο δεδώρηται ὑπὸ θεοῦ μακαρίζομεν [cf. Matt. 19:11b]). We admire monogamy and the high standing of single marriage (τὸν ἕνα γάμον), holding that we ought to share suffering with another and "bear one another's burdens," lest anyone thinks he stands securely should himself fall.[102]

In this passage Clement clearly understands the never-before-married state to be a gift granted by God.

In *Stromata* 3.7.59 Clement again notes that continence is not merely in relation to sexual relations but concerns all the indulgences that the soul craves.

> As for ourselves, we set high value on continence which arises from love to the Lord and seeks that which is good for its own sake, sanctifying the temple of the Spirit. It is good if for the sake of the kingdom of heaven a man emasculates himself (διὰ τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν εὐνουχίζειν ἑαυτόν) from all desire, and "purifies his conscience from dead works to serve the living God."[103]

Here, Clement does not understand the third category of eunuchs in Matt 19:12 to apply only to one who never marries.[104] The one who never marries is like the one who resists desire in that both exercise the virtue of self-control.

Finally, in *Stromata* 3.15.99, Clement again seems to be responding to the misinterpretation of Matt 19:12 given by the heretics in

[101]LCC 2:40.

[102]LCC 2:41–42.

[103]LCC 2:67. Cf. Schneider, *TDNT* 2:768.

[104]Tertullian (*To His Wife* 1.6 [ACW 13:18]) applies the third category of eunuchs in Matt 19:12 to the condition of those who refrain from sexual relations within marriage!

3.1.1. He concludes: "but blessed are those who have made themselves eunuchs, free from all sin, for the sake of the kingdom of heaven by their abstinence from the world."[105]

These, then, are all of the references to Matt 19:12 in the writings of Clement of Alexandria.[106] They indicate clearly that Clement employs the terms ἐγκράτεια and εὐνουχία "in their widest sense of a discipline of one's whole life and conduct rather than in the narrower sense of abstinence from coitus and he recognizes that the duties of marriage are just as much things belonging to the Lord as the duties of a continent life (c[hap.] 12)."[107]

It is perhaps not by accident nor due to Clement's own hermeneutical practice[108] that he interprets the third category of eunuchs (Matt 19:12*c*) in the broad sense noted above. The Gnostic heretics were using Matt 19:12 to support their own deprecation of marriage. Thus in arguing against the heretics' distorted view of marriage,[109] it would hardly have been advantageous to interpret Jesus' eunuch-saying straightforwardly as a challenge (for those who could make room for it) to forego marital life for the sake of being more devoted to the Lord. To emphasize this aspect of Jesus' teaching in Matt 19:3–12 would have only justified the heretics' distorted practice.

This brings us back to *Stromata* 3.6.50 and the point that Clement *does* emphasize in his own interpretation of Matt 19:12 in the context of vv 3–12. For Clement, Jesus' condemnation of divorce followed by remarriage to another[110] is evidence of Jesus' high view of the marriage relationship. The heretics who oppose marriage and use Matt 19:12 as one of their proof texts, says Clement, do not take note of the context in which Jesus makes this remark about "eunuchs," one that exhibits a high view of marriage.

> After his word about divorce some asked him whether, if that is the position in relation to women, it is better not to marry; and it was then that the Lord said: "Not all can receive this saying, but those to whom it is granted."[111] What the questioners wanted to know was whether,

[105]LCC 2:87.

[106]Cf. *Biblia Patristica* 1: *Des origines à Clément d'Alexandrie et Tertullien* (Paris: Éditions du centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1975) 271.

[107]Ford, "St Paul, the Philogamist," 327.

[108]Clement talks about others who pervert the words of the Lord (3.4.27), misapply sound doctrine (3.4.29), interpret in a literal sense sayings intended to be understood allegorically (3.4.38), do not interpret contextually (3.6.50), and force Scripture in favor of their own immoral opinions (3.8.61). Clement is not above hermeneutical errors himself, of course.

[109]Cf. R. M. Grant, "The Heresy of Tatian," *JTS* NS 5 (1954) 62–68.

[110]Clement emphasizes "single marriage" throughout Book 3 (*Stromata* 3.1.4; 3.11.74; 3.12.80, 82).

[111]For the meaning of Matt 19:11 and the debate over what "this saying" refers to in the context of Matt 19:9–12, see W. A. Heth and G. J. Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce:*

> when a man's wife has been condemned for fornication, it is allowable to him to marry another.

Clement thinks the close connection of the eunuch-saying with Jesus' saying in Matt 19:9 should be obvious to the reader of Matthew's Gospel. What does Clement see in this passage that the modern day reader has apparently overlooked?

In light of the ascetics who basically condemned marriage by employing Matt 19:12, Clement is most likely suppressing (though not misinterpreting) the invitation to singleness for those who have been enabled to accept it (vv 12*c–d*). Instead he focuses on Jesus' statement in v 11, "Not all men can accept this statement," where "this statement" refers to the hard saying on the need to remain single (cf. 1 Cor 7:11*a*?) after divorcing adulterous wives (v 9),[112] since any remarriage results in adultery (cf. Matt 5:32*b*). This is the teaching to which the disciples have just objected (v 10). On this understanding, Jesus, as if to demonstrate that continence in singleness after a broken marriage is not as difficult as the disciples make it to be, presents a most convincing example by arguing from the greater to the lesser. Those who must live without sexual relations after an unfortunate divorce are in no worse a position than those who were born eunuchs or made eunuchs by men. These eunuchs live apart from marital relations unaided by the grace of God. Jesus' disciples, who find themselves in a state of singleness after divorce, should be able to do as much since they are aided by the enabling grace of God. Jesus then proclaims the existence of a new category of "eunuchs" (v 12*c*). These so-called "eunuchs" have a special grace-gift or calling from God and have chosen not to marry because they have become so captivated by the kingdom of God (cf. Matt 13:44) and its claims upon their lives (cf. 1 Cor 7:17–24). Jesus then concludes with a call to faith: "He who is able to accept this, let him accept it" (v 12*d*). In this context the call to faithful living is directed to two groups of people: (1) those disciples who might be so inclined to forego marriage because of their personal calling to be totally devoted to their Lord (as Paul found himself to be; cf. 1 Cor. 7:7*a*, 8*b*, 25–26, 28*b*, 29–35, 40); and (2) those disciples who find it difficult to accept and live by Jesus' teaching concerning the lifelong permanence of mar-

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Towards an Evangelical Understanding of New Testament Teaching (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985) 53–68.

[112]Clement is not focusing on the negative, almost sarcastic remark of the disciples (v 10) that it would be best not to marry at all if a man cannot get out of an undesirable marriage and begin again with another. Perhaps Clement is attempting to correct those who did interpret the passage in this way and then used it to teach that marriage should be avoided altogether.

riage, namely, that faithful disciples do not remarry after divorce. Clement of Alexandria appears to focus on the latter emphasis of Matt 19:9–12 in his attempt to defend the sanctity of marriage in the face of those heretics who degraded it.

This understanding of the eunuch-saying in the context of the divorce controversy that precedes it is not only attractive, but it helps to explain two phenomena in the early church: (1) Many Christians chose to forego marriage in their desire to serve Christ as best they knew how; and (2) the early church in the first five centuries almost unanimously rejected remarriage after divorce, even if the divorce was for Matthew's πορνεία exception. Clement affirms that the ability to forego marriage in one's desire to serve God is a gift granted by God; but the eunuch-saying also carries a message for those disciples who feared the consequences of violating Jesus' teaching about the lifelong permanence of marriage. Jesus assures his disciples that God will grant separated spouses the grace necessary to remain single and avoid committing adultery by remarriage to another. "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matt 19:26). God enables faithful disciples to do that which he commands.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study has demonstrated that remaining single "because of the claims and interests of the kingdom of God" was clearly impressed on the minds and lives of many of the early Christians. The practice of celibacy in the early church cannot be wholly or even primarily attributed to the influence of the ascetic tendencies of the day, though it was certainly aided by them. Both the concepts and the terminology of Matt 19:12 and 1 Cor 7:7 stand behind this practice. The ability to remain continent in singleness was considered to be a gift granted by God, and the one who was entrusted with such a gift was exhorted to remember the Giver of it and to beware of thinking that his abilities were found in himself. When God is the giver of both grace and gifts it is inappropriate to think that the one with the gift of singleness somehow stands on a higher spiritual plane than those who marry. Whether single or married, what matters is obedience to God and becoming more like Christ (Rom 8:29).

The single person devoted to the Lord is certainly not a second-class citizen in the church as is often implied today.[113] On the contrary, the single person who feels called to a life of singleness for the sake of serving the Lord more fully—let a warning against some ascetic legalism here be sounded—may even be thought of as an eschatological sign that Christians are living between the times: the time of

[113]Cf. J. Bayly, "Saved, Single, and Second Class," *Eternity*, March 1983, 23–26.

Christ's resurrection and the time of his parousia. The single person committed to Christ reminds the married person that he too must be committed to Christ (cf. 1 Cor 7:29), for a time is coming when men neither marry nor are given in marriage (Matt 22:30ff.). Marriage has an eschatological limit, but one's relationship with and devotion to the Lord does not. Uppermost in every disciple's mind ought to be the urgency of obedience to our Lord and the claims and interests of his kingdom.