



2. Shortness of Time and being Married as if You are not

La brevedad del tiempo y estar casado como si no se lo estuviera

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Abstract

The article takes up the question of what Paul means in 1 Corinthians 7,29 when he states that, for the remaining time, those who have a wife should be as if they do not have one. This can refer either to a universal, timeless ethical principle or to one limited by context—in this case an eschatological one. The paper proceeds to take up the primary question of the verse's meaning in three sections. The first surveys readings by early Church writers. The second section examines the language of the text, focusing specifically on meaning, syntax, and verbal aspect. In the third and final section, the study considers the social and philosophical context that may have informed Corinthians' conceptions of marriage. A comparison with various Stoic philosophers suggests Paul carries forward a similar ambivalence about marriage but one that is marked particularly by eschatological understanding. This is placed over and against the "Greco-Roman marriage background", which is characterized by social obligations and the expectation of intercourse.

Keywords

Time of the end — Marriage — Celibacy — 1 Corinthians 7

Resumen

Este artículo aborda la pregunta de qué quiere decir Pablo en 1 Corintios 7,29 cuando declara que para el tiempo que queda, para los que tienen esposa, debe ser como si no la tuvieran. Esto se puede referir a un principio ético universal, eterno, o a uno limitado por el contexto —uno escatológico, en este caso—. El estudio procede a abordar la pregunta primaria del significado del versículo en tres secciones. La primera analiza lecturas de escritores cristianos primitivos. La segunda examina el lenguaje del texto y se concentra específicamente en el significado, la sintaxis y el aspecto verbal. En la sección tercera y final, el estudio considera el contexto social y filosófico que puede haber conformado las concepciones corintias del matrimonio. Una comparación entre distintos filósofos estoicos sugiere que Pablo procede con una ambivalencia similar sobre el matrimonio, pero es una que está marcada particularmente por la comprensión escatológica. Esto es ubicado una y

otra vez sobre y contra el “trasfondo grecorromano del matrimonio”, que está caracterizado por obligaciones sociales y la expectativa de la relación sexual.

Palabras clave

Tiempo del fin — Matrimonio — Celibato — 1 Corintios 7

Introduction

This is a study about the husband and wife relationship in the context of the shortness of time as it is expressed in the Corinthian correspondence. The question of research is what did Paul mean by the phrase τὸ λοιπὸν, ἵνα καὶ οἱ ἔχοντες γυναῖκας ὡς μὴ ἔχοντες ὦσιν (1 Cor 7,29). By the expression “to be as if not having [a wife]” Paul does not allude to divorce or the neglecting of the marital duties. There are two possible answers.

The first one is that the apostle develops a timeless, ethical principle relative to the successful interference between the relationship of a man with his wife and their individual relationships with God. In this sense, what Paul argues for is that being married as if you are not requires one to take, and give the spouse, the freedom to serve God without distraction that normally comes from the marital conditions which involve the obligation to please the partner.

The second possible answer seems more plausible, as it considers the eschatological context within which Paul formulates that advice or command. Thus, the passage seems to suggest something more than a universal principle about husband-wife and God relationships. The family relationships are to continue unaltered even in the end-times, but the bond between the partners must remain what it is, a characteristic of this temporary form of the world, which must be left behind as the earth’s history comes to its end. The following factors are indicative of the veracity of this explanation: (a) structural-contextual, (b) semantic, (c) syntactic, (d) intertextual, and (e) cultural. Since for Paul marriage seems to be part of τὸ σχῆμα τοῦ κόσμου τούτου, which παράγει (1 Cor 7,31), within these time constraints it is likely that Paul urges married people not to use marital rights to the full. But within the context of an eschatology of nearness and crisis, Paul argues that

married people are to see their marital rights and obligations as active, but secondary to serving God, and be ready to give them up soon.

In order to answer the question raised in this study, a number of steps will be followed. First, the opinions of commentators from among the Church Fathers to the great Reformers will be reviewed, as these commentators tried to fathom the meaning of 1 Corinthians 7,29 key phrase. Second, several linguistic analyses will be done in order to clarify the key words or phrases which inform the meaning of the phrase οἱ ἔχοντες γυναῖκας ὡς μὴ ἔχοντες ὧσιν. Third, the cultural and ideological context of the church in Corinth will be studied, as it defines what a profitable marriage would be.

From the Fathers to the Reformation

The seeming restriction of the use of marriage for Paul, motivated by the shortness of time, came to be regarded as a blessing in *Acta Pauli* 5.8-9, which modifies the key phrase in 1 Corinthians 7,29 in the following words: μακάριοι οἱ ἔχοντες γυναῖκας ὡς μὴ ἔχοντες, ὅτι αὐτοὶ κληρονομήσουσιν τὸν θεόν (“Blessed are the ones having wives as not having, for these will inherit God”). Usually, however, the ancient Christian writers wrote about Paul’s advice in terms of an exception or a necessity due to special conditions.

One way the Church Fathers read 1 Corinthians 7,29 was to place this text against God’s command at the beginning of the world: “Multiply!”¹ In *On Monogamy* 7, Tertullian describes how some contemporary people, based on the law of the Levirate, believed in the “frequency of marriage”² But he argues against this use of the law primarily by showing the original

¹ Clement of Alexandria states in his *Paedagogus* 2.3.36.1.3-2.1, Εἰ δὲ ἐπὶ γάμου ταῦτα, ἐφ’ οὗ φησιν ὁ θεὸς »πληθύνεσθε«, πῶς οἴεσθε τὴν ἀπειροκαλίαν ἐξ ἀθηντείας κυριακῆς ἐξοριστέαν; (“But if these are said about marriage, of which God says ‘multiply’, how can you not think one must expel the extravagance of the dominating woman?”). Clément d’Alexandrie, *Le pédagogue*, 3 vols., H.-I. Marrou, M. Harl, C. Mondésert, C. Matray, ed. (Paris: Cerf, 1960-1970).

² Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. IV: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 64.

rationale of the Levirate law (related to the Jewish customs and tradition) and secondarily by making use of 1 Corinthians 7,29. According to him, Paul's command cancels the original "Grow and multiply".³

A second approach to 1 Corinthians 7,29, which is related to the first one, was that Paul talks about sexual abstinence inside marriage. In chapter 6 of *On Exhortation to Chastity*, Tertullian writes: "... for, of course, by enjoining continence, and restraining concubinance, the seminary of our race, (this latter command) has abolished that "Grow and multiply".⁴ In *On Monogamy* 3, Tertullian states that God is in favor of continence and marriage and that this is only permitted as an inferior evil to burning. He also holds that 1 Corinthians 7,29 seems more binding to the ones already married.⁵

Augustine also considers that this verse supports sexual separation within marriage. In *Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount* 1.14.39 he states that there is much blessing for those married partners who mutually decide, after having children, to restrain themselves from sexual intercourse. This, he states, is not equivalent to putting the spouse away, because they still live together spiritually. According to Augustine, Paul gives expression to this in 1 Corinthians 7,29.⁶ Chrysostom, in *Homilies*

³ See also Tertullian, *On Modesty* 16. He states that since this world is passing away, the command in 1 Cor 7,29 is the opposite to "grow and multiply" from the beginning of the world. Roberts, Donaldson, and Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. IV*, 92.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁶ Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. VI (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 17. Augustine in *Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament* 1.21 speaks of the "union of hearts" between husband and wife, without any sexual intercourse: "21. Joseph then was not the less His father, because he knew not the mother of our Lord, as though concupiscence and not conjugal affection constitutes the marriage bond. Attend, holy brethren; Christ's Apostle was some time after this to say in the Church, "It remaineth that they that have wives be as though they had none". And we know many of our brethren bringing forth fruit through grace, who for the Name of Christ practise an entire restraint by mutual consent, who yet suffer no restraint of true conjugal affection. Yea, the more the former is repressed, the more is the other strengthened and confirmed. Are they then not married people who thus live, not requiring from each other any carnal gratification, or exacting the satisfaction of any bodily desire? And yet the wife is subject to the husband, because it is fitting that she should be, and so much the more in subjection is she, in proportion to her greater chastity". Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Vol. VI, 252-253.

on *Matthew 7.8* argues that married people are to be like monks.⁷ Methodius states in *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins* 3.13: “And again, going on and challenging them to the same things, he confirmed his statement, powerfully supporting the state of virginity”.⁸ In 9.4, Methodius argues for virginity and chastity inside marriage in the context of 1 Corinthians 7,29.⁹ Caesarius of Arles, in *Sermon 51.3* (FC 31:258), tries to replace the satisfaction of begetting children, with that which results from sexual abstinence, placing the focus on getting spiritual children, that is good works, which should characterize the Christian daily.¹⁰ In the same vein, Ambrosiaster in *Commentary on Paul’s Epistles* (CSEL 81.3:83-84) states that since the end of the world was considered to come soon, believers should have been concerned with serving the Lord and not with begetting children, which would have thrown them in unnecessary fears and pressures, and caused them to be trapped by the devil.¹¹

A third way to interpret 1 Corinthians 7,29 was by suggesting that Paul argues here for chastity, that is, not re-marrying. Tertullian, in *On Exhortation to Chastity* 4 is in favor of chastity. He based his contention on the principle that when Paul allows for remarriage he seems to speak from himself, but when he shows himself against, he seems to appeal to the fact that he is inspired by the Holy Spirit.¹² So Tertullian makes an artificial distinction between Paul writing the text of Scripture from himself, and doing the same thing while having the Holy Spirit. Another way to argue in the same direction was for Tertullian to state in his *To His Wife* 1.5 that 1 Corinthians 7,29 is the measure taken by God to counteract the vices of Noah’s generation expressed in the words “They were

⁷ Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 10:49.

⁸ Roberts, Donaldson, and Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. VI*, 322.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 346-347.

¹⁰ Gerald Lewis Bray, *1-2 Corinthians*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture NT 7 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 70.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Roberts, Donaldson, and Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. IV*, 53.

marrying and buying”.¹³ Using Ecclesiastes’ principle that “there is a time for all”, Augustine, *On the Good of Widowhood* 8.11 reads:

... now is the time not of casting stones, but of gathering; not of embracing, but of abstaining from embracing; [...] assuredly if thou hadst sought a second marriage, it would have been no obedience of prophecy or law, no carnal desire even of family, but a mark of incontinence alone.¹⁴

A fourth contention relative to Paul’s advice in 1 Corinthians 7,29 was that the apostle pronounces the limitation¹⁵ of marriage or the end of it. Speaking against Marcion’s doctrine, which forbade marriage, Tertullian relates in *Against Marcion* 1.29 how Christians did not “reject marriage, but refrain from it”.¹⁶ This statement shows his Montanist ideas which are wrapped in biblical vocabulary. Thus, 1 Corinthians 7,29 becomes the pronouncement of the end of marriage, of course not because marriage is to be blamed but because it came to its fulfillment. Abstaining from marriage is symbolic of marriage’s own harvest. Writing to Diodorus about one contemporary fellow who pretended to be Diodorus and encouraged someone to marry his deceased wife’s sister, Basil writes in *Epistulae* 160.4.14-18: Ἐγὼ δὲ παντὶ τῷ περὶ γάμου βουλευομένῳ διαμαρτύρομαι ὅτι παράγει τὸ σχῆμα τοῦ κόσμου ὑτοῦ καὶ ὁ καιρὸς συνεσταλμένος ἐστίν, ἵνα καὶ οἱ ἔχοντες γυναικας ὡς μὴ ἔχοντες ὦσιν. (“But, for my part, to everyone

¹³ Roberts, Donaldson, and Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. IV*, 42.

¹⁴ Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 3:445.

¹⁵ Eusebius in *Demonstration evangelica* 1.9.5.1-6.2, τοῖς μὲν παλαιοῖς ἀνεμμένον καὶ ἐλεύθερον μετιῦσαι βίον οὐδὲν ἦν ἐμποδῶν οἴκου καὶ παιδων προϊστασθαι μετὰ τῆς περὶ τὸ θεῖον σχολῆς, αὐταῖς γαμεταῖς καὶ παισὶ καὶ οἴκοις θεοσεβεῖν ἀπερισπάστως δυναμένοις, καὶ μηδαμῶς ὑπὸ τῶν ἐκτὸς τῆς περὶ τὰ κρείττω προθέσεως ἀποσπωμένοις· τὰ δὲ καθ’ ἡμᾶς μυρία τὰ ἐκτὸς καθέλκοντα καὶ εἰς ἀλλοκότους φροντίδας περισύροντα τῆς τε περὶ τὰ θεῶ ἀρεστὰ σπουδῆς ἀφιστάντα τυγχάνει. τοῦτο γοῦν αἴτιον εἶναι τῆς τῶν γάμων συστολῆς παρίστησιν ὁ τῆς εὐαγγελικῆς διδασκαλίας λόγος, φάσκων, “The men of old days lived an easier and a freer life, and their care of home and family did not compete with their leisure for religion; they were able to worship God without distraction from their wives and children and domestic cares, and were in no way drawn by external things from the things that mattered most. But in our days there are many external interests that draw us away, and involve us in uncongenial thoughts, and seduce us from our zeal for the things which please God. The word of the Gospel teaching certainly gives this as the cause of the limitation of marriage”. Eusebius of Caesarea, *The Proof of the Gospel Being the Demonstration Evangelica*, trans. W. J. Farrar (London, Macmillan, 1920), 51. Italics mine.

¹⁶ Roberts, Donaldson, and Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. III*, 294.

who is thinking about marriage I testify that, “the fashion of this world passeth away”, and the time is short: “it remaineth that both they that have wives be as though they had none”).¹⁷

Cyprian, *Treatises* 12.3.11 affirms that the converted person ought to look only for heavenly things. In this context, though not explaining the meaning of the verse proper, Cyprian points to 1 Corinthians 7,29 as one example of what it means to look not for the earthly, but for the celestial.¹⁸

A fifth interpretation of marriage in the context of 1 Corinthians 7,29 was made by Augustine. Considering his initial frivolous manners, it is understandable why the bishop of Hippo contends that being married as if you are not means not to be under the control of lust and sensuality. Augustine, *On Marriage and Concupiscence* 1.13.15 reads: “It remaineth, therefore, that they that have wives’ be not subject to carnal concupiscence”.¹⁹

A sixth approach to 1 Corinthians 7,29 pertains to Augustine as well, who argues that the essentials of Paul’s claim is that one is to care and please for the Lord and put the spouse second. Augustine, *On Marriage and Concupiscence* 1.13.15-14.16 explains Paul as follows:

And thus to some extent he explains what he had already said: “Let them that have wives be as though they had none”. For they who have wives in such a way as to care for the things of the Lord, how they may please the Lord, without having any care for the things of the world in order to please their wives, are, in fact, just as if they had no wives. And this is effected with greater ease when the wives, too, are of such a disposition, because they please their husbands not merely because they are rich, because they are high in rank, noble in race, and amiable in natural temper, but because they are believers, because they are religious, because they are chaste, because they are good men.²⁰

¹⁷ Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series*, vol. VIII (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 214.

¹⁸ Roberts, Donaldson, and Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. V*, 536.

¹⁹ Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Vol. V*, 270.

²⁰ Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Vol. V*, 270. Augustine in *Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament* 75.7 quotes 1 Cor 7,29 in the context of holding possessions and he clearly

The seventh interpretation of the Church Fathers regarding 1 Corinthians 7,29 is that, based on this verse, Paul appears to advocate celibacy. Severian of Gabala states in *Pauline Commentary From the Greek Church* (NTA 15:252): “If married people are supposed to live as if they were single, how is it possible not to prefer virginity?”²¹

When we come to the Reformation, so far as this is represented by Luther and Calvin, it seems that not all of the seven interpretations of the Church Fathers resisted time. The thinking of the two reformers revolves around the fifth and the sixth views presented above. Luther underscored the main idea of 1 Corinthians 7,29-31, which, in his view, is a teaching for all Christians in general, whereby they are urged to despise this life, behave like pilgrims, and “using everything for a short time because of need and not for pleasure.”²² By “need”, Luther means to get marry so as to avoid sin. But anything that goes from this necessity further into the realm of desire or pleasure seems to nurture the lusts of the old man. In the same vein, Calvin held that Paul’s intention is to draw attention to the shortness of life and that we are not to abuse the things of the world:

For the man who considers that he is a stranger in the world uses the things of this world as if they were another’s — that is, as things that are lent us for a single day. The sum is this, that the mind of a Christian ought not to be taken up with earthly things, or to repose in them.²³

In this context, Calvin urges Christians to live every moment as if the moment of departure from life is impending.

None of the sources consulted above derives its conclusions on strictly exegetical grounds. The Church Fathers and the Reformers rather theorize on the basis of 1 Corinthians 7,29 phraseology and the expectations

distinguishes between being a lord over and slave, subject to one’s own possessions. Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Vol. VI*, 479.

²¹ Bray, *1-2 Corinthians*, 70.

²² Martin Luther, vol. 28, *Luther’s Works, vol. 28: 1 Corinthians 7, 1 Corinthians 15, Lectures on 1 Timothy*, eds., Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald and Helmut T. Lehmann, *Luther’s Works* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 1 Co 7:31.

²³ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries: 1 Corinthians*, electronic ed., Logos Library System; Calvin’s Commentaries (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998), 1 Co 7:29.

and context of their age. In order to construe the meaning of the expression “being married as if you are not”, several philological analyses will now be done: lexical, syntactic, structural, and contextual.

Marriage Life and the Shortness of Time

Meaning of καιρός and συνεσταλμένος

When it expresses time proper, the noun καιρός in the canonical Hellenistic Greek, as well as in the non-canonical Hellenistic Papyri, means a season, a fixed time, and a stage or period.²⁴ Its association with the participle συνεσταλμένος suggests that in 1 Corinthians 7,29 καιρός means a period of time, since it is described as “having been shortened”. Specifically, it stands for the time before the Parousia. This idea is based on Paul’s semantic habits and the confirmation of the usage in similar literature. Καιρός was used by Paul in the same letter to refer to Christ’s return (e.g., 1 Cor 4,5; cf. Rom 13,11; 1 Thess 5,1; 1 Tim 4,1; 2 Tim 3,1; 1 Pet 4,17; Rev 1,3; 22:10). Also, both BDAG and EDNT perceive these two words as eschatological vocabulary.²⁵ *Epistle of Barnabas* 4.3b.1-3 quotes Enoch saying: Εἰς τοῦτο γὰρ ὁ δεσπότης συντέτμηκεν τοὺς καιροὺς καὶ τὰς ἡμέρας, ἵνα ταχύνῃ ὁ ἡγαπημένος αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἐπὶ τὴν κληρονομίαν ἤξῃ²⁶ (“For this reason, the Lord cut short the times and the days so that

²⁴ Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg and Neva F. Miller, vol. 4, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, Baker’s Greek New Testament Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 212; Gerhard Delling, “Καιρός,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-), 461; James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930), 315.

²⁵ William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 498; Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990-1993), 2:233. As Gordon Fee puts it, “more likely the noun ‘time’ refers to the eschatological event of salvation, which has been set in motion by Christ’s death and resurrection and the gift of the Spirit”. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 338-339.

²⁶ R. A. Kraft, ed., *Épître de Barnabé* (Paris: Cerf, 1971), 72-218.

His beloved might hurry and come for his inheritance”).²⁷ The perfect passive of *συστέλλω* seems to be reflective of divine causation. It was God who shortened the time before the Parousia.

Τὸ λοιπὸν refers to the remaining time before the Parousia. This time is depicted in the Jewish Apocalypse 2 Esdras 16:40-48 in a language similar to Paul's.²⁸ One may wonder what significance τὸ λοιπὸν may have as these words precede the conjunction ἵνα. It seems that Paul “rather frequently puts words in front of ἵνα for emphasis; 2 Cor 2:4; Gal 2:10; Rom 7:13; Col 4:16”.²⁹ So the time that remained before the Parousia is important for the reasons enumerated after ἵνα. Moulton considers that Hellenistic Greek innovates upon the combination of ἵνα with the subjunctive mood, ascribing to the conjunction the role of introducing a command, a role held in the classical Greek by ὅπως in combination with the future indicative.³⁰ However, the commands in the subjunctive are less strong than in the imperative, all the more because they are rendered in the third person plural: “Let those who have wives be as if they do not have, etc”.

²⁷ The idea of the eschatological times being shortened is also present in Matt 24:22.

²⁸ “Hear my words, O my people; prepare for battle, and in the midst of the calamities be like strangers on the earth. ⁴¹ Let the one who sells be like one who will flee; let the one who buys be like one who will lose; ⁴² let the one who does business be like one who will not make a profit; and let the one who builds a house be like one who will not live in it; ⁴³ let the one who sows be like one who will not reap; so also the one who prunes the vines, like one who will not gather the grapes; ⁴⁴ those who marry, like those who will have no children; and those who do not marry, like those who are widowed. ⁴⁵ Because of this, those who labor, labor in vain; ⁴⁶ for strangers shall gather their fruits, and plunder their goods, overthrow their houses, and take their children captive; for in captivity and famine they will produce their children. ⁴⁷ Those who conduct business, do so only to have it plundered; the more they adorn their cities, their houses and possessions, and their persons, ⁴⁸ the more angry I will be with them for their sins, says the Lord” (NRSV).

²⁹ Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (New York, NY: C. Scribner's Sons, 1911), 155.

³⁰ James Hope Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, Volume 1: Prolegomena (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2006), 178. Stanley Porter seems to ascribe a resultative meaning of ἵνα in 1 Cor 7:29, “the time stands shortened, with the result that those having wives might be as those not having [wives]”. Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1999), 235.

Semantics of ὡς μὴ in the structure of the passage

In the New Testament, the collocation ὡς μὴ is only present in the Corinthian correspondence. Aside from the present passage (1 Cor 7,29-31), where it is used five times, ὡς μὴ is found three times in 1 Cor 4,7, 18 and 2 Cor 10,14. All these three latter instances make ὡς μὴ a literary device that introduces an apparent or false behavior that would make someone boast. Is it an apparent behavior what Paul asks for in 1 Corinthians 7,29-31? Does he ask married Christians to play the role of (but not be) married individuals? It appears that it is not so. In 1 Corinthians 7,29-31 there are five pairs of verbs separated by ὡς μὴ. The first three of these are identical (ἔχοντες, κλαίοντες, and χαίροντες). To have as if you do not have, to cry as if you do not cry, and to rejoice as if you do not rejoice do not seem self-explanatory, but rather odd. But the last two pairs put side by side two different verbs (ἀγοράζοντες/κατέχοντες and χρώμενοι/καταχρώμενοι). These combinations are very instructive with respect to the usage of this ὡς μὴ in the structure of the passage. As it is visible from the first of these last two pairs, the second verb is, so to speak, harder or, rather more intensive, than the first one. It is one thing to buy and another thing to possess. Likewise, it is one thing to make use of the things of the world and another thing to make full use of them.

To apply this meaning to the phrase “let those who have wives be as though they do not have” may give some clues for a clearer understanding. The second usage of ἔχοντες has a more intensive nuance and stands for an exaggeration of what marriage is normally meant to be. This exacerbation is probably reflective of the cultural mutual obligations that spouses had in the first century. They are not to experience marriage to the full, when this fullness is dictated by the then contemporary ethos. To put it in other words, they are not to be controlled by what they have.

Verbal Aspect in 1 Corinthians 7,29-31

Of the 53 words that 1 Corinthians 7,29-31 consists of, 15 are verbal forms, most of them being participles. Since the problem of this study

involves some of these participles, it is worth studying these verbal forms' aspects, in light of Buist Fanning's discussion about the verbal aspect in the participles.³¹ The first participle in the passage is the perfect passive *συνεσταλμένος*. Its syntactic relation to the noun *καιρός* makes the reader conclude that the shortness of time is a state or condition caused by some anterior action. The author of the action is probably God (*cf.* Matt 24,22). The temporal dimension of the participle is usually contemporaneous with the action of the main verb, so it is in the present (*cf.* *ἐστίν*). When Paul writes, the time *is* shortened. The apostle may have come to this conclusion by interpreting the then current state of affairs (*ἡ ἐνεστώσα ἀνάγκη*, 1 Cor 7,26) in light of the eschatological tribulation spoken of by Jesus (*ἀνάγκη μεγάλη*, Luke 21,23; *cf.* *θλίψις μεγάλη*, Matt 24,21). With escalating fatalities in mind, the end of time seemed to have come nearer.

The next participles are *οἱ ἔχοντες*, *οἱ κλαίοντες*, *οἱ χαίροντες*, *οἱ ἀγοράζοντες* and *οἱ χρώμενοι*, which are substantival, and their pairs, *ἔχοντες*, *κλαίοντες*, *χαίροντες*, *κατέχοντες*, and *καταχρώμενοι*, which are related to the subjunctive *ᾧσιν*. All these participles are in the present and, hence usually continuous. But the continuity of the present participle, as Daniel Wallace writes, “can be diminished if the particular context requires it”.³² The context here tells us that all these participles are gnomic but only some are continual.³³ “The ones who cry” and “the ones who rejoice”, for instance, fall in the first category. They do not refer to persons who cry or rejoice continually, but to some general situations when persons may experience these states. On the other hand, the phrase “the ones having wives” has a continual aspect.³⁴ It is this category that is ex-

³¹ Buist M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 406-418.

³² Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 620.

³³ “The use of the participle *echontes* with and without the article indicates a distinction, not between two groups of persons, but between the actual situation of the persons and the way they are to treat their situation”. William F. Orr and James Arthur Walther, *I Corinthians: A New Translation, Introduction, With a Study of the Life of Paul, Notes, and Commentary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 219.

³⁴ Fanning prefers the word “customary” (see Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, 410).

horted by Paul when he conveys his hortatory³⁵ *formulae*. On the other hand, while the first ἔχοντες is articular and denotes linearity, the second, ἔχοντες, is without definite article, and being periphrastic, it is gnomic. Paul grammaticalizes the difference between the fact of being married and the unbalanced behavior by which marriage is exacerbated. In other words, Paul does not advise a married person to deny his or her marital status. This would contradict his previous admonitions (1 Cor 7,2-5). Rather, while the continual aspect (the fact of being married) is going on, the generic aspect (to act according to the societal marital obligations,³⁶ cf. 1 Cor 7,33.34) is to be disowned.

This conclusion is also defensible from the context. David Garland³⁷ draws attention that weeping and rejoicing must not be viewed literally. Paul himself weeps and rejoices (cf. Rom 9,2; 1 Cor 16,17; 2 Cor 2,4; 7,4-10; Phil 1,12-19; 2,25-30; 3,18; 4,10).³⁸ Therefore, the point that Paul makes is that smiles and tears are not ultimate.³⁹ And so is marriage in light of eternity (cf. Mark 12,19-25).

³⁵ For this use of the subjunctive, see C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of the New Testament Greek*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 22. See also Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 464.

³⁶ “Paul is not battling a realized eschatology in Corinth, but pressing his own eschatological orientation on those who do not think in the same way. The climactic events of history are already underway; their completion is imminent. Since the institutionalized ‘form’ of society as we know it is ‘passing away’ (v. 31b; cf. Rom 8:18-25), the appropriate stance toward the world is ‘as though . . . [not]’.” Richard A. Horsley, *1 Corinthians*, Abingdon New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 106.

³⁷ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 329-30.

³⁸ See also Richard Pratt: “Paul’s words should not be taken in an absolute sense. Elsewhere he affirmed balanced views of marriage responsibilities and sexuality (Eph. 5:22–33), happiness (1 Thess. 5:16), mourning (Phil. 3:18), and possessions (1 Tim. 6:8). In this passage, he reminded all Corinthians that these legitimate aspects of life are not everything.” Richard L. Pratt, Jr, *I & II Corinthians*, Holman New Testament Commentary 7 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 121.

³⁹ As Richard Hays puts it, “he means that they should live out their marriages with a watchful awareness that the present order of things is not ultimate.” Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 127.

Marriage as part of τὸ σχῆμα τοῦ κόσμου τούτου

The fashion of this world refers to the world as we know it. This form of the world, says Paul, is passing away (*παράγει*). The present indicative has a twofold aspect: it expresses progress and denotes a reality which is specifically present by the time of the writing.⁴⁰ Because the world was currently and progressively passing away, Paul could say that the time had been shortened. From an exegetical point of view, the present tense replaces a future and this betrays that Paul expected the end of the world to be at hand.⁴¹ Simon Kistamaker argues that Paul “is not advocating celibacy, separation, or divorce” but that he urges Christians to be ready to leave the things of the world at any moment.⁴² Since marriage is part of the fashion of this world and this form is passing, Paul can prompt Christians metaphorically to be married as if they are not, that is, to be ready to leave it any time soon. Not even marital relationships should avert someone from serving God at the end of earth’s history.

The context of the passage compels us to see marriage, weeping, rejoicing, buying, and using or dealing with the world, as features of the present world.⁴³ When Paul warns about these activities, he has in mind those dimensions which are subject to the law of entropy, since “the life situation of the Christian community is transitory”.⁴⁴

Marriage has different aspects, some of whom are age enduring. For example, family relationships are not part of the form of this world. When

⁴⁰ Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, 199-200.

⁴¹ John Peter Lange, Philip Schaff, Christian Friedrich Kling and Daniel W. Poor, *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: 1 Corinthians* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2008), 161.

⁴² Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, vol. 18, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1953-2001), 244.

⁴³ “What does Paul really say? Marriage, tears, joys, purchases, the whole world of earthly things—we Christians may have all of them, use all of them, experience all of them—how? for what they are, as belonging to the *σχῆμα* or form of this present world”. R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1963), 319.

⁴⁴ Orr and Walther, *1 Corinthians*, 221.

God said οὐ καλὸν εἶναι τὸν ἄνθρωπον μόνον ποιήσωμεν αὐτῷ βοηθὸν κατ' αὐτόν (Gen 2,18, “it is not good for man to be alone; let us make a helper suitable to him”), He described the world before sin. The goodness of human togetherness does not pertain of the present form of the world. So it will stand in spite of the contractual side of marriage, which seems to be coming to an end (*cf.* Luke 20,35).

But these relationships in this age are conditioned by the norms and manners of the society (τὰ τοῦ κόσμου, 1 Cor 7,33.34), which basically means to please the partner (ἀρέσει τῇ γυναικί/τῷ ἀνδρί) to the expense of pleasing God, which would require one to be holy in body and spirit (τῷ σώματι καὶ τῷ πνεύματι). Accordingly, in 1 Corinthians 7,29-31, Paul does not try to dissuade Corinthians from marrying,⁴⁵ but he pronounces against the marital standards of the Corinthian society, which will now be surveyed.

Pleasing the Spouse within the Culture of the Corinthian Society

The main reason why Paul places the Christian marriage outside the preoccupations for the partner, as it was the case in the Greco-Roman society, was that these things distract the spouses from serving God. These marriage distractions were found in the vocabulary of some of the Stoic philosophers. Even though Paul has eschatological premises in mind, he wished Christians be exempted from such concerns so that they can devote themselves to their service for the Lord (εὐπάρεδρον τῷ κυρίῳ ἀπερισπάστως, 1 Cor 7,35). Cynic-Stoic philosophy had different premises but somewhat similar advices.

⁴⁵ Against Reidulf Molvaer who states: “The whole passage, vv. 29-31, stresses his [Paul’s] eschatological expectations, which may be the main reason why he seems rather negative to marriage. He lived in permanent expectation of the speedy return of Christ, as did the whole first generation of Christians. Marriage would in his view distract people from turning their minds fully towards this event, the Parousia.” Reidulf K. Molvaer, “St Paul’s Views on Sex According to 1 Corinthians 7:9 & 36-38”, *Studia Theologica* 58 (2004): 49 (for bibliography, 45-59).

Stoic Detachment from the World?

David Balch mentions five Greek authors: Epictetus,⁴⁶ Hierocles, Antipater of Tarsus, Musonius, and Stobaeus, who answered the question how desirable it is for a man to get married. Stobaeus synthesizes the Stoic view of marriage, tackled partially by the first four authors, in three possible directions: (a) considering the present conditions, marriage is not good (Epictetus⁴⁷), (b) given its mutual benefits and natural character, marriage is best (Hierocles and Antipater), and (c) marriage works for some but is inexpedient for others (Hierocles and Musonius). Stobaeus himself sides with the third opinion.⁴⁸

Paul seems to have echoed some of these thoughts. In his view on marriage, we find arguments on all sides, but the third Stoic opinion seems to be alluded to in 1 Corinthians 7, states Balch. Paul, too, holds that due to the fact that the time has been compressed and is difficult, some should marry (in order to avoid sin, 1 Cor 7,9⁴⁹), but some should not

⁴⁶ The relationship between 1 Cor 7,29-31 and Epictetus' *Discourses* was also observed by Eugene Boring, Klaus Berger, and Carsten Colpe in their *Hellenistic Commentary to the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Abindon, 1995), 414. They noticed that the conduct regarding the goods of the world that passes away in Epictetus has in Paul an eschatological dimension. For Paul, the attitude toward the present world is to be regulated in light of the world soon to come.

⁴⁷ In *Discourses* 3.22.67-72, Epictetus states that the ideal marriage is between two Cynics. Aside from this scenario, in the present world marriage between a Cynic and a non-Cynic is to be avoided, due to its infelicities, particularly too much distraction with the marital obligations and partial devotion to the service of God: "But in such an order of things as the present, which is like that of a battle-field, it is a question, perhaps, if the Cynic ought not to be free from distraction, wholly devoted to the service of God, free to go about among men, not tied down by the private duties of men, nor involved in relationships which he cannot violate and still maintain his role as a good and excellent man, whereas, on the other hand, if he observes them, he will destroy the messenger, the scout, the herald of the gods, that he is. For see, he must show certain services to his father-in-law, to the rest of his wife's relatives, to his wife herself; finally, he is driven from his profession, to act as a nurse in his own family and to provide for them. To make a long story short, he must get a kettle to heat water for the baby, for washing it in a bath-tub; wool for his wife when she has had a child, oil, a cot, a cup (the vessels get more and more numerous); not to speak of the rest of his business, and his distraction". Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.22.67-72 (trans. Oldfather, LCL, 153, 155).

⁴⁸ David L. Balch, "1 Cor 7:32-35 and Stoic Debates about Marriage", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 102 (1983), 430-434.

⁴⁹ I am referring to sin in the form of fornication through means such as prostitution or other context favorable to illicit sexual intercourse. Paul Weaver considers that there is enough primary

(in order to eschew avoidable hardships that stand against serving God, 1 Cor 7,28.35). The language may be formally Stoic, but the thought behind is surely different.⁵⁰ Paul does not adhere to Stoic apathy:

What in Stoic thinking was an aloof reaction to the world of human existence has now been cast in terms of another world dominated by the Christ-event, with a destiny that is different. Christians may live in the world, but Paul calls them to consider a lifestyle that is detached from it so that they may devote themselves to the Lord's affairs.⁵¹

To conclude this section, I use Hans Conzelmann's words: "The non-Stoic character of the relationship to the world emerges only in the wider context. Paul's advice is not to withdraw into the safe and unrestricted realms of the inner life, but to maintain freedom in the midst of involvement".⁵²

After all, as Paul considers, even the unmarried could be distracted (7,2.5.9), though he singles out the value of being single.

Greco-Roman Marriage Background

Will Deming discusses the Hellenistic background of 1 Corinthians 7 with special interest in Paul's view on marriage and celibacy in light of Cynic-Stoic elements. His contention is that Paul uses Stoic arguments against marriage to which the apostle adds an apocalyptic stance. Holding that Stoic and apocalyptic ideas are blended and equally present in 1 Corinthians 7,29-31, Deming deems this passage as forewarning Corinthian Christians that marriage in end times circumstances will be unsatisfactory.

data to prove that Corinth was highly immoral during Roman times, though probably not as much as it was thought before. Paul D. Weaver, "Ancient Corinth, Prostitution, and 1 Corinthians 5-7", *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* (mar 2015): 151 (for bibliography, 116-155).

⁵⁰ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 585.

⁵¹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 317-18.

⁵² Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Hermeneia. A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1975), 133.

Due to this unfulfilled marital union, and to the fact that Christian marriage will end, “it is good for man”, Paul states, “not to get involved”.⁵³ However, this would not be of help to someone already married.

“Often the study of passages like 1 Corinthians 7 has been attempted without consideration of the character and conduct of Roman marriage and family life”.⁵⁴ Ben Witherington depicts Roman marriage in several significant shades: (a) most of the marital relations were arranged; (b) a marriage was considered successful if it were characterized by *concordia*, a peaceful and generally harmonious relationship between the spouses (as opposed to the modern concept of love and affection between the husband and wife); (c) the common model of husband was authoritarian and overly powerful; (d) the majority of life activities were public, so family was hardly private, but often it was the theater of social interactions and business; (e) because some of the above reasons, Romans tended to seek for pleasure outside their families.⁵⁵

Ammy Richlin⁵⁶ describes connubial relationships in the first century Roman society through the remarks of Ovid (1 BC), Rabbi Eliezer (c. 80 AD), Musonius Rufus (2nd part of the 1st century), Martial (90 AD), and Plutarch (c. 100-120). The synthesis of what these authors wrote about sex within marriage is that the intercourse between husband and wife involves pleasure, regularity and mutuality. This idealized view is set in contrast with the antagonistic circumstances, when the wife should conform to her husband’s preferences lest she would be repudiated, and when the wife should neither drop her husband, nor become arrogant or not affectionate toward her partner. Richlin also mentions that sexual abstinence

⁵³ Will Deming, *Paul on Marriage & Celibacy: The Hellenistic Background of 1 Corinthians 7*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 192-193.

⁵⁴ Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 170.

⁵⁵ Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 1970-173. A good synthesis of marriage, family, and the place of women in the Roman society is provided by Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of early Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 70-82.

⁵⁶ Ammy Richlin, “Sexuality in the Roman Empire” in *A Companion to the Roman Empire*, ed. David S. Potter (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 343-345, 350. (For bibliography 327-353)

is found in Christian (escalating from 200 CE), Stoic, and some medical circles, but not in Judaism.

When Paul speaks about the distractions of the marital life, he was probably referring to the mutual obligations described in a normal marriage contract:

... from now, Apollonius, son of Ptolemaeus shall furnish to Thermion as his wedded wife all necessaries and clothing in proportion to his means and shall not ill-treat her. [...] Thermion shall fulfill her duties towards her husband and their common life.”⁵⁷

Corinthian pro-celibacy faction

Craig Blomberg⁵⁸ argues that *καλὸν ἀνθρώπῳ γυναικὸς μὴ ἄπτεσθαι* (1 Cor 7,1) is a Corinthian slogan (see also NIV),⁵⁹ which informs the meaning of the whole chapter. Within the Hellenized Christianity in Corinth, a strange ideal was promoted, which is, complete sexual abstinence, including among the married couples. In the whole of 1 Corinthians 7, Paul addresses this tendency. In short, the apostle wrote that sexual abstinence should be mutually considered and only for brief periods of time (vv. 1-7), it is an advantage to remain single or a widow, but “marriage is better than unrestrained passion” (vv. 8-9), serving the Lord as not married seems easier (vv. 32-35), and once married the spouses are bound until death (v. 39).

⁵⁷ BGU 1052 [H & E 3]. *A Contract of marriage*, 13 BC.

⁵⁸ Craig L. Blomberg, “Applying 1 Corinthians in The Early Twenty-First Century”, *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 45 (2002): 26-27 (for bibliography, 19-38).

⁵⁹ See also Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 276. For a technical discussion about slogans in 1 Corinthians, including 7,1, see Jay E. Smith, “Slogans in 1 Corinthians”, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 167 (Jan-Mar 2010): 68-88. He offers 11 criteria on account of which a phrase may be considered a slogan. Chrys Caragounis argues that there is no slogan in 1 Cor 7,1, but Paul’s own words, which expressed his thought that “it is good for the man not to marry”. Chrys C. Caragounis, “Fornication? and ‘Concession’? Interpreting 1 Cor 7:1-7”, in *The Corinthian Correspondence*, ed. Reimund Bieringer. *Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologiarum lovaniensium* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1996), 547 (for bibliography, 543-560). But Fee seems to have stronger arguments on his side.

Conclusions

Interpreters and commentators tend to explain Paul's commands from an ethical point of view. It is thus held that all that Paul intended was to make Christians live their lives in detachment from the world. All the five "as if not" are thus taken as Paul's try to emphasize the balance in the Christian's dealings with life. However, it would be a mistake to overlook the eschatological mark of the passage. There is not a universal, timeless ethical principle in 1 Corinthians 7,29 but one that is time-specific. Paul's "as if not" is to be taken eschatologically and, hence, metaphorically. This means that "to be married as if you are not" is not a negation of marriage, and maybe, not even a limitation of it. What Paul is primarily trying to say is that wives and husbands must live their marital union knowing that they live on the edge of eternity. This worldview does have ethical consequences, but the first of these is that spouses are to be ready to give up marriage at any moment, since the end is drawn nearer.

The ethical side of Paul's commands has its value. Corinthian Christians are to live fully involved in their marriage, but not to the detriment of their good relationships with God. It seems that there were pressures upon them from the direction of the Greco-Roman norms related to the obligations of married life and sectarian pro-celibacy or abstinence views. Paul tries to set family relationships in a balanced eschatological-spiritual perspective. In light of the nearness of the Parousia, Paul re-emphasizes the priority of the partner's relationship with and service for God and portrays the marital status as transient.

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