

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY IN PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS - PART EIGHT

After dealing with several problems of sexual immorality, in chapter 5 and 6, in which the behaviour of the city around them had infiltrated the church, Paul turns now to difficulties the Corinthian Christians are facing within their marriages. They are struggling to deal with the threat to family life from the values of Corinth. As before Paul is responding to issues raised in letters he has received.

The first way some are trying to avoid the moral chaos of Corinth is to avoid sexual relationships altogether either by not marrying or by sexual abstinence within marriage. The problem is that such an extreme approach makes them very vulnerable to temptation. God realises the pressures we face in temptation. If a man or a woman is called by God to be unmarried, that is fine, and the Lord will enable that person to be true to his or her calling. (Matt. 19:11,12) Such a person will have a freedom to serve God wherever He chooses. But if abstinence is the result of social pressure then it will lead to failure and then to hypocrisy as people try to cover up their sin. Sexual desire is not a wrong reason to marry. It is part of the way God made us but it belongs only within a committed marriage relationship. (7:1-2)

Similarly within marriage, the sexual relationship is a normal part. Long term abstinence might create temptation. Paul sets out an interesting basis for resolving the problem. He says that God has given each partner authority over the body of the other one. Notice however that we do not have authority over the soul or spirit of the other. There will certainly be times in a marriage when we may decide that seeking God's will for us at this moment is so important that everything else is put aside for the present. (7:3-7)

Paul begins next a section in which he sets out the wisdom of staying in our present condition in life unless there is some overriding consideration. Anyone not married he encourages to be content the way he or she is. (7:8,9) He was not against marriage but simply saying, 'Don't rush it unless you are really sure this is God's idea.' Likewise to those already married he gives advice to stay that way if at all possible, or if a couple do separate to seek to reconcile. (7:10,11) Even in the more difficult situation of those married to unbelievers he encourages them to stay put in hope of the salvation of the partner and the children. Nevertheless he recognises that in such situations there will be times when the other one does not want reconciliation and so the one left behind is free from further responsibility. (7:12-16)

He now extends the same principle to a wide range of life situations. Be content as you are whether this concerns religious affiliation or social circumstance. As Christians we belong to Christ which is the only affiliation or circumstance which matters. (7:17-24)

Paul has referred to the unmarried in various ways. He now gathers up all the different marital circumstances again to encourage them all to be content. The virgin is the person, male or female, who has never married. The widow or the divorced person is now unmarried. All of them are free to marry if God calls them. But first find peace and satisfaction in Christ and only then consider marriage. Marriage will not give contentment if we have not found it already. (7:25-35) Life till its end or till Christ's return is too short to waste on getting into an unhappy marriage.

Next Paul reminds parents, fathers in particular, of their responsibility in guiding their children wisely towards the marriage of God's choice, or towards remaining single. This principle is sound in the very different cultural traditions regarding marriage from which we come. Too many parents

certainly in a European culture have simply given up on their young people when it comes to decisions about marriage.(7:36-38)

Paul concludes this very practical chapter with a final reminder that marriage is meant to last and that the emotional bond of a good marriage continues even beyond death.(7:39,40)

Chapter eight moves into a totally different kind of moral problem.

8:1-3 Q.1 Put these few verses into your own words. What warning about knowledge was Paul giving here? Isn't it good to know as much as possible? How can knowledge be misused? What is the secret of keeping knowledge useful?

8:4-6 Q.2 What practical problem were the Corinthians facing? What is the doctrinal base for handling this dilemma? How does this show us the value of being clear about the literal truth of creation? To what sort of issues might we apply this principle today?

8:7-9 Q.3 Why is the knowledge just referred to not the whole answer to this problem? What greater concern can there be than being right about our view of what we can or cannot do? What damage can we do others by our liberty?

8:10-13 Q.4 What practical problem was arising from some Corinthian Christians using their knowledge about idols and exercising their freedom? What then should be our response in such situations? Doesn't it mean we have again become bound by the law?