

# Introduction

## NOT ANOTHER BOOK ON MARRIAGE!

When I told one person I was working on a book about marriage her response was to wonder why I was writing about a subject on which there was so much material already. ‘Why not,’ she asked, ‘write about the ways in which God has encouraged you as a single person?’ One reason is that often I *haven’t* felt particularly encouraged by being single! But a second reason (not unrelated to the first) is that whilst there are many books which contain good *advice* on the subject of marriage, there seem to be very few which contain good *theology*. So, **this book aims to show how principles for courtship and marriage can be found in the Bible.**

This also helps answer a second question which might arise: ‘What is a single man doing writing a book about *marriage*?’ The answer is that this is not a book about *my* views on marriage; it is a book about what the Bible has to say. It is worth pointing out that the apostle Paul and Jesus himself were also single men. The doctrine of the *inspiration* of the Bible assumes that the Holy Spirit is not limited in what he can say by the human material he uses. And in any case, the best view of the game is not always from the pitch. However, I’ve had my share of relationships and experiences, which were another reason why this book came to be written. Uncomfortable about the way some of these had gone, I began looking through the Bible to find out what I had been doing wrong. In the course of this I realized that 1 Corinthians 7 contained everything I needed to know provided I read it properly.

The book that most helped me do so was Gordon Fee’s commentary on *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1987). Where I have referred to ‘Fee’ in the text I mean this commentary. It is a great book, but unfortunately it is also a very big, technical and expensive book and not the sort of



thing you are likely to read unless you have a knowledge of Greek and a lot of time on your hands. This brings me to another reason for writing, which is **to bring you some of the insights of the best scholars in a cheap and readable format.**

Of course, these scholars don't always agree with one another – or with me! Sometimes I have taken one side in a translational or theological dispute where other options are available, but I don't always go into all the details where the arguments are beyond the scope of this book. Where this is the case, however, I have usually given page references in Fee which the interested reader can pursue.

In addition to Fee, I have referred to a large number of other works both on 1 Corinthians and on sex and marriage – too many to list. The ones to which I have *specifically* referred in the text are given in the endnotes. The curious may want to check these, the trusting will take my word for it.

However, I would also recommend the following two books which aren't in the endnotes:

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| Clifford & Joyce Penner | <i>The Gift of Sex and A Gift for all Ages</i> (Milton Keynes: Word UK Ltd.) for good advice and theology on sexual matters.        |
| Anne Atkins             | <i>Split Image</i> (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1987) hard to obtain, but one of the most helpful books I've read on gender issues. |

## **BIBLE VERSIONS AND REFERENCES**

Various Bible translations have been referred to in this book, for which the abbreviations are as follows:

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| GNB  | Good News Bible  |
| KJV  | King James Version, also known as the Authorized Version |
| NASB | New American Standard Bible                              |
| NEB  | New English Bible  |
| NIV  | New International Version                                |
| RSV  | Revised Standard Version                                 |

Bible references are by book, chapter and verse, using standard abbreviations, e.g. 'Eze 16:8' is a reference to Ezekiel, chapter 16, verse 8. 'Cf.' means 'compare', i.e. 'you might find it useful to look this up'.

### TECHNICALITIES

The Greek text used was the Nestlé-Aland 26th Edition (Copyright 1966, 1968, 1975, 1983 by the United Bible Societies). The Bible software was Logos 1.6b (Copyright Logos Research Systems Inc. 1991-93). The coffee was percolated and the tea was mostly Earl Grey. Where I have not used my own translation I have generally quoted from the RSV.

Most people, I am sure, will be using the NIV, but I still find the RSV better (if less readable) and I certainly think the NIV reader should also have reference to the RSV, NASB or KJV for study purposes.

Some people may object to the RSV's 'sexist' language – and my own retention of terms like the generic 'men' in translation. What I would *like* to say on this subject would fill another book. But let me simply state that attempts to use 'inclusive' language are increasingly denying the 'non-inclusive' nature of the original Biblical text. The Greek *anthrōpos*, for example, can be translated 'a person' but it is derived from *anēr*, meaning 'a man', and whilst it can indicate a *particular* man (e.g. in 1 Corinthians 7:1), it is never to my knowledge used in this way for a woman. The argument that Greek is more 'inclusive' than English does not hold much water and we are in danger of lying about Scripture in an attempt to make it more palatable. Personally, I prefer to stick to the text and confront the offence.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to those people who have consciously or unconsciously kept me going with this project. I am especially grateful to those who read through various versions of the text and helped me make it more intelligible to the general reader. Thanks are also due to Taffy Davies for the excellent cartoons.

John P. Richardson  
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BUT WHAT ABOUT  
THE TEAPOT?



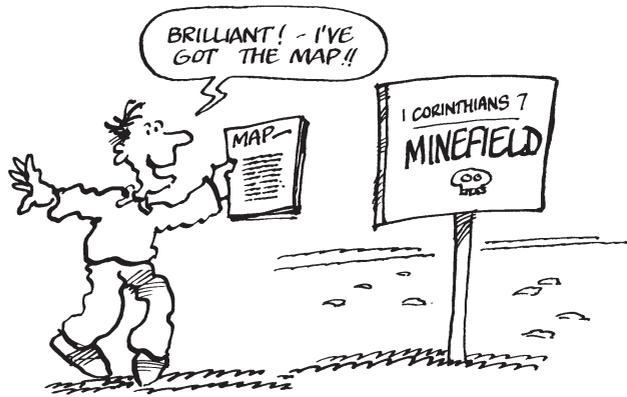
# The Corinthian Background

## WHAT WAS THE QUESTION?

The answer is 1 Corinthians 7. Now what was the question? This is the problem that faces us as we begin unravelling this part of the Bible. It is obvious from the first verse – ‘Now concerning *the things about which you wrote...*’ – that Paul is answering a letter the Corinthians had sent to him. If only we had this letter life would be so much easier! Much of what we deduce from 1 Corinthians 7, as with other parts of the Bible, will depend on what we think were the questions behind the text. Working these out is sometimes straightforward, sometimes more difficult, and a lot of this book is taken up with this issue.

And here we must sidetrack for a moment. One of the biggest questions facing Christians today is ‘How can we understand the Bible properly?’ In particular, what do we do when *alternative* understandings of the same Bible passage are on offer? Of course, everyone will agree we should pray about it, but some Christians (mistakenly) feel this is enough. They believe that God will ‘just reveal’ the right answer to them ‘through his Spirit’ and that they will know what this is ‘instinctively’. But though this sounds fine, it ignores the nature of the Bible itself. The Bible is a *book*, and the way to understand a book is the same whether it is the Bible or the book you are now holding. The right understanding is *the one that makes best sense of the text*, not the one that agrees with your opinions or intuitions. God would not have revealed himself to us through a *book* if he had intended us to understand him in another way not related to books. When we pray, therefore, it should be that God will help us use the available resources *properly* to come to a right understanding of the Bible. It should not be that God will save us the effort by giving us a vision or an intuition that makes the hard work unnecessary!

So to know what the questions are that 1 Corinthians 7 sets



out to answer we will often have to do some detective work. The inexperienced reader may perhaps feel this is unnecessarily complex, but we must do it *and it is worth the effort!* Once we know the questions, the value of the answers becomes obvious. *Until* we know them, the answers may be positively dangerous! As we will see, 1 Corinthians 7 may be a minefield for the unwary, but it is a gold-mine for the diligent.

### THE BACKGROUND

Our story begins around 50AD when the Apostle Paul visited the Greek town of Corinth (see Acts 18). Along with a married couple called Priscilla and Aquila, and joined later by his fellow missionaries Silas and Timothy, Paul established a church there. Due to the fruitful nature of the work (Acts 18:9-10) Paul stayed over eighteen months before he left for Syria, taking Priscilla and Aquila with him. Yet for all his hard work, the church at Corinth seems to have caused Paul more headaches than all the others put together. Only two years later he is having to write the first of the two letters to the Corinthians contained in the Bible, and from 1 Corinthians 5:9 we know there was at least one more of which we have no other record. Both the Biblical letters are full of rebuke and warning from the Apostle and reveal an alarming situation in the Corinthian church. Immorality, immaturity and unfaithfulness abound. The members are divided amongst themselves and alienated from the Apostle. They are proud where they should be humble and weak where they should be strong. In

fact, when you read Paul's letters, it is amazing that any modern church would want to model itself on that at Corinth, even though so many apparently do!

### **THE PROBLEM WITH SEX**

One of the biggest problem areas for the Corinthians was sexuality (so at least in this respect little has changed today). Chapters 5 and 6 reveal an appalling catalogue of sins, including incest and prostitution! Yet the church was apparently blind to these – they are not included in the things 'about which' they wrote to Paul. The Apostle must have been in despair! Yet we can be thankful that because the Corinthians so soon departed from the ways of the Gospel we have the benefit of Apostolic teaching on issues that would inevitably have arisen one day.

You would do well to read through the earlier chapters of 1 Corinthians for yourself and think about the principles of Christian behaviour they contain. Notice in particular how Paul roots his teaching about Christian living in the Old Testament and the basic principles of the Gospel. His teaching on sexuality goes right back to Genesis 2:24 (see 6:16), yet all the time that he is criticizing the Corinthians he is also affirming their true liberty in Christ.

However, in this book we must concentrate on chapter 7. This is partly for reasons of space, but mainly because in its forty densely-packed verses this chapter has something for everyone, whether married, widowed, separated, single or courting. A careful reading of these verses will not only help you understand your own situation better but may prepare you for change, whether it be the sorrows of bereavement or the joys of marriage. It would be no exaggeration to describe 1 Corinthians 7 as God's 'Marriage Guidance'. I hope a prayerful reading of it, and the suggestions contained in this book, help you understand what that is.