

“Why Scripture Has to Be Interpreted”

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

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In his book *Wishful Thinking* Frederick Buechner says that, while some suggest we read the Bible as literature and others insist we read it as the literal word of God, still others contend that we should not read it at all for many reasons.

...The barbarities, for instance. The often fanatical nationalism. The passages where the God of Israel is depicted as interested in other nations only to the degree that he can use them to whip Israel into line. God hardening Pharaoh’s heart and then clobbering him for hardheartedness. The self-righteousness and self-pity of the Psalms, plus their frequent vindictiveness... The 137th Psalm, for example, which starts out ‘By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept’ and ends ‘Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!’ Or Noah, the one man left worth saving, God’s blue-eyed old sailorman, getting drunk in port and passing out in a tent where his son Ham beholds his shame... Or Jesus of Nazareth, the same Jesus who in one place uses a Samaritan of all people... as the example of a man who truly loves his neighbor, and in another place is quoted as telling a Canaanite woman who came to him for help that it was not fair for him to throw the children’s food to the dogs. (pp. 7-8)

Indeed, there are a number of different ways to approach the Bible, but as Buechner notes, there are some compelling arguments for not approaching it all. There are passages which seem to present so many problems that we may be tempted to abandon these passages if not the Bible as a whole. I say this not because I am ready to pitch the book or cut out chapters, though there are some stories I am tempted to... I say

this because I want to hold on to these sacred texts that are filled with wisdom that has spoken to fellow strugglers like us through the ages. And the only way to do this is to recognize the need for interpretation.

I believe God speaks in many ways beyond the texts of our faith, but I also believe that in a distinctively Christian community we have to work through the texts. Some texts speak to us clearly. Psalm 23 does this, as does 1 Corinthians 13 and most of The Sermon on the Mount. Other passages we have to interpret if we are to keep them in our canon.

The verses we have read today from 1 Corinthians 7 seem to fall into this category as does this whole chapter. For in this passage the Apostle Paul seems to be saying that marriage is something a Christian ought to enter into only as a last resort, as the least offensive way of expressing physical desires. He also seems to be saying that slavery is an acceptable institution and in fact these words have been used over the years to justify slavery. Finally, he addresses an array of issues from virginity to circumcision in ways that just don't communicate to us today. In fact, we might wonder whether we even want to know what some of these verses mean. They are a bit like some heavy metal and rap lyrics that may need to come in censored and uncensored forms.

I would suggest that, when we examine these verses carefully, we really have only two choices - cut them out of our Bible or interpret them in some way, dig deeper into the context or background to see whether there is wisdom hidden within. I must add that, whenever I have done such digging into the texts of our faith, I have always found something worth holding onto.

If we are going to interpret Paul's words recorded in 1 Corinthians 7, we begin with the realization that everything Paul says here comes in response to what is going on in the Corinthian church and not out of his initiative to structure a position paper on marriage, slavery or anything else. The first verse of this chapter reads, "Now concerning the matters about which you wrote, 'It is well for a man not to touch a woman.'"

Some within the church at Corinth are in favor of asceticism, abstinence from all pleasure, especially that of a sexual nature. The reasons include this community's struggle with excesses in this realm

and their belief in the imminent return of Jesus. They communicate their conclusions, wonder what Paul thinks and in this chapter, he tells them. “Concerning these matters, I say this...” Everything comes in response to a specific concern of specific people in a specific time.

What difference does this make? A huge difference! Where we begin a conversation makes all the difference in the world. Who asks the questions, who shapes the agenda, where and how we begin matters.

I have shared with some of you the story of a television interview I did years ago when I was playing the role of Jesus in a production of *Godspell*. I was already in a jumpy mood because I was having my make-up done which took nearly an hour each night, when the reporter said to me with intense sarcasm, “Have you had any unusual experiences playing the role of *the man*?” I looked at him with a decidedly un-Christ-like expression and said, “Could you rephrase that question a bit less pretentiously?” That part of our conversation did not make it onto the news at eleven, and I realize I was short with someone just trying to do his job, but I did not want to begin the conversation about playing the role of Jesus in this way. How a conversation begins matters.

So does the context. For example, I served two churches back-to-back that had diametrically-opposed stances vis a vis alcohol. The founding pastor of the first church was a martyr for “temperance” (read “abstinence”) and I am speaking literally here. He got into an argument with a man over the legalization of alcohol in 1892; the good Baptist pastor was, of course, agin’ it; and as they argued, he started punching the other man. A month later that man got loaded, loaded his gun, and then shot and killed the pastor. That experience marked that church on not just alcohol but many social issues. Up until the 1960’s you could get kicked out of the church not just for dancing, but for going to a dance and watching! Needless to say, drinking anything with alcohol was a no-no, no matter what the Bible says about Jesus and wine.

That was one church. In the next church, I felt good if I could keep the driver of a boat pulling skiers at a Sunday School party under a sixpack! And I was seen as a moralist by some for doing so!

Now, what I said about alcohol to these two churches was different, not because my views changed, but because the needs were

different. One group needed to calm down while the other needed to loosen up. Context matters.

It makes a difference who Paul is writing to when he speaks about marriage and other issues, and interestingly, heard in context, some of his views are progressive. While the Corinthians argue for complete abstinence, Paul argues for intimacy within marriage. While speaking as a male in a patriarchal world, he writes these egalitarian words in verse three, “The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.” If we are to hear and embrace this text, like many others, we have to do some interpretation and if we are to interpret faithfully, we begin with a realization that Paul is responding to specific needs in a specific context.

We would also do well to note the interpretation that Paul himself does in this passage. Specifically on the topic of circumcision (verses 17-20), he tells those believers who have been circumcised to not seek to remove the marks of circumcision and he tells those believers who have not been circumcised to not worry about being circumcised. What really matters, he says, is obeying the commandments of God.

At first glance, we may not notice anything significant or controversial here. But according to Genesis 17, one of God’s commandments is for the faithful to be circumcised and the text goes so far as to say that those who are not are cut off from God (Genesis 17:14). So, in reality what Paul is doing is interpreting a sacred teaching. He is examining an old text in a new light. He is reframing a thought-to-be rigid law in the light of the Jesus story.

In the process, he not only tells the Corinthians they need not change their physical condition, he also tells us that there is a need for ongoing interpretation in the covenant community and he models what that interpretation looks like. Not only here, but again and again, the broad trajectory of increased understanding is to move away from rigid laws in the direction of grace, to move away from exclusive worldviews where many are left out to a more inclusive view of God’s love for all.

So, as we examine this text more carefully, a text we might be poised to pitch, we find both an affirmation of the need for interpretation

and a word of encouragement to engage significant and controversial subjects in our day, such as sexual orientation, whether anyone outside of the church can make it into God's reign, how believers ought to view the environment, which economic system (if any) has an ethic akin to the biblical ethic.

I am not saying that, because Paul interprets and moves in a more progressive direction, that faithful interpretation must always move in this direction. Nor am I saying that, given permission to interpret, all thinking believers will agree on subjects like those I have named. I am saying that there is nothing new or heretical about interpretation, even of texts thought to be fixed, and that history is on the side of new learning and an openness to grace.

I think of Galileo and whether the earth is round or flat. I think of Lottie Moon and whether God calls women to ministry. I think of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and whether the races can come together. History is on the side of greater understanding.

So, if we are to embrace these difficult words of 1 Corinthians 7, we begin by understanding the context to which Paul is responding and note the interpretation he does, and then, we realize that everything Paul says here hinges upon his conviction that Jesus is returning any minute ushering in a new age. This is why he tells people not to worry about their marital status, whether they have been circumcised, whether they are virgins, even whether they are slaves.

I confess that, on this last issue, no interpretation helps. Slavery is wrong and it bothers me that Paul does not say so. But regarding the other issues, this one contextual reality helps. Though I would like for Paul to say something more affirming about marriage and sexuality, if we really believe the world is changing tomorrow, our priorities shift.

When individuals receive a terminal diagnosis - which by the way, we all have - priorities change. Some never return to work and spend all of their time with loved ones. Others travel. Few worry about how many committee meetings they attend or what the neighbors are doing or who wins what ballgames. With a terminal diagnosis, priorities change. Paul sees the world as having a terminal diagnosis and thus he tells

people to shift their priorities, primarily to start paying attention to where they stand with their Maker. “Folks, the present form of this world is passing away,” he says, “and you are worried about what?!”

As it turns out, Paul is mistaken in his view that Jesus will return in his day, though the Spirit has ushered in a new way of grace more gradually. But Paul’s plea for a change in priorities is still valid. The delay of a cataclysmic *parousia* has simply obligated the church to develop a more enduring set of ethics around the issues of marriage and sexuality, slavery and who is in God’s reign. Because the context has changed, we are obligated to interpret the texts we have and in some cases, perhaps go beyond them.

For those who are troubled by this, I would say two things. First, consider the alternatives – holding on to a text that blesses slavery and denigrates marriage or throwing it out altogether. Second, consider the text itself, examine it carefully, take it seriously, because if we do this, we come away with an entirely different perspective about what Paul is saying about the issues at hand, what issue he is really dealing with, and how much he knows he has to interpret. In the final analysis, this is why scripture has to be interpreted - because we love it and want to drink deeply from its wisdom, and interpretation is how we do that.