

In What Confusion Earth Appears

Philip Doddridge (1702–1751)

In what confusion earth appears!
God's dearest children bathed in tears;
While they, who heaven itself deride,
Riot in luxury and pride.

But patient let my soul attend,
And, ere I censure, view the end;
That end, how different, who can tell?
The wide extremes of heaven and hell.

See the red flames around him twine,
Who did in gold and purple shine!
Nor can his tongue one drop obtain
T' allay the scorching of his pain.

While round the faint so poor below
Full rivers of salvation flow;
On Abra'm's breast he leans his head,
And banquets on celestial bread.

Jesus, my Savior, let me share
The meanest of thy servant's fare;
May I at last approach to taste
The blessings of thy marriage-feast.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

By Permission, and Not of Commandment

Kevin T. Bauder

Critics of verbal inspiration sometimes appeal to verses that appear to disavow a divine origin for themselves. One such verse can be found in 1 Corinthians 7:6, where the apostle Paul writes, “But I speak this by permission, and not of commandment.” Read at face value and in isolation, this verse *could* be understood to imply that Paul, in writing Scripture, wished to insert certain of his own ideas that were not divinely inspired, and that God allowed him to express those ideas as his own, but not as God's.

Such a reading of the text, however, is badly mistaken. In fact, it only seems possible if the reader ignores the context of the verse. Before citing the verse to disprove biblical inspiration, a thoughtful reader should first ask what the verse is doing *within its context*. As ever, context is the key to a right understanding of Scripture.

1 Corinthians 7 represents a pivot in the argument of the epistle. Evidently the church at Corinth had sent Paul a series of questions that they wanted him to answer. The letter that we call 1 Corinthians was his reply. Before responding to their question, however, Paul took advantage of the opportunity to correct several errors that he perceived within the church at Corinth. Among other topics, he wrote against factiousness and party spirit, carnality, lax church discipline, sexual immorality, and lawsuits among church members. At the opening of chapter 7 he had covered the subjects that he wanted to address, so he turned his attention to the questions that the church had sent him: “Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me...” (7:1).

The first set of questions from the church must have been about marriage and sexual relationships. Here Paul provided an answer that fit the chaotic and sometimes persecuted nature of the church in Corinth: “It is good for a man not to touch a woman” (7:1). This advice matches his counsel elsewhere in the chapter. In view of present distress, it is better to remain unmarried (7:25). Marriage comes with concerns and responsibilities that Christians might better avoid (7:32–35).

Paul recognized, however, that not being married can create distractions of its own. For many people, sexual temptation is one of these, and it would



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www.centalseminary.edu | info@centralseminary.edu
900 Forestview Lane N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 800.827.1043

have been a genuine pressure in the pornographic city of Corinth. Consequently, the apostle provided practical advice: where sexual temptation is rampant, every man should have a wife and every woman should have a husband (7:2). One of the God-ordained functions of marriage is to provide a way for both men and women to deal with sexual temptation.

Consequently, husbands and wives owe something to each other. Paul stated that both should fulfill their obligations, and he did not leave his readers wondering what those obligations were (7:3). In marriage, the wife belongs sexually to her husband; she no longer exercises authority over her own body. The husband belongs sexually to his wife: he no longer exercises authority over his own body (7:4).

This does not mean that either partner has a right to make sexual demands upon the other. Rather, it means that husbands and wives must recognize that their sexuality is given to them as a ministry to their spouses, a way of serving the person to whom they are married. Neither partner is authorized to make demands, but each partner owes it to the other to use his or her body so as to fulfill the needs of the spouse.

To withhold sex is equivalent to theft; a spouse who withholds himself or herself is defrauding the marriage partner (7:5). Paul strictly forbade such willful abstinence. While he did not prescribe any particular frequency for sexual relations within marriage, he clearly anticipated that marital intimacy would occur so regularly as to alleviate sexual temptation for both partners.

Of course, Paul was aware that the regular sexual relationship between husband and wife might be interrupted by any number of factors. Matters like health, travel, or other obligations might lead to a suspension of normal marital relations. He was not addressing those circumstances. He was talking about situations in which the spouses were hypothetically available to each other, but one or the other partner simply chose to withhold intimacy. Willful denial of one's body to one's spouse is a sin.

But are there no circumstances under which a married couple might voluntarily suspend their normal sexual relationship? Paul could envision exactly one, and he described it in some detail (7:5). First, there had to be a good and spiritual reason. The couple could suspend their sexual relationship only for purposes of fasting and prayer. Second, this abstinence had to be "by consent," which means that both partners had to agree to it. A sexual fast cannot rightly be imposed by one partner upon the other. Third, the suspension of intimacy had to be limited in duration: "for a time." The idea seems to be that the duration of a sexual fast would be both brief and agreed upon ahead of time. Finally, at the end of the agreed-upon time, the couple must "come together again," resuming their normal, regular sexual relationship.

Therefore, a temporary suspension of marital sexual activity is permissible if both partners agree to it, if they use it for a spiritual purpose, and if they resume their normal relations soon. The question is, are couples ever obligated to engage in such a sexual fast? Does such a period of abstinence ever become mandatory?

That is the question that Paul answered in 1 Corinthians 7:6. He wanted to make this point very clear. A temporary sexual abstinence was *permissible*, provided it met the stipulated requirements. But such a temporary sexual abstinence was never *required*. Paul specified that he was granting permission for a sexual fast, but he was not under any circumstances commanding it. Hence the words, "But I speak this by permission, and not of commandment."

If anything, these words bolster the authority of Paul's writings. When he wrote a commandment, he expected to be obeyed. He clearly had a high view of his own authority under Christ. Paul put his instruction at the mandatory level.

Except, of course, when it isn't mandatory. And it was not mandatory when it was only a permission or concession. That is the very point that Paul was clarifying in 1 Corinthians 7:6. He granted permission, but he did not issue a command. This verse is in no way a disclaimer of biblical inspiration.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
