

PREFACE

How pleasant it would have been if the apostle Paul had permitted us to ease our way out of the backbreaking Chapter Seven with a simple, easily understandable summary. Alas, it was not to be. By saying things in vv36-38 in such a way that multiple and very different interpretations are possible—and predictable—the apostle closes this difficult chapter with yet another quandary. Scholars have a favorite phrase they use for passages such as the one before us: “a notorious crux.” The word “crux” in this context refers to “a difficult problem; puzzling thing” (Webster’s).

Permit me to first summarize the problem; I will not go into the many details, all the whys and wherefores, since I would use up the rest of our time doing so: most of you would be bored, and we would never get to the meat of the matter. So let me address just the large chunks. The most efficient way to do this is to focus less on the underlying text than with the obvious differences between our modern translations. [See Handout \(last page\).](#)

I have color-coded the key words or phrases that set off the differences between the translations. The first three of our translations—NASB, KJV, and NKJV—have the perspective of a father with a virgin daughter still living in his household—one presumably approaching or having already reached an age when she should be married. This interpretation assumes a question written to Paul along the lines of, *What is a father’s duty when he has a daughter of marriageable age?*

The last two of our translations—NIV and ESV—have the perspective of a man betrothed to a virgin. In the current climate in Corinth, one we have looked at a number of times, this assumes a question written to Paul along the lines of, *I have made a vow to marry this girl; would it be wrong to not marry and keep her a virgin?* And, of course, there are smaller differences between the translations even within these two groups. There is a third perspective, seen in the New English Bible (NEB) that is such a minority view I have not included it for our consideration.

THE FATHER-DAUGHTER INTERPRETATION

Normally I would decide which interpretation is the best and then focus on it alone. But in this instance I am going to do my best to fairly present both. I freely admit that I prefer the ESV interpretation for this passage—the 2011 NIV is an [improvement over the earlier NIVs, and is even closer in perspective to the ESV](#)—but the camp (translators and commentators) that subscribes to the first perspective is too large to be dismissed. So let’s begin with a quick survey of the first perspective.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:36-38 in NASB.

The primary reason and strongest argument for this interpretation is found in v38, with the verb usually translated in Scripture, “give...in marriage.”

So then both he who gives his own virgin daughter in marriage does well, and he who does not give her in marriage will do better.

give...in marriage = *gamizein* = from <G1537> (ek) and a form of <G1061> (gamisko) [compare <G1548> (ekgamisko)]; **to marry off a daughter** :- give in marriage.

It is assumed by this that the awkward phrase “his virgin” (v36; the NASB adds “daughter” for clarity) refers to a young woman still living at home under her father’s care and rule.

if she is past her youth, and if it must be so, let him do what he wishes, he does not sin; let her marry.

The phrase “past her youth” must be kept in the context of the first century. This does not refer to what we would term an “old maid,” well past her prime. Girls would be given in marriage at a younger age than in our time, so this could just mean that she has reached puberty but as yet the father has not found her a suitable husband.

Here the ambiguous phrase “and if it must be so” is taken to mean “the thing out to be done” (a betrothal should be pursued if the father thinks he is acting improperly by keeping her a virgin). Paul declares that there is nothing wrong with the father pursuing this path and marrying her off.

But he who stands firm in his heart, being under no constraint, but has authority over his own will, and has decided this in his own heart, to keep his own virgin daughter, he will do well.

Verse 37 addresses the alternate path: If the father is convinced that it is best that his daughter remain a virgin and remain under his roof, then—consistent with the apostle’s view throughout this chapter—this would be an even better option.

Difficulties

While we can treat this interpretation seriously, with respect, it is also fair to point out some (but not all) of the difficulties with it.

1. From a layman’s overview of the NASB (et al), before consulting anyone else, this passage is jarring; it seems out of place, oddly worded. David Garland agrees: “Nothing in 7:25-35 prepares for this reading of the situation.” And one of the reasons for this is the reference to “his virgin,” which is an irregular and extraordinary way to refer to a father’s daughter.
2. Referring again to the strongest argument for this interpretation—the inclusion of *gamizein*, translated here “give...in marriage”—can also be translated, “the one who marries.”

3. G. Schrenk argues that if this passage refers to the father's authority, "Paul is justifying an unheard of tyranny, for to impose asceticism [the Corinthian brand of spiritual purity through ritual celibacy] on oneself is rather different from imposing it on marriageable children." J. Hering adds that it is "grotesque to praise the unswerving constancy of the father in a decision which costs him nothing, and in which it is his daughter, who is not consulted, who bears the full weight of the sacrifice" (Garland).
4. Finally, why inform a father, who presumably is or at least was married, that marriage is good but the single life is better? It makes more sense if these words were directed toward those exploring the possibility of marriage for themselves (Garland).

THE MAN BETROTHED INTERPRETATION

Now let us turn to the second interpretation, which has Paul addressing not a *father* of a virgin, but a man betrothed to a virgin.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:36-38 in ESV.

The ESV replaces the Greek for "virgin" (*parthenos*) with "betrothed woman," which, for the context of this counsel and the times, would be synonymous. Verse 36 thus echoes what Paul wrote in v28.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:28.

If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed,

In this interpretation the paragraph before us flows more naturally out of the previous paragraphs. We may wonder what Paul means by the man "not behaving properly toward his betrothed," but if we read on it becomes clear.

if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin.

One of the challenging problems with this passage is not just translating the Greek, but understanding Paul's awkward sentence construction. To begin, he uses a Greek word not used anywhere else—*hyperakmos* (hoop-air'-ak-mos)—which, if it referred to the woman could indeed mean "past the bloom of youth," but if referring to the man would mean "over the top"—i.e., "strong passions." Garland points out that after exhaustive analysis of this word in other (non-biblical) contexts, the word is synonymous with "to burn" (*pyroun*) in 7:9—"For it is better to marry than to burn with passion." But we can't be sure whether Paul speaks here of the man or the woman! Gordon Fee concludes that grammatically the subject should be the man, and hence the ESV "if his passions are strong."

This informs the first part of the sentence and paints a pretty familiar picture of an engaged couple. As my mom told Linda and me once, remembering her courtship with Dad in the mid-forties, “It was getting harder and harder to wait.” To a young man who clearly does not have the God-given gift of celibacy, Paul declares that it is no sin for them to marry.

But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart,

Now Paul addresses the other option for the man: valid reasons to call off the marriage and remain as he is. He does this by giving the man four criteria by which to determine whether this is the correct path.

- *firmly established in his heart,*
“heart” (*kardia*) here means mind (thoughts and feelings)—that is, he has made up his own mind;
- *being under no necessity*
this (*ananke*) could mean that he has his sexual passions under control—the opposite of *hyperakmos*, in v36 (Garland), but since the third criterion states this, likely means that he is not under compulsion from outside influence (Fee);
- *but having his desire under control,*
here either option for the second criterion could apply: reiterating having “authority” over his passions (Garland) or reiterating that he is exerting his own authority over his decision rather than someone else forcing the action on him (Fee);
- *and has determined this in his heart*

Taken as a whole, these criteria emphasize personal responsibility and sobriety as regards the sexual passions. Having met these requirements, the man is free to call off the marriage (betrothal).

to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well.

Here is the only place I could find where the ESV has a problem. This translation has been consistently translating the Greek *parthenos* as “betrothed,” instead of virgin. But doing so here presents a point of confusion. If the man has decided against marrying the girl, how could it possibly make sense that he would “keep her as his betrothed”?! But it does make sense that he—and only in regards to him—would keep her a virgin, thus releasing her to marry someone else. The NIV reflects this with “not to marry the virgin.”

So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.

In v38 Paul recapitulates his counsel in vv36-37. He tells the man that, based on the various gates he has set before him, if he still wants to marry the virgin, that's OK; if not, based on his consistent counsel in this chapter of "remaining as you are," that's even better, because of "the present distress" (v26).

Difficulty

But to be fair to the opposing camp, we must reconcile Paul's choice of verb in this last verse, switching from "to marry" (*gameo*) to "to give in marriage" (*gamizo*)—which is the foundational reason for the opposing interpretation found in the NASB, KJV, and NKJV—that is, the "father-daughter" interpretation. Happily this is easily resolved. Fee explains,

The verb *gamizo* is not found outside the NT; in classical Greek *gameo* served both purposes. To the question whether the verb *must* carry the nuance "to give in marriage," the answer is No. There is sufficient evidence that the classical distinctions between *-eo* and *-izo* verbs had broken down in the *koine* period. But that still does not answer the question as to *why* Paul changed verbs in this set of sentences. The usual answer is "for the sake of variety," which may still be the best one.

CONCLUSION

I believe we have shown that the second, the betrothed man interpretation, is a better fit with the context of Chapter Seven. But there are far too many translations and commentators in the other camp for us to be dogmatic about it. Let the earnest student of God's word decide which is the best reading.

In our next session we will take a brief look at the last two verses of this most troublesome but rewarding chapter, where Paul then, as he has consistently, turns to address the female side.

More important, however, because we have spent so much time down in the weeds in our study of this chapter, in our next session we will revisit and summarize, in a more comfortable manner, all of Paul's counsel found in Chapter Seven, before moving on.

“A Notorious Crux”

1 Corinthians 7:36-38

NASB (updated)	KJV	NKJV	NIV (1984)	ESV
<p>36 But if any man thinks that he is acting unbecomingly toward his virgin daughter, if she is past her youth, and if it must be so, let him do what he wishes, he does not sin; let her marry.</p> <p>37 But he who stands firm in his heart, being under no constraint, but has authority over his own will, and has decided this in his own heart, to keep his own virgin daughter, he will do well.</p> <p>38 So then both he who gives his own virgin daughter in marriage does well, and he who does not give her in marriage will do better.</p>	<p>36 But if any man think that he behaveth himself uncomely toward his virgin, if she pass the flower of her age, and need so require, let him do what he will, he sinneth not: let them marry.</p> <p>37 Nevertheless he that standeth stedfast in his heart, having no necessity, but hath power over his own will, and hath so decreed in his heart that he will keep his virgin, doeth well.</p> <p>38 So then he that giveth her in marriage doeth well; but he that giveth her not in marriage doeth better.</p>	<p>36 But if any man thinks he is behaving improperly toward his virgin, if she is past the flower of youth, and thus it must be, let him do what he wishes. He does not sin; let them marry.</p> <p>37 Nevertheless he who stands steadfast in his heart, having no necessity, but has power over his own will, and has so determined in his heart that he will keep his virgin, does well.</p> <p>38 So then he who gives her in marriage does well, but he who does not give her in marriage does better.</p>	<p>36 If anyone thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if she is getting along in years and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married.</p> <p>37 But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin—this man also does the right thing.</p> <p>38 So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does even better.</p>	<p>36 If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin.</p> <p>37 But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well.</p> <p>38 So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.</p>

Perspective: a father with a virgin daughter still living in his household.

Commentators holding this view: John MacArthur (after the NASB), David Guzik, and most older commentators such as Chrysostom, Augustine, and some “modern” scholars such as A. T. Robertson, M. R. Vincent, Lange, JFB, Edwards, Lightfoot, Robertson and Plummer, Ketter, and Morris.

Other translations with this perspective: ASV (American Standard Version), YLT (Young’s Literal Translation).

Perspective: a man betrothed to a virgin.

Commentators holding this view: Gordon Fee, David Garland, W. Harold Mare, Conzelmann, Thiselton, Wolff, Winter, and R. Collins.

Other translations with this perspective: NRSV (New Revised Standard Version), ISV (International Standard Version).