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INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

1.1 The Challenge of 1 Corinthians 7

Paul's discussion of marriage and singleness in 1 Corinthians 7 has long presented interpreters with an array of exegetical challenges. As William M. Ramsay once acknowledged, 'There are not many passages in Paul's writings that have given rise to so many divergent and incorrect views as this chapter.'¹ A fundamental *crux interpretum* arises with the opening words of the chapter, 'Now concerning the matters about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman.' Paul is clearly responding to previous non-extant correspondence of the Corinthians, but the reader must make some conjecture of what the situation was that prompted the Corinthians to write to Paul, and the primary nature of their concern, whether it concerned their marital status or sexual behaviour. A related question is whether the statement in 7:1b, 'it is good for a man not to touch a woman' reflects the Corinthians' viewpoint, Paul's viewpoint, both, or neither. A second major difficulty arises concerning the relationship of the issue that Paul responds to in 7:1 with the issue apparent in 7:25–26 that reflects very similar language. The latter may be an entirely separate concern or interconnected in some direct way to the prior. However readers navigate through the parts of the chapter, they are forced to proceed with some rudimentary reconstruction of what is prompting the overall discussion to which Paul responds. Such a reconstruction requires placing the Corinthians within some context with regard to how they thought about sexuality, singleness, and marriage and the motivations that prompted them to raise the questions they did with the apostle.

The dominant interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7 in both ancient and modern times is that Paul's response in 7:1 is prompted by the

¹ Ramsay (1900):283.

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Corinthians writing to Paul motivated by some interest in sexual asceticism either within or apart from marriage. This conclusion is drawn in large part from the apparent ascetic language in the 7:1b statement, ‘it is good for a man not *to touch* (ἄπτεσθαι) a woman’.² But the ascetic reconstruction is riddled with difficulties, the most immediate being the qualification that Paul gives to his response in 7:2, διὰ τὰς πορνείας that most likely reflects existing cases of immorality present among the inquirers.³ This is followed by three other probable references to immorality in the course of the next seven verses: διὰ τὴν ἀκρασίαν ὑμῶν in 7:5, εἰ οὐκ ἐγκρατεύονται in 7:9, and the term ποροῦσθαι also in 7:9. Nor does the ascetic reconstruction fit readily with evidence elsewhere in the letter where Paul appears repeatedly to be addressing an audience of a prevalently libertine disposition (e.g., 5:1, 5:9–11; 6:9–18; 10:8).

Another difficulty among those espousing the ascetic reconstruction is identifying the probable seminal source for such a perspective among mid-first-century Corinthians. As we shall review below, scholars have proposed a wide range of possible sources including: gnostic or proto-gnostic dualism, Graeco-Roman philosophy, Eastern cults (e.g., Isis), Judaism, misguided theological convictions of the Corinthians, and even Paul himself. While the sheer range of possibilities is impressive, the lack of consensus also points to the inherent shortcomings of any particular option in being sufficiently persuasive.

Perhaps more than any other recent study, Will Deming’s *Paul on Marriage & Celibacy: The Hellenistic Background of 1 Corinthians 7* has advanced understanding of 1 Corinthians 7 in light of Hellenistic culture.⁴ Deming argues that the common fault of most scholarship on 1 Corinthians 7 is the tendency to interpret the text within a continuum of ascetic practices in Hellenistic Judaism and early Christianity that leads directly into the asceticism of the Patristic era.⁵ Deming proposes an alternative hypothesis that Paul’s discussion of marriage and singleness is best understood against the backdrop of Stoic and Cynic discourse that envisioned marriage primarily as a set of responsibilities toward one’s spouse, household,

² Compare the apparent ascetic use of ‘touch’ (ἅπτω) in Col 2:21: μή ἄψη μηδὲ γεύση μηδὲ θίγης.

³ As Fee (2014):308–9 also concurs.

⁴ Deming (2004).

⁵ Deming (2004):43.

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and community.⁶ Deming gives fresh attention to drawing a critical distinction between ‘sexual asceticism’, which he defines to be sexual renunciation, and the marriage decision in the secular Graeco-Roman context, which was normally regarded as a question of social responsibility independent of one’s sexual activities. This tendency within Graeco-Roman culture to separate the marriage question from an individual’s sexual conduct bears fundamentally upon our understanding of Paul’s discussion in 1 Corinthians 7.

While Deming’s contribution has opened the door to a better understanding of the text, Deming stops short of adequately pursuing the implications of his own research. Though Deming recognizes the long trajectory of the marriage debate as an ethical *topos* through the history of Hellenistic thought, he too quickly reduces the discussion to a Stoic-Cynic debate,⁷ without fully considering the broader streams of thought that advocated in favour of marriage or singleness. Nor does Deming expand the marriage decision beyond a narrowly defined ideological focus to include the interplay of socio-economic factors. While Deming effectively distances Paul from an ascetic disposition,⁸ his exegesis does not sufficiently resolve the lynchpin exegetical problem of the reference to ‘touching’ a woman in 7:1b that primarily accounts for *why* interpreters have continued to ascribe ascetic motivations to the Corinthians. Consequently, he eventually reverts to an ascetic reconstruction of the Corinthians not unlike the theories he rejects, interpreting 7:1b as a Corinthian quotation that expresses an ‘aversion to sexual intercourse’ that ‘finds an analogy in the Cynic traditions’.⁹ Thus, he posits Cynic influence as the basis for the Corinthian tendency to ‘renounce sexual activities’, which equates to his own definition of ‘sexual asceticism’ given early in the book.¹⁰

The present study builds upon Deming’s contributions in several ways. First, it expands the scope of the marriage question beyond the Stoics and Cynics, to determine the most dominant ideological protagonists for singleness through the trajectory of Hellenistic thought. Second, the study offers a broader methodological

⁶ Deming (2004):104.

⁷ Although Deming traces the conflict of the marriage question to pre-Socratic philosophers (pp. 58–59), he still concludes that the debate on marriage ‘began in the Hellenistic period in Stoic and Cynic circles’ (p. 104).

⁸ Deming (2004):207–19.

⁹ Deming (2004):109.

¹⁰ Deming (2004):xv.

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approach incorporating non-literary evidence to provide a more robust contextual backdrop. Third, it offers a reconstruction and interpretation of 7:1b consistent with the claim that in 1 Corinthians 7 neither Paul nor the Corinthians were expressing an ascetic disposition; *both* parties are interacting in 1 Corinthians from the premise of the secular marriage question. In sum, the intent of the present social-historical study is to build upon and extend the results of Deming and other studies to more fully explore the shape of non-ascetic or ‘secular’ singleness in Corinth and to propose that Paul’s response in 1 Corinthians 7 can be better understood in light of such a secular reconstruction of singleness. Context for the present study begins with a synopsis of the previous discussion.

1.2 A Synopsis of the Previous Discussion

1.2.1 The Tübingen Hypothesis

With the rise of critical scholarship in the late eighteenth century there was a resurgence of interest in interpreting various early Christian texts in light of the emerging early Christian community. Dominant in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholarship was the Tübingen hypothesis of F. C. Baur, who proposed that opposition between Paulinists and Petrinists had had a significant influence on the formulation of the various canonical letters.¹¹ Baur himself didn’t see evidence for a strong ascetic impulse in Corinth and preferred seeing the Corinthians as attempting to defend customary fornication apart from marriage.¹² Nevertheless Baur’s prevailing paradigm of two dominant opposing parties in Corinth, based on an initial combination of the four parties mentioned in 1:12, became a useful grid for interpreters to explain the apparent ascetic ‘conflict’ in 1 Corinthians 7. Baur’s student, Albert Schwegler (1846), in an attempt to systematize Baur’s conflict between Jewish Christianity and Paulinism in the apostolic church, attributed the rejection of marriage and unconditional preference for single life to known Essenic elements within Ebionitism.¹³ In keeping with Baur’s overarching hypothesis, this group was also identified with the Petrine party mentioned in 1:12. Adolf Hausrath (1868), on the other

¹¹ Baur (1851):294.

¹² Baur (1852):16–17, 20.

¹³ Schwegler (1846):1.163–64.

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hand, denied that the 7:1 maxim could have proceeded from followers of Peter, who was married. He suggested alternatively that this might have been one of the points of difference between the Peter party and the Christ party, with the latter following their celibate namesake in being advocates for celibacy.¹⁴ Numerous other commentators of the era associated the Corinthian ascetics with the Pauline party of 1:12,¹⁵ and Ramsay notes that the view was common among interpreters.¹⁶

As support for the Tübingen hypothesis waned around the turn of the century, later interpreters such as Georg Heinrici, Frédéric Godet, Ramsay, Thomas Edwards, and Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer rejected all the options and gravitated to more general explanations for the apparently ascetic affirmations.¹⁷ Visibly illustrative of this shift is Heinrici's revision of H. A. W. Meyer's handbook on 1 Corinthians. Whereas Meyer's (1870) fifth edition argues for the Pauline party hypothesis, Heinrici's revised 1881 sixth edition of the commentary rejects any connection between the issues of chapter 7 and the four parties of 1:12.¹⁸

1.2.2 The Gnostic Hypothesis

In his 1908 *Freiheitspredigt und Schwarmgeister in Korinth*, Wilhelm Lütgert was an early advocate of what has become known as the 'gnostic' (or 'proto-gnostic')¹⁹ hypothesis. Lütgert envisioned Paul's

¹⁴ Hausrath (1895):4.22. Kniewal as cited in Meyer (1861):156; Olshausen (1863):114; and Ewald as cited in Godet (1898):317 also proposed the Christ party.

¹⁵ Meyer (1861):156–57; Kling (1869):139; Meyer (1870):181; Stanley (1876):98–99; Ellicott (1887):108–9; Meyer (1892):192 also lists Storr, Rosenmüller, Flatt, Pott, and Maier as proponents of the Pauline party option. Meyer (1892):192 and Edwards (1903):153 affirm that Osiander, Neander, and Rübiger, even before Baur's influence, supported this view.

¹⁶ Ramsay (1900):288–89.

¹⁷ Heinrici (1888):183–84; Godet (1898):316–18; Ramsay (1900):288–89; Edwards (1903):153–54; Robertson and Plummer (1914):132.

¹⁸ Compare Meyer (1870):181, 'Dass es endlich Pauliner gewesen . . . ist am denkbarsten, weil nämlich, wie wir aus uns. Kap. sehen, die Ansichten des Ap. über diesen Punkt ganz der Art waren, dass sie von manchen seiner Anhänger, besonders im gegensätzlichen Interesse, sehr leicht zum Nachtheil der Ehe an sich missverstanden oder gemissdeutet werden konnten, wenn man nämlich den *bedingten* Charakter der Vorzüge, welche er dem Ledigbleiben giebt, übersah oder übersehen wollte.' with Heinrici (1881):168, 'Mit dem Parteiwesen sind die hier behandelten Fragen vom Apostel nirgends in Beziehung gesetzt.'

¹⁹ On the general problem of the definition of Gnosticism we follow Broek, 'Gnosticism I: Gnostic Religion' in *DGWE*:403–5.

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opponents in Corinth to be a group of ‘enthusiasts’, who placed an undue emphasis on Paul’s teaching that they possessed the Spirit.²⁰ This led them to conclude that they had their own access to ‘gnosis’, giving them a degree of intellectual autonomy beyond merely that which Paul taught or directed.²¹ It was this particular mislaid emphasis that paradoxically motivated both the libertine and ascetic impulses within the Corinthian church simultaneously.²² Lütgert’s proposal was especially appealing to interpreters because it provided a unified theory to explain the juxtaposition of libertinism in chapters 5 and 6 and sexual asceticism in chapter 7.²³

Wolfgang Schrage is a more recent advocate of the theory who has sought to give fuller expression to Lütgert’s original proposal within the broader current of developing Gnosticism. For Schrage, the conjunction of 1 Corinthians 6:12ff with 7:1 illustrates the gnostic bipolarity between libertinism and asceticism in Corinth. Both flow out of the same premise of radical devaluation of everything physical and material stemming from a basic negative understanding of *σῶμα* and *σάρξ*.²⁴ Schrage sees an organic continuum from the nascent Gnosticism of 1 Corinthians 7,²⁵ and those forbidding marriage in 1 Timothy 4:3,²⁶ to an array of more developed second century or later forms of Gnosticism.²⁷

Ironically, it may have been another proponent of the hypothesis, Walter Schmithals with his 1954 dissertation, *Die Gnosis in Korinth* under Rudolph Bultmann, who has served to undercut its major appeal. Schmithals pointed out the difficulties involved with the proposal of contradictory libertine and ascetic responses both originating simultaneously from the same gnostic devaluation of the physical body. He rejected such a proposal for reasons of logic, the lack of religio-historical parallels for such a procedure, and in the

²⁰ Lütgert (1908):43–62. Yamauchi (1983):39 argues that Lütgert was the first to suggest this thesis.

²¹ Lütgert (1908):124.

²² Lütgert (1908):124–35. Lütgert envisioned the Corinthians’ ascetic tendency as a reaction against libertinism but also grounded in the same over-emphasis on the spirit which was counterbalanced by a deprecation of the body.

²³ Yamauchi (1983):39 lists adherents including Bousset, Reitzenstein, Bauer, Bultmann, Schniewind, Haenchen, Bartsch, and Dinkler.

²⁴ Schrage (1976):217–20. Schrage denies Lütgert’s parallel proposal that the ascetic movement was in reaction to libertinism (219).

²⁵ See Schrage (1976):220n26.

²⁶ Schrage (1976):220.

²⁷ Schrage (1976):220–21. He cites as evidence Saturnius (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.24.2), Marcion (Tertullian *Marc.* 1.29), and a variety of Nag Hammadi sources.

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Corinthian situation, that the texts ‘neither require nor suggest such an interpretation’.²⁸ In distinction to the dualistic hypothesis of Lütgert and Schrage, Schmithals argued that the entire discussion of 1 Corinthians 7 was occasioned by only libertine gnostics who raise their inquiry to Paul in response to his restriction on intercourse with prostitutes.²⁹ But ironically for Schmithals’ own view, while more recent scholarship has also become increasingly sceptical of the ‘two-prong’ gnostic ethic of libertinism and asceticism, it is the libertine prong that has been primarily doubted.³⁰ Beyond this, a major sticking point continues to be the dating of primary source materials, as extant materials simply do not support a pre-Christian dating of Gnosticism, however it is defined.³¹

1.2.3 Realized Eschatology and the ‘New Consensus’

1.2.3.1 Käsemann and Thiselton

Another major thesis to explain Corinthian asceticism proposes it arose as a result of their realized (sometimes referred to as ‘over-realized’) eschatology.³² Ernst Käsemann provided a strong impetus for this view in 1965 when he asserted:

Today we may take it for granted that the dominant group in Corinth believed themselves to have reached the goal of salvation already – in the shape of baptism – and Christian existence here on earth meant for them solely the temporal representation of heavenly being.³³

For Käsemann, it was the Corinthian belief that complete redemption had already been effected that was the root of all that had gone wrong in the community, including its overvaluing of sexual asceticism.³⁴ In this view, the Corinthians believed that they

²⁸ Schmithals (1971):222, 387–88.

²⁹ Schmithals (1971):234–36.

³⁰ Broek (1983):49–50; Berger (1984):522; Williams (1996):164.

³¹ So Broek, ‘Gnosticism I: Gnostic Religion’ in *DGWE*:415; MacRae (1978):146–47; Wilson (1982):103, 111; Yamauchi (1983):190; Pearson (1990):166n5; King (2003):174.

³² Lütgert’s view of the Corinthian ‘enthusiasts’ was also a pre-cursor for the realized eschatology thesis (see Section 1.2.3), but that thesis also stands independently of Lütgert’s gnostic assumptions (1908:105).

³³ Käsemann (1969):125.

³⁴ Käsemann (1969):126.

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have already experienced a ‘spiritual resurrection’ with Christ in baptism, while Paul’s concern in responding to them is to convince them that the full benefits of salvation including bodily resurrection will only be realized at the Parousia. The thesis has been argued cogently in an article by Anthony Thiselton, who contends that it provides a single common factor that explains a diverse array of apparently independent problems in Corinth including sexual asceticism.³⁵ In 1995, the proposal was described as the ‘current consensus among New Testament scholars’,³⁶ and one that provides ‘some generally accepted answers’³⁷ with regard to the ascetic motivation in 1 Corinthians 7.³⁸ According to Judith Gundry, Corinthian sexual asceticism ‘is grounded in the belief that celibacy characterizes eschatological existence and in a strong sense of eschatological fulfilment manifested especially in a lively pneumatism’.³⁹

Critics have argued that this hypothesis posits a more complicated theological reconstruction than the problems of the text require and that neither of the primary texts commonly referenced in support of the thesis, 1 Corinthians 4:8 and 1 Corinthians 15:12, are most readily explained by presuming the Corinthians held to a past resurrection.⁴⁰ John Barclay, for example, suggests that the Corinthians’ theological framework may simply have been non-eschatological.⁴¹ And some proponents of the hypothesis now also acknowledge that beyond realized eschatology, Graeco-Roman cultural attitudes appear to be informing the Corinthian perspective.⁴²

Nor does the hypothesis fit well with the particular details of Paul’s discussion in chapter 7. In 7:29–31, Paul himself appeals to an

³⁵ Thiselton (1978):512.

³⁶ Martin (1995):105. Barclay (1992):63–64 likewise describes the realized eschatology proposal as having become ‘scholarly fashion’.

³⁷ Gundry-Volf (1996):519. The essay is from a collection of papers delivered in 1994.

³⁸ Proponents of the hypothesis generally include: Schniewind (1952):110–39; Käsemann (1964):171; Käsemann (1969):124–37; Barrett (1971):109, 347–48; Bruce (1971):49, 144; Robinson (1971):32–34; Dahl (1977):59; Thiselton (1978):510–26; Fee (2014):12. With respect to 1 Cor 7 specifically: Käsemann (1969):126; Thiselton (1978):518–19; Yarbrough (1985):117–19; Gundry-Volf (1996):519–41; and Fee (2014):299.

³⁹ Gundry-Volf (1996):519.

⁴⁰ Martin (1995):106. For critique of the hypothesis especially with regard to analysis of 4:8 and 15:12 see Ellis (1974):73–75; Wedderburn (1987):24–27; Barclay (1992):63–64; Kuck (1992):27–28, 214–17; Litfin (1994):168–69; Martin (1995):105–8; Hays (1997):70–71; Hall (2003):79–85; and May (2004):170.

⁴¹ Barclay (1992):64; similarly Hays (1997):70.

⁴² Thiselton (2000):40; similarly Fee (2014):11–13.

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eschatological argument in favour of remaining single, exhorting ‘those who have wives should be as those who have none’ (οἱ ἔχοντες γυναῖκας ὡς μὴ ἔχοντες ᾤσιν). This he commends to them on the basis that the present form of the world ‘is passing away’ (παράγει). Paul’s explicit exhortation ‘So I say this, brothers’ (Τοῦτο δέ φημι, ἀδελφοί) for them to live ‘now’ (τὸ λοιπὸν) as if single, in a pattern characteristic of the eschatological age would appear pointless if this was already the Corinthians’ disposition. The persuasive tone undergirding his eschatological argument here would more likely suggest that the Corinthians themselves were of a non-eschatological disposition.⁴³

1.2.3.2 Fee and the New ‘Consensus’

Gordon Fee has championed an exegetical reconstruction of the context of Paul’s response to the Corinthians in 7:1 in light of the Corinthians’ false theology that he describes as ‘an over-realized eschatology informed by an improper understanding of spiritual enthusiasm’.⁴⁴ Building on the presumed eschatological motivations of the Corinthians, Fee argues for the new ‘consensus’ perspective that 7:1b is a statement reflecting the Corinthians’ viewpoint rather than Paul’s.⁴⁵ Fee regards 7:1–24 as addressing specifically those who are or were married, and 7:1–7 as the first step in an argument concerning behaviour within marriage rather than the marriage question in general.⁴⁶ In Fee’s reconstruction, the Corinthians were arguing that they should be living out their new eschatological existence by both abstaining from sex within marriage (the question raised in 7:1b) and by denying marriage to the ‘virgins’ (the question raised in 7:25–26). Paul, while agreeing in principle with their premise that it is good for a man not to have relations with a woman, rejects their applying it within the marriage relationship.⁴⁷

Fee has admitted there is a real problem with his reconstruction, namely, how one explains 6:12–20, where just a few sentences earlier the Corinthians appear to have taken precisely the opposite position.

⁴³ Cf. Deming (2004):25, who argues similarly.

⁴⁴ Fee (1980):313. In his commentary, Fee (2014):11–13 regards the primary theological problem of the Corinthians to be a dispute with Paul over what it means to be πνευματικός but still regards the Corinthians tainted by Hellenistic dualism and over-realized eschatology.

⁴⁵ Fee (2003):198–201.

⁴⁶ Fee (1980):309–14. See also Fee (2003).

⁴⁷ Fee (1980):313.

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Since Fee prefers to understand the Corinthian letter (of 7:1) as representative of the whole church rather than one particular party,⁴⁸ he offers a tentative resolution for the problem that ‘wives in Corinth are responsible for 7:1b while at the same time they are urging their husbands to go to the temple prostitutes if they needed sexual fulfilment’.⁴⁹ But the generic nature of ‘woman’ in 7:1b makes this proposal problematic.⁵⁰

1.2.3.3 Living as Angels

Another line of argumentation among realized eschatology proponents is to suggest that the Corinthian sexual ascetics saw themselves in their post-baptismal state as living the asexual experience of angels.⁵¹ This is argued two ways: first, from the ‘direct’ evidence in 13:1 where Paul refers to speaking in the ‘tongues of men and angels’;⁵² and second, from the supposition that the Corinthians were influenced by the Synoptic tradition on marriage and the resurrected state (Matt 22:23–33; Mark 12:18–27; Luke 20:27–40) in which those in the resurrection neither marry nor are given in marriage but are ‘like angels in heaven’. That the Corinthians were aware of this Synoptic tradition is supported by the presence of the rare verb *γαμίζω*, which appears only in 1 Cor 7:38 and the Synoptics.⁵³

But Paul’s statement in 13:1 may be nothing more than a form of hyperbole just as we see in his description of various gifts in 13:2–3. In 13:1, he describes himself as speaking ‘in the tongues of men and angels’; in 13:2, as having prophecy and knowing ‘all mysteries and all knowledge’ and having ‘all faith such as to move mountains’; and in 13:3, as giving away ‘all my possessions’ and surrendering ‘my body to be burned’. Paul’s reference in 13:1 to ‘tongues of angels’ may simply be his way of describing an extreme version of speaking in tongues. Nor do any other references to angels elsewhere in 1 Corinthians help corroborate the theory.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Fee (1980):314.

⁴⁹ Fee (1980):314.

⁵⁰ As Fee (1980):314n25 concedes. One would also expect *ἀνὴρ* rather than the generic *ἄνθρωπος*.

⁵¹ Bartchy (1973):146–49; Meeks (1974):202; Cartlidge (1975):229–30; Wire (1990):127. See also Balch (1971-2):351–58.

⁵² Cartlidge (1975):230; Wire (1990):127.

⁵³ So Balch (1971–72):357; Bartchy (1973):147; MacDonald (1987):70–71. *γαμίζω* appears nowhere else in the NT/LXX.

⁵⁴ 1 Cor 4:9; 6:3; 11:10. Cf. May (2004):171–72.