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Spiritual Marriage in the Early Church

A Suggested Interpretation of 1 Cor. 7:36-38

By ROLAND H. A. SEBOLDT

(Concluded)

THE CASE FOR THE SPIRITUAL MARRIAGE VIEW

Evidence of Ascetic Attitude in the Early Church

THERE is evidence of the ascetic attitude in the early Christian Church.

The feeling grew that the ordinary life with its natural duties and obligations is incompatible with the life lived in the spirit. Possession of the spirit requires a life which is extraordinary, where there is no room for worldly affairs, particularly for marriage.²³

An early Gospel, now known only through a series of passages in the writings of Clement of Alexandria, bears witness to this.²⁴ It bears a pretentious title, *The Gospel According to the Egyptians*. From this title Vööbus concludes that it could not have been only a Gospel of a minority group but must have been well known (p. 7). In this Gospel, Salome inquires of Jesus when the things about which she asked should be known. The Lord answers, "When ye have trampled on the garment of shame, and when the two become one and the male with the female is neither male nor female." Another word in the same Gospel says, "The Saviour Himself said: I came to destroy the works of the female."²⁵ Vööbus dates this Gospel from the second century. Although it originates in the valley of the Nile, it represents religious ideas of the earliest period in Christianity. (Page 8)

As early Christianity develops, asceticism begins its role in

²³ Arthur Vööbus, *Celibacy a Requirement for Admission to Baptism in the Early Syrian Church* (Stockholm: Estonian Theological Society in Exile, 1951), p. 7.

²⁴ Montague Rhodes James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945), pp. 10, 11.

²⁵ Clem. Alex., *Strom.*, iii. 13 and iii. 9.

shaping the Christian life. Virginitv is the leading phase of this ascetic ideal. This becomes apparent in the apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, which probably dates from the second and early third centuries (p. 8). Concerning the Acts of Paul and Thekla, Harnack reports:

Thekla was won over from paganism by means of "the word of virginitv and prayer" (λόγος τῆς παρθενίας καὶ τῆς προσευχῆς. Acts Theclae, ch. vii), a motive which is so repeatedly mentioned in the apocryphal Acts that its reality and significance cannot be called in question. Asceticism, especially in the sexual relationship, did prevail in wide circles at that period, as an outcome of the religious syncretism.²⁶

When Thekla became a Christian, she would not be joined in marriage with her bridegroom. Paul is reported as saying, "Blessed are they that possess their wives as though they had them not, for they shall inherit God." Again, "Blessed are the bodies of the virgins, for they shall be well pleasing unto God and shall not lose the reward of their continence (chastity)."²⁷

The Acts of Thomas call married life "this dirty communion."²⁸ In one episode we have the account of a couple who are influenced by this message and decide during their wedding night to keep virginitv.²⁹

Glimpses of ascetic practices are also found in the Apostolic Fathers. The *Didache* says, "If you can bear the whole yoke of the Lord, you will be perfect; but if you cannot, do what you can."³⁰ In comment on this, Lietzmann says,

A differential ethic had been developed: the "perfect" take upon themselves the entire yoke with the burden of asceticism. The great majority do as much as they are able, according to their ability.³¹

²⁶ Adolf Harnack, *The Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), I, 478.

²⁷ *Acts of Paul and Thekla*, 5, in James, pp. 372, 6.

²⁸ Vööbus, p. 26, quotes "The Acts of Thomas in Syriac," ed. P. Bedjan, in *Acta martyrum et sanctorum*, III, 13, 92.

²⁹ *Acts of Thomas*, 11—15, in James, pp. 369—371.

³⁰ *Didache*, VI, 1—3, in Edgar J. Goodspeed, *The Apostolic Fathers* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950), p. 14.

³¹ Hans Lietzmann, *The Beginnings of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), p. 272.

This passage indicates the ascetic ideal toward which the faithful may strive.

The first epistle of Clement lists the gifts of God: "Life in immortality, splendour in righteousness, truth in boldness, faith in confidence, continence in holiness (ἐγκράτεια ἐν ἁγιασμῷ)." ³²

The second letter of Clement, described by Goodspeed as "A Christian sermon, probably of Roman origin, written about A. D. 150 to 165," reports:

For the Lord Himself, when He was asked by someone when His kingdom would come, said, "When the two shall be one, and the outside like the inside, and the male with the female neither male nor female." . . . A brother when he sees a sister should not think of her at all as female, nor she think of him at all as male. When you do this, he says, my Father's kingdom will come.³³

An early reference is the work of the Shepherd of Hermas. Goodspeed dates it "in the last decade of the first century," so that it represents an early source (p.97). The significant passage is his ninth parable, in which he describes his visit with the virgins in the tower. The virgins say, "You shall sleep with us as a brother, not a husband, for you are our brother, and in future we are going to live with you, for we love you dearly."³⁴ Achelis considers these virgins to be personifications of Christian virtues. He infers from the appearance of this episode in the Shepherd of Hermas, "Die Gemeinde muss ein solches Wesen geduldet haben, wenn Hermas so unbefangen davon sprechen konnte" (p. 17). Remembering that this was written at the same time as the Apocalypse of St. John, we may well note a trace of a very early attitude toward the institution of spiritual marriage.

Evidence of παρθένοι συνείσακτοι in the Early Church

Achelis gathered most known references to this practice. To him we are indebted for most of the following information.

Achelis believes that the virgins in the community of the *Therapeutae*, as described in *De vita contemplativa*, by Philo, are

³² XXXV, 1, 2, in Kirsopp Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), I.

³³ *Second Letter of Clement*, XII, 1—6, in Goodspeed, p. 90.

³⁴ *Parable IX*, 10, 6 ff., in Goodspeed, p. 184.

συνείσακτοι (p. 29). He reports the statement of Philo that they are spread over the whole earth, but especially in Egypt. "Their chief home was in the neighborhood of Lake Maricotis near Alexandria, where they settled in the low hills on account of the excellent climate." The Therapeutae did not allow a close fellowship between men and women. "Unlike the Essenes, the Therapeutae admitted women to their society, though they extolled the virtue of virgin life in most extravagant terms."³⁵ Their rules on the Pentecost Feast placed men on the right and women on the left. The sexes faced each other in groups in their nightly celebrations. Achelis concludes, "Es ist nicht schwer, in ihnen eine Urform der christlichen Jungfrauen wiederzuerkennen." And again, "Die christlichen Jungfrauen in Korinth sind die Nachfolgerinnen der jüdischen 'Gottesverehrerinnen' oder 'Beterinnen.' Das Syneisaktentum ist älter als das Christentum" (p. 31). He regards the Corinthian practice of taking virgins into the homes as a variation of this older usage. In a monastic village, such as the Therapeutae had, men and virgins could live in individual huts, each to himself. Achelis believes that the large city and seaport Corinth, with its proverbial bad reputation, made it necessary for virgins to seek the protection of dedicated Christian men. In this way he views the association of a male and female ascetic in "spiritual marriage" as a variation of the life practiced by the Therapeutae (p. 32). That the ways of the Therapeutae were known to the Corinthians is not impossible, since Apollos came to Corinth from Alexandria, a center for their movement. (Acts 18:24; 10:1; 1 Cor. 1:12)

Another witness to asceticism in marriage is Tatian. Irenaeus reports that Tatian evaluated marriage as φθορά καὶ πορνεία.³⁶ Vööbus reports how the Persian Diatessaron by Tatian changes Luke 2:36, which reads in the Greek text, ζήσασα μετὰ ἀνδρὸς ἕτη ἑπτὰ ἀπὸ τῆς παρθενίας αὐτῆς. This text changes the original into a state of the celibate, by making it read, "She remained a virgin with her husband seven years" (p. 19). This seems to indicate that a message was spread that marriage is an immoral institution

³⁵ F. J. Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake, *The Beginnings of Christianity* (London: Macmillan Co., 1920), I, 95 f.

³⁶ *Adversus haereses* I, 28, 1, in Vööbus, p. 17.

and that Christianity finds its realization only in rigid asceticism, in particular, virginity.

Another evidence of asceticism is found in Valentinus. This movement "admitted ascetics only into its church, i. e., believers who were ready to kill their flesh and practice *μυστήριον τῆς συζυγίας*, spiritual marriage, an ascetic substitute for ordinary marriage." (Page 16)

The fourth letter of Cyprian of Carthage, written by Cyprian, together with four bishops and some presbyters, was addressed to Pomponius. The letter answers a question of discipline, for there were virgins who had vowed virginity and were convinced they should share their goods with men. Cyprian answers Pomponius, stating that the living together of virgins and men is not to be allowed, because it brings great dangers. (Achelis, pp. 7, 8)

About fourteen years after Cyprian the bishops meeting in Antioch gave their opinion regarding the matters of Paul of Samosata.³⁷ He had two virgins with him on his journeys. The custom of spiritual companions is known at this time.

An important document in Armenian is ascribed to Ephraem Syrus. Vööbus (p. 23) believes that the Syriac idiosyncracies in the text make it clear that the original document was in Syriac. This might indicate an earlier author and an earlier date — perhaps the second and no later than the third century. The Christian life is described as a spiritual mode of life. Christians are defined as ascetics who stand in the "state of vow." Vööbus infers that this "spiritual mode of life" probably included the *συνείσακτοι*. He believes that this spiritual marriage had a wide popularity in Syrian communities. To document this he points to the efforts of Bishop Rabbula in Edessa in the beginning of the fifth century to eliminate this custom.³⁸ He refers also to the synodical acts of the Eastern Syrian Church. "At the Synod in Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 410 it was decided that no one who practices this custom will be permitted to enter the service of the church."³⁹ This and other

³⁷ Eusebius, VII, 30, 12 ff., in Achelis, pp. 9, 10.

³⁸ Vööbus, p. 25. (He refers to *Ephraemi Syri, Rabulae episcopi Edesseni, Balaei aliorumque opera selecta*, ed. J. J. Overbeck, Oxonii, 1865, p. 210.)

³⁹ Ibid. (He refers to canon 3, *Synodicon orientale*, ed. J. B. Chabot, Paris, 1902, p. 24.)

synods indicate how much time was needed before this ancient heritage began to recede from the Syrian Church.

Tertullian was not known for sponsoring the practice of the *συνείσακτοι*. Yet Achelis finds a reference which may refer to the spiritual marriage:

Weshalb bist du, O Christ, so bestellt, dass du ohne Frau nicht sein kannst? Nun, es mag auch die Gemeinschaft wegen der haeuslichen Lasten notwendig sein: so habe irgend eine geistliche Frau, nimm sie aus den Witwen, durch Glauben schön, durch Armut ausgesteuert, durch Alter besiegelt; du schliessest eine gute Ehe.⁴⁰

Irenaeus comments about the ascetic practices of the Gnostic Valentinians. He describes certain Valentinians who decided to enter into a bond with women as with sisters. Later it was revealed that these "sisters" became "mothers" through their relationship with these "brothers."⁴¹ Achelis finds that Irenaeus does not condemn the practice but only registers protest against its misuse.

At the time of Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis, who lived between 310 and 403, the *συνείσακτοι* were a plague to the church. He writes about the Encratites of Tatian, "Dass sie Weiber aus allen Orten betörten, mit Weibern reisten und lebten, und sich von ihnen bedienen liessen."⁴²

Evidence of Church Action to Abolish παρθένοι συνείσακτοι

We have found traces of the spiritual marriage custom in various writers. From the middle of the third century onward the church takes a stand against this institution and tries to remove it because of misunderstandings and dangers. From the beginning of the fourth century onward the great synods are concerned with the question. For several centuries, in all parts of the empire, various assemblies passed the resolution not to tolerate any more *συνείσακτοι*. The repeated resolutions may indicate that some bishops were reluctant to give up the practice of spiritual marriage themselves or to enforce the resolution in their districts.

The first known resolution regarding spiritual marriages was

⁴⁰ Tertullian, *De exhortatione castitatis* 12, in Achelis, p. 12.

⁴¹ Irenaeus, h. I, 6, 3, in Achelis, p. 19.

⁴² Epiphanius, h. 47, 3, in Achelis, p. 20.

passed by the Synod of Elvira in Spain, which Hefele dates A. D. 305 or 306. The 27th canon reads:

De clericis ut extraneas foeminas in domo non habeant. Episcopus vel quilibet alius clericus aut sororem aut filiam virginem dedicatam Deo tantum secum habeant; extraneam nequaquam habere placeunt.⁴³

This canon is more severe than the third similar canon of the Council of Nicaea of A. D. 325, since it allows clergy to have in their house only their sisters or their own daughters. It is noteworthy that these must be virgins and consecrated to God in the vow of virginity.

The Synod of Ancyra in A. D. 314 said in canon 19, τὰς μέντοι συνερχομένας παρθένους τισὶν ὡς ἀδελφὰς ἐκωλύσαμεν. "We also forbid virgins to live as sisters with men." Hefele interprets this canon as referring to the συνείσακτοι. (Page 218)

The Council of Nicaea in A. D. 325 resolved in canon three: The great Synod absolutely forbids, and it cannot be permitted to either bishop, priest, or any other cleric, to have in his house a συνείσακτος (*subintroduced*), with the exception of his mother, sister, aunt, or such other persons as are free from all suspicion. (Page 379)

In his commentary on the third canon, Hefele refers to the ancient practice of spiritual marriage:

They were known by the name of συνείσακτοι, ἀγαπηταί, and *sorores*. That which began in the spirit, however, in many cases ended in the flesh; on which account the church very stringently forbade such unions, even with the penalties more severe than those with which she punished concubinage: for it happened that Christians who would have recoiled from the idea of concubinage permitted themselves to form one of these spiritual unions, and in so doing fell. (Pages 379 f.)

It is of interest that the council no longer deals with the possibility of a daughter living with a cleric, as did the Synod of Elvira.

The next few centuries finds the church working to enforce this resolution. Achelis mentions, among other later synods, the Synod

⁴³ Charles Joseph Hefele, *A History of the Christian Councils*, translated from the German and edited by William R. Clark (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1871), p. 148.

of Carthage in 397, the second Synod of Arelate, the *statuta ecclesiae antiqua* in the first part of the sixth century, the Synod of Orleans in 538, the Synod of Tours in 567. These refer to the stand taken by Nicaea in 325. He mentions also the attempts in Spain: canon 7 of Gerunda in 517; canon 15 of Ilerda in 523; canon 3 of Toledo II in 531; canon 5 of Toledo III in 589; canon 3 of Hispalis in 590; canons 42 and 43 of Toledo IV in 633; and canon 4 of Bracara III in 675 (pp. 34 f.). These references serve to emphasize the fact that this institution was generally accepted and widespread. Its deep roots made reform difficult.

Another document which indicates the presence of this practice is *De singularitate clericorum*. It may have been a circular letter. The author is pseudo-Cyprian. The writer forbids a clergyman to have a strange woman in the house. The writer refers to the clergy, who tried to find spiritual marriages in the Bible. They found, among others, Elijah and the widow, Jesus and the women who served Him, John the Apostle, who took Mary into his home. Achelis points out that the fact that the clergy used Scriptures to support the spiritual marriage idea indicates their deep conviction that it was God pleasing. (Pages 36 ff.)

An interesting case is that of Parergorius, a 70-year-old presbyter, who soon after A. D. 370 received the command from his bishop to separate from his *συνεισακτος*, a young virgin. He found this order hard to take and contrary to the widespread custom. He turned with an appeal to the great Bishop Basilius in Caesarea. The answer of Basilius clearly points to the canon of Nicaea. He does not doubt the reputation of Parergorius, but he enforces the rule. He threatens excommunication for failure to obey.⁴⁴

Aphraat, in his homilies, counsels the monks in the Far East either to marry or to be monks and to avoid any compromise.

Gregory of Nazianzus opposes this institution in his Epigrams. Achelis reports his opinions:

Auch er richtet sich an Mönche und Nonnen und zeigt ihnen, dass sich die Virginität mit dem Syneisaktentum nicht vertrage; die "bessere Hoffnung," das Mönchtum, habe Mann und Weib getrennt. Die Jungfrau habe Christus zum Fürsorger und Bräutigam, und bedürfe keinen irdischen Vertreter. Das Verhältnis

⁴⁴ Basilius, ep. 55, in Achelis, p. 46.

zwischen Mönch und Nonne, dieser ἄγαμος γάμος, habe ein recht zweifelhaften Charakter; soll man sie zu den Verheirateten oder den Ledigen rechnen? . . . Die Syneisakten verderben den guten Namen der Christen. (Page 51)

The final historical reference is that of Chrysostom, who writes to those who have virgins and to virgins who have monks in the spiritual marriage arrangement. He opposes this relationship.

What conclusions can we draw from these references? Of one thing we can be sure: there was hardly a church province in ancient Christianity in which spiritual marriages were unknown.

The fact that they were so general and prevalent would seem to indicate that they are in accord with a very old Christian tradition. One influence upon Christian development was the thought of the Greek world. In his chapter on "Greek and Christian Ethics," Hatch points to a desire for moral reformation in Greek life at this time.

A kind of moral gymnastic was necessary. The aim of it was to bring the passions under the control of reason, and to bring the will into harmony with the will of God. This special discipline of life was designated by the term which was in use for bodily training, ἀσκησις.⁴⁵

The Greeks had a high regard for the soul, which was considered immortal. The body was not so regarded. Perhaps this is why Paul went into detail in presenting the resurrection of the body in 1 Corinthians 15. Again, in Colossians 2, Paul presents the eschatological view of man when he rebukes those who are guilty of "neglecting the body" (Col. 2:23). The Christian view considers all of man, both soul and body, as a gift of God and redeemed in the atonement of Jesus Christ. The church of Corinth may have been influenced to some extent by the Greek view of man.

Add to this Greek influence the existence of a primitive pattern for spiritual marriage in the Therapeutae and the early reference in Hermas. As a result we must acknowledge the possibility of spiritual marriages in the Christian community of Corinth. A custom so well established by the third century must have rested upon a very early Christian tradition.

⁴⁵ Edwin Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages upon the Christian Church* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1892), pp. 147, 148.

Evidence from Vocabulary Study

An examination of four key words in this passage will also help us determine whether there is a case for spiritual marriage.

The first key word is ἀσχημονεῖν, which Arndt-Gingrich translate, "If anyone thinks he is behaving dishonorably toward his maiden."⁴⁶ In the noun form, ἀσχημοσύνη, it is used for shame, or nakedness, or the private parts (sex organs). (Ex. 20:26; Deut. 23:14; Rom. 1:27; 1 Cor. 12:23; Rev. 16:15)

Thus understood, it could hardly refer to the father, in an inordinate lust for his daughter. More easily it refers to the desire of the man toward his virgin, thus eliminating the father-daughter theory and pointing either toward the engaged couple or the spiritual marriage interpretation.

Another key word is παρθένος. This is always "virgin" in the New Testament (ibid., p. 632). Kittel comments:

Einen speciell asketischen Sinn hat παρθένος wahrscheinlich 1 K 7:34, 36-38 und wohl auch 25 (vielleicht von Mädchen und Männern) und 28. Es handelt sich um Mädchen der Gemeinde, die sich mit einem Manne zu einer Hausgemeinschaft zusammengeschlossen haben, um in ihr in wirtschaftlicher Unabhängigkeit das christlich-asketische Lebensideal zu verwirklichen. Die Deutung auf unverheiratete Töchter stößt auf schwer überwindbare philologische Hindernisse. (V, 835)

This word does not say "daughter" or "engaged" virgin. When it is used of the Virgin Mary, St. Luke says πρὸς παρθένον ἐμνηστευμένην. The phrase "his virgin" nevertheless points to a relationship with some individual. The use of the word here suggests the interpretation of spiritual marriage rather than the other theories.

Another word, used only here in the New Testament, is ὑπέρακιμος. It may apply either to the man or to the woman in our section. Applied to the woman, it means "past one's prime, past marriageable age, past the bloom of youth" (KJV). Luther tempered the meaning: "Weil sie eben wohl mannbar ist." Applied to the man, the prefix ὑπέρ would not be understood in the

⁴⁶ William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 118.

temporal sense, but to express intensification: "with strong passions" (ibid., p. 847). So Goodspeed, Moffatt, and the RSV translate. On this usage Moulton writes, "D. Smith (L. and L. of St. Paul, 268, n. 6) favors 'exceedingly lusty' rather than 'past the flower of youth,' and cites ὑπεραμιάζω = excell in youthful vigor (Athen 657D)." (II, 352)

Moffatt renders, "if his passions be strong." He believes this denotes the surge of sexual passion which some were able to control, while others felt they must yield to it in spite of some original determination. Moffatt lists two good reasons why the translation "past the flower of her age" is wrong. First, there is no change of subject. The subject remains the same throughout the entire verse. It is the τις of the first clause. Second, there would be no point in marrying off a woman after she had reached a certain age of maturity. The full-blooded life of the man in this spiritual marriage was being dangerously stirred by the close associations of their life together. (Pages 99, 100)

The one word which has caused greatest divergence of opinion is γαμίζειν, as used in verse 38. Exegetes who insisted that this verb must be defined in a causative sense, because of —ίζω, were led to adopt a corresponding interpretation. Moulton-Howard say,

The meaning of a verb in —ίζω, often depends on the context. . . .

We have the pairs ὑστερέω — ὑστερίζω; κομέω — κομίζω to remind us that this distinction (causative and transitive) is not invariably observed. (Page 409)

What renders the decision most difficult is that the word is used only in the New Testament, and then only four times. Twice we find it in verse 38, and once in Matt. 24:38 and Mark 12:35. Lietzmann comments:

In der Tat ist die philologische Exaktheit, mit der versichert wird, γαμίζειν bedeute "verheiraten" und nicht "heiraten" nur eine scheinbare. . . . Bei schulmässiger Korrektheit ist ein Verbum auf —ίζω das neben sich eins auf —έω hat, als Causativum zu behandeln. (Pages 35 f.)

Then he quotes the rule of Apollonius, as found also in Arndt-Gingrich (p. 150):

ἔστι γὰρ τὸ μὲν πρότερον [i. e., γαμῶ] γαμοῦ μεταλαμβάνω, τὸ δὲ γαμίζω γάμου τινὶ μεταδίδωμι.

Lietzmann lists several exceptions. In addition to the two pairs in Moulton, he cites:

γνωρίζω ist zwar Causativ zu γινώσκω, aber heizt doch recht oft "ich erfahre" (zum Beispiel Ph. 1, 22). Diese Erscheinung wird dadurch begreiflich, dasz zahlreiche Verba auf —ίζω von Hause aus ja keine kausative, sondern intransitive Bedeutung haben: χρονίζω, ὀψίζω, ἐλπίζω, ἐριζω, ὑβρίζω. (Pages 35 f.)

He refers to Wendland, who stated that the itacistic pronunciation of the aorist ἐγάμησα sounds like ἐγάμισα. He continues, "A. Debrunner erinnert mich an die Verba auf —ίζω, die 'ein Fest feiern' bedeuten wie παννυγίζω und andere: da könnte γαμίζω recht gut — 'hochzeit feiern' sein." He therefore concludes that it is possible for a writer like Paul to use the rare word γαμίζω for γαμέω.

To change the sense of verses 36 and 37 because of strict observance of a rule regarding causative verbs is not good exegesis, especially since the use of verbs in —ίζω is so unpredictable. To translate, "he who marries his virgin does well, and he who does not marry shall do better" coincides with the obvious translation of γαμέϊτωσαν in verse 36, "let them marry," referring to the man and his virgin as subject.

The study of these four words leads to the conclusion that this passage refers either to the engaged couple or to the spiritual marriage. To this writer it seems to indicate spiritual marriage because παρθένος is used without qualification.

Evidence from Grammatical Construction

The construction of our text portion also lends credence to the spiritual marriage interpretation. The clearest way to understanding the entire section is to make the man involved in the spiritual marriage the subject. To alternate between the man and the virgin in verse 36 by making him subject of νομίζει and the virgin the subject of ἐὰν ἢ ὑπέρακαμος, and then making the man subject of οὐχ ἀμαρτάνει, would be violating the natural sense.

Evidence from Paul's View on Marriage

The "spiritual marriage" view is coherent with Paul's view on marriage. There is the eschatological influence upon his thought, quite apparent in the entire chapter of 1 Corinthians 7 and in

1 Thessalonians. We gain the idea that marriage belongs to the scheme of this world and that in the coming age there is no marriage, as in Mark 12. "We shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:16, 17) means a lasting union with Him. As long as the world exists, we may continue living according to its pattern. Yet institutions of this life must not be taken more seriously than they deserve, for Christians adapt themselves to the truth that this world with its customs will pass away. The stress of the times, in the light of the *παρουσία*, may have given rise to Paul's suggestion of remaining unmarried. This view would fit the situation of those who chose the "spiritual marriage" as an aid in keeping their virginity.

The other possibility of Paul's attitude in chapter 7 is to construe it as viewing celibacy as one of the charismatic gifts. Paul may well think of celibacy as a gift which permits those who have been blessed with it to do a service to the Lord. Paul does not establish an ascetic principle for all or hold up the ascetic ideal as one for which everyone should strive in his dedication to the Gospel. He speaks clearly of marriage as a blessing of God and urges husbands and wives to live with each other in the Lord (1 Cor. 7:2-5). Paul demonstrates also in 1 Corinthians 12 that gifts to Christians are all different. Life in the unmarried state may be more favorable because of the impending distress (v. 26). But for those who do not have this charismatic gift, "it is better to marry." This is further underscored by 1 Cor. 7:1: "It is good for a man not to touch a woman" (*μη ἄπτεσθαι*). *ἄπτω* is the word often used for sexual intercourse (Arndt-Gingrich, p. 102). Paul also addresses himself to ascetic groups in Col. 2:21, who had the regulation, "Touch not, taste not, handle not" (p. 20). Here the word for "touch not" is *ἄψη*, suggesting the possibility that this may have referred to the prohibition of marriage and the expression of sex. Paul places the whole problem in the context of the Gospel, warning against the "rudiments of the world," "ordinances," and the "doctrines of men" (v. 22). In this light, we can see how Paul may have viewed the custom of spiritual marriage as a way of developing the charismatic gift of non-marriage.

Argument of Naturalness

Which interpretation seems the most natural in the light of our discussion?

It would seem that the natural way of interpreting παρθένος would be simply "virgin." No other meaning can be given without introducing a strained element.

The phrase τηρεῖν τὴν ἑαυτοῦ παρθένον fits more easily into the form of the συνείσακτοι than for an engaged man to his betrothed. The problem of how a betrothed man keeps his virgin experiences difficulties. But the expression fits well the custom of keeping the virgin in the vow of spiritual marriage.

THE TRANSLATION

Indeed, the evidence is not conclusive. The historical gap is great. The knowledge of the social milieu of New Testament times is limited. Yet the best choice, to this writer, seems to be the spiritual marriage, as reflected in the following translation:

But if any man thinks that he is acting improperly toward his virgin in his spiritual marriage, if his passions are strong and that is what ought to be done, let him do what he wants—let them be married; he is not sinning.

But the man who has firmly made up his mind, under no constraint of passion but with full self-control, and has decided in his own mind to keep his virgin in her present state, will be doing the right thing.

Thus the man who marries his virgin does well, and he who does not marry will do better.

Oak Lawn, Ill.