

# 1 CORINTHIANS 7:29-31 AND THE TEACHING OF CONTINENCE IN THE ACTS OF PAUL AND THECLA

W. EDWARD GLENNY

*This study purposes to present the meaning of 1 Cor 7:29-31 in its original literary context and then to contrast that meaning with its application in The Acts of Paul and Thecla.*

*This contrast is the basis for a critique of Dennis Ronald MacDonald's theory that The Acts of Paul preserve aspects of Pauline teaching which should be considered on a level with the Pastoral Epistles; MacDonald implies that The Acts of Paul are closer to the primitive Pauline teaching on the role of women than the Pastorals are.*

*The supposed similarity of the teaching on marriage in 1 Cor 7:29-31 and the application of this passage in The Acts of Paul and Thecla is a crucial link in MacDonald's argument that The Acts of Paul reflect primitive Pauline teaching. This study of 1 Cor 7:29-31 proposes, however, that the teaching of The Acts of Paul and Thecla concerning marriage is closer to the doctrine of the opponents of Paul in 1 Corinthians, than it is to the teaching of Paul in 1 Cor 7:29-31.*

\* \* \*

## INTRODUCTION

EVEN the casual reader of *The Acts of Paul* is struck by the author's emphasis on sexual continence. This is an emphasis seen most clearly in *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* where in Iconium, Paul preaches "the word of God concerning continence and the resurrection."<sup>1</sup> Some of the statements concerning purity and continence in the sermon are general and the exact application intended is unclear. However, the sermon is summarized in a series of beatitudes, which tie

<sup>1</sup> *Acts of Paul and Thecla* 5. All the quotations from *The Acts of Paul* are taken from Edgar Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2 vols., edited by Wilhelm Schneemelcher and translated by R. McL. Wilson (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1965).

the author's notion of purity to the matter of sexual continence. According to the beatitudes those who are married should refrain from normal conjugal relations and live as if they are unmarried, and those who are unmarried should remain pure and renounce marriage.

The beatitude series shows a clear connection with Paul's teaching in I Corinthians 7<sup>2</sup> and some similarity to the beatitudes of Matthew 5 and Luke 6. The clearest similarity to I Corinthians 7 occurs in the beatitude "Blessed are those who have wives as if they had them not, for they shall inherit God." The phrase **ekontej gunaikaj wj mh ekontej**; is a verbatim reproduction of I Cor 7:29b. Other similarities between Paul's sermon in *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* and I Corinthians 7 reinforce this connection. In a later beatitude Paul declares "Blessed are they who through love of God have departed from the form of this world, for they shall judge angels."<sup>3</sup> The Greek word **sxhna** ("form") occurs only twice in the New Testament, in I Cor 7:31 and Phil 2:7, and the occurrence in I Cor 7:31 warrants serious comparison with *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* since both texts employ **sxhna** in the construction, "the form of this world."<sup>4</sup> Both the Corinthian and Theclan texts stress virginity and continence (or self-control) as key themes.<sup>5</sup> This evidence supports Schneemelcher's conclusion concerning the language in *The Acts of Paul*. He states that

<sup>2</sup> The Pauline authorship of I Corinthians is assumed throughout this paper. See Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982) 2:120-26; and Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970):421-49 for discussion of Pauline authorship of I Corinthians. While the Pauline authorship of portions of I Corinthians has been questioned by some, I Corinthians 7 is seldom questioned. Winsome Munro, *Authority in Paul and Peter*, *SNTMS*, 45 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983):80-81 questions the Pauline origin of I Cor 7: 17, 20, 24. Munro argues that these verses conflict with the command for a slave to take advantage of the opportunity to be free in verse 21. This argument is not compelling because Paul continually qualifies his teaching in I Corinthians 7 and because, as S. Scott Bartchy, *First Century Slavery and I Cor 7:21*, *SBL Dissertation Series II* (Missoula, Montana: Society of Biblical Literature, 1973): 96ft". has shown, "there was no way that a slave could refuse freedom-status if his master decided to manumit him" (98). Munro argues further that elements of verses 17, 20, 24 resemble a stratum of material later than Paul. In light of the consistency of these verses with Paul's teaching throughout I Corinthians 7 and the lack of textual support for a later addition of these verses, this author has not found these arguments compelling.

<sup>3</sup> *Acts of Paul and Thecla* 6.

<sup>4</sup> The words modifying **sxhna** are not identical in both places (I Cor 7:31-**to sxhna tou?kosmou toutou** and APTh-**tou?sxhna toj tou?kosmiku?**). Also I Corinthians states that "the form of this world is passing away" while APTh emphasizes the blessedness of those "who have departed from the form of this world." It is interesting to note that cognates of **sxhna** are also used in I Cor 7:35, 36.

<sup>5</sup> The noun **egkrateia** occurs four times in the New Testament (Acts 24:25, Gal 5:23, and two times in 2 Pet 1:6). The verb form is found only in I Cor 7:9 and 9:25.

The author's language is uniform, and to a large extent that of the NT. In particular the Pastorals and Acts have been used, but so also have the Gospels and Paul's letters. Here however it is scarcely a question of exact quotations, but rather of linguistic and conceptual agreement on the basis of a knowledge of the NT literature.<sup>6</sup>

The linguistic and conceptual agreement between I Corinthians 7 (especially vv. 29-31) and the beatitudes in *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* (5-7) indicates that the second century author of *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* had knowledge of I Corinthians 7 and intentionally or unintentionally used some of the concepts found in it. The similarity of the general subject and especially of the words and phrases suggests at least a strong possibility that the second century author was directly dependent on I Corinthians.

Whether *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* depend directly on I Corinthians or not, some scholars like Dennis Ronald MacDonald suggest that *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* preserve the teaching of I Cor 7:29-31.<sup>7</sup> MacDonald believes I Cor 7:29-31 and *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* reflect the "radical characteristics of apocalyptic movements"<sup>8</sup> and teach "a renunciation of sex and marriage."<sup>9</sup>

This connection between *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* and I Corinthians is important for MacDonald's thesis in his book, *The Legend and the Apostle*. In this work<sup>10</sup> he argues that several oral legends lie behind *The Acts of Paul*. MacDonald maintains that these legends had social value for women, promoting the notions of women teaching in the church and celibacy. He argues that the Pastoral Epistles were written later to object to the teaching of these legends and to silence these women. The Pastorals were accepted as canonical by the church and the legends were not;<sup>11</sup> however, MacDonald argues that the church's image of Paul should not be shaped by the Pastorals alone but also by the legends. In fact, the implication of his book is that the legends in *The Acts of Paul* are closer to the primitive Pauline teaching than the Pastorals are.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Hennecke, 2:348.

<sup>7</sup> Dennis Ronald MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983):44-45.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>10</sup> MacDonald's theories are also found in his articles. Among them are "The Role of in the Production of the Apocryphal Acts of Apostles," *The Iliff Review* 41 (1984):21-38 and "Virgins, Widows and Paul in Second Century Asia Minor," *Seminar Papers* 16 (1979):169-83.

<sup>11</sup> MacDonald summarizes *The Legend and the Apostle* on 14-15.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-103. On p. 98 MacDonald states that "in many respects the legends stand to the center of Paul's theology than do the Pastorals."

This paper purposes to present the meaning of I Cor 7:29-31 in its original literary context and then contrast that meaning with its application in *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Then the implications of this comparison for MacDonald's thesis will be noted.

### PAUL'S OPPOSITION AT CORINTH

The opposition that Paul attacks throughout I Corinthians (7:1-40 and 11:2-16 being the exceptions to this combative spirit) is not from outside the church but is rather promoted by key figures from within (15: 12; cf. 4:18).<sup>13</sup> Paul's opponents at Corinth have been sitting in judgment on him (4:3) and had been favoring Apollos (4:6; cf. 3:5). The key issue at Corinth is what it means to be pneumatikos (cf. especially chapters 12-14)<sup>14</sup> and this is closely tied with the subjects of sophia (chapters 1-4) and gnosis (chapters 8-10). Two other more basic theological problems, which surface in the epistle, are connected with the confusion over spirituality inherent in a dualistic worldview and an over-realized eschatology.

Walter Schmithals<sup>15</sup> and others have equated this dualism with Gnosticism, yet since the only element common between the situation at Corinth and Gnosticism is the dualism, it is better to explain the dualistic Corinthian worldview as a result of the assimilation of the gospel to the Hellenistic environment of Corinth.<sup>16</sup> The over-realized Corinthian eschatology is a matter closely related to the dualism issue. Anthony C. Thiselton has demonstrated the existence of this latter emphasis throughout I Corinthians<sup>17</sup> and Fee seems to be correct in calling it "spiritualized eschatology," arguing that "from their point of

<sup>13</sup> Gordon Fee suggests that though the problems were initiated by a few (1:12, 4:3, 6, 18-20; 9:3; 10:29-30; 14:37; 15:12) they had infected nearly the whole assembly by the time I Corinthians was written (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987]:8). The fact that the heavy fire of the epistle is addressed to the whole church supports this latter fact.

<sup>14</sup> Fee (10-11) shows the emphasis on this theme throughout the epistle. Anthony C. Thiselton's "Realized Eschatology at Corinth," *New Testament Studies* 24 (1978):510-26 demonstrates that "in every single section from the beginning of the epistle to xiv. 40 there occurs evidence of both a realized eschatology and an enthusiastic theology of the Spirit on the part of the Corinthians" (523). Bartchy, 128ff., has a helpful development of the problem also.

<sup>15</sup> Walther Schmithals, *Gnosticism in Corinth* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1971).

<sup>16</sup> F. F. Bruce, 1 and 2 Corinthians, *New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971):20-21. See the critique of the Gnostic explanation by R. McL. Wilson, "How Gnostic Were the Corinthians?" in *New Testament Studies* 19 (1972/73): 65-74.

<sup>17</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, "Realized Eschatology at Corinth," *New Testament Studies* 24 (1978):510-26.

view it would not so much be the 'time' of the future that has become a present reality for them, as the 'existence' of the future."<sup>18</sup> The Spirit, which they are experiencing in full measure belongs to the Eschaton, thus they think they are living on a spiritual plane above the merely material existence of this present age.<sup>19</sup> The spiritual ones may have considered themselves to be as the angels (11:2-16; 13:1; cf. Luke 18:29-30; 20:34-36), having already realized the resurrection from the dead (15:12), and thus they considered the body eschatologically insignificant (6:13; 15:12) and also without any present significance. This dualism resulted in license and libertinism in the lives of some (5:1-2; 6: 12-20) and severe treatment of the body and denial of sexual relations within marriage on the part of others (7:1-6).

Although he contrasts their present existence with their past pre-salvation experience (6:9-11; 8:7; 12:1-3), Paul drives home the idea that they have not yet arrived, by contrasting their present existence with the future (1:5-8; 3:13-15,17; 4:5; 5:5; 6:13-14; 7:26-31; 11:26,32; 15:24,51-56; 16:22; and especially 4:8-13). Paul corrected the "spiritualized eschatology" at Corinth by emphasizing the "not yet" of salvation which is still to come. He corrected the dualism by emphasis on the importance of the body in this age (chapters 5-7) and in the future (6:14 and all of chapter 15). Throughout the epistle he endeavored to teach what is true **sofia** (chapters 1-4), true **gnōsij** (chapters 8-10) and thus what it means to be *1tVEU!latt1COc*; (chapters 11-14).

#### THE LITERARY CONTEXT OF I CORINTHIANS 7:29-31

The Apostle Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus (I Cor 16:5-8) during his more than two years of ministry there (described in Acts 19:1-20:1).<sup>20</sup> Paul had written a previous letter to the Corinthians warning them not to associate with immoral persons (mentioned in 1 Cor 5:9), but this previous letter was either misunderstood or disregarded (I Cor 5:10-11). Later a delegation from the church at Corinth, consisting of Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus, brought a series of questions to Paul on behalf of the church (I Cor 16:17)<sup>21</sup> Paul also received an oral report from the household of Chloe (I Cor 1:11),

<sup>18</sup> Fee, 12.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Koester, 2:114-16.

<sup>21</sup> Fee (7) suggests, on the basis of the combative nature of I Corinthians, that the responses of the Corinthians took exception with several of Paul's positions or prohibitions in his previous letter. See also John Coolidge Hurd, *The Origin of I Corinthians f* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1983, reprint of the original 1965 edition): 50-58, on the relationship between Paul and the Corinthians.

communicating disorders in the church at Corinth. Perhaps confirming suspicions raised by the prior visit of the Corinthian delegation, this report served as the final cause for the writing of I Corinthians.<sup>22</sup>

### *The Structure of 1 Corinthians*

There are four main divisions of I Corinthians. After the introduction (1: 1-9), Paul addresses the divisions and disorders in the church at Corinth, which were reported to him by the household of Chloe (1: 10-4:21). Chapters 5 and 6 are best understood as connected with 1:10-4:21, not only because they are also based on the report of the household of Chloe, but also because they focus on the question of Paul's authority which is a key issue in 1:10-4:21. Fee suggests that the three issues brought up in chapters 5 and 6 were questions raised in the church which tested Paul's authority, a matter which had been reasserted in chapters 1-4.<sup>23</sup>

The third main division of 1 Corinthians (7:1-16:12) systematically answers the questions that the Corinthians raised for Paul in their letter to him (16:17): The answers to each of these questions are introduced by the phrase, **peri de** (7:1, 25; 8:1 [cf. 8:4]; 12:1; 16:1, 12)<sup>24</sup> The epistle concludes with various instructions to the church in 16:13-24.

### *The Structure and Argument of 1 Corinthians 7*

In this chapter Paul addresses the first item in the letter the Corinthians sent to him.<sup>25</sup> Although the 1st Epi of. construction in 7:25 ("now concerning virgins...") could be taken as a new section, the whole chapter is united by the themes of marriage and sexual morality and by the afterthought concerning "the unmarried and widows" in 7:39, 40 which adds to earlier instruction given this same group in 7:8, 9:6 Therefore, this study will approach the chapter as a single unit consisting of two parts.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the purpose of the chapter is

<sup>22</sup> Fee (7, n. 18) remarks that "this order of events cannot be proved. ..but it seems to make good sense of the data. It also helps to make sense of the apparent discrepancies between what is really going on in the church and the 'official' stance presented in their letter (as, e.g. in 11:2)."

<sup>23</sup> Fee, 194-95. See also Hurd, 89, n. 1. Compare especially 4:18-21 and 5:4.

<sup>24</sup> the exception being 11:17-34 and perhaps chapter 15.

<sup>25</sup> Note the clause **peri de** in 7:1.

<sup>26</sup> Hurd, 169 states that "in subject matter the topic to which Paul responded in I Cor 7:25-38 is associated with that of the preceding section. Both concern sexual morality. The 1st Epi of. in 7:25, however, implies that in some sense the problem thus introduced is separate from the preceding."

<sup>27</sup> Fee, 268. See also Hurd, 154ff., on this whole issue.

not to be a summary of Paul's teaching on marriage;<sup>28</sup> it is rather intended to address the errors concerning marriage at Corinth.

I Corinthians 7:1-24. Paul's instruction to the married in verses 1-7 is based upon the statement in verse 1b: "It is good for a man not to touch a woman."<sup>29</sup> It is generally understood that "to touch" is a euphemism for sexual intercourse and verses 2-7 indicate the passage is addressed to married couples. This statement (7:1a) is apparently a quotation from the Corinthian letter, or at least it reflects the sentiment of that letter.<sup>30</sup> If it is from the Corinthians letter, "it is good" (**kal on**) introduces the notion that it is advantageous or utilitarian for a man not to have sexual intercourse with his wife.<sup>31</sup> Fee argues that **kal on** means "advantageous" or "utilitarian" on the basis of 7:8,26,35, and because if Paul was agreeing with the Corinthian slogan in 7:1b it is most likely that that is what it means there also.<sup>32</sup> In the context of 6:12-20 and 5:1-5, it seems likely that some within the church thought themselves so spiritual that they were above the temptations of the flesh (6:12-20) no longer having to discipline their bodies and physical appetites. Perhaps they even encouraged those who were married to cease sexual relations in order to demonstrate their freedom from the allure of physical longings.

In verse 2, Paul qualifies the slogan of verse 1b. Both the husband and the wife have sexual needs and rights and, continuing on, the apostle points out not only an obligation to meet the sexual needs of one's mate (v. 3), but also a reciprocal right of each married partner to possess the body of his (her) mate (v. 4). Neither is to "deprive" the other sexually except for a short time, by mutual consent, for the purpose of fasting and prayer (v. 5). For verse 6 to be consistent with verses 2-5, it must mean that Paul's teaching on sexual abstinence is a concession not a command.<sup>33</sup> Thus for Paul, marriage is, to a large degree, sexual, as it is frequently portrayed in Old Testament passages such as Gen 2:15, Prov 5:15-20, and Song of Solomon. Paul's wish is

<sup>28</sup>This is obvious from 7:2.

<sup>29</sup>It is impossible to give support for every part of my understanding of I Corinthians 7. However, I will try to give support for main ideas which are especially important for the interpretation of verses 29-31.

<sup>30</sup>Fee, 276; Hurd, 65-88, 163; see also J. Murphy O'Connor, "Corinthian Slogans in I Cor 6:12-20," CBQ 40 (1978):391-96.

<sup>31</sup>See Hurd, 159, for the options concerning the meaning of **kal on**. See also Fee, 275.

<sup>32</sup>Even though Paul is in general agreement with the principal in 7:1b, he disagrees with the Corinthian's reasons for believing it, and therefore, he qualifies the statement in the following verses. Apparently, this is a Pauline teaching which the Corinthians have abused.

<sup>33</sup>Fee, 283-84.

that all could be single as he is (v. 7a), but he only recommends celibacy for those with the "gift."

A series of datives in verses 8, 10 and 12 mark the next divisions of this section. In verse 8 Paul teaches that widows and widowers<sup>34</sup> would do well to remain unmarried, as he is. However, verse 9 argues that if those named in verse 8 cannot control their sexual desire, they should marry. Paul teaches the married (vv. 10-11) that believers should not divorce, and if they are separated they are not to remarry but remain single or be reconciled to their spouses. In marriages where only one spouse is a believer (vv. 12-16), the believing partner is not to leave his or her spouse, because the believer has a sanctifying effect on the household (vv. 14, 16). If the unbeliever decides to depart (v. 15) the believing spouse is not "bound" but is to seek peace.<sup>35</sup> Verses 17-24, central theological verses in the chapter, teach that the believer is to be content to remain in the social setting he or she is in at the time each one is called into the faith.<sup>36</sup> What matters is not one's situation in life but rather obedience to God (v. 19). Throughout the passage, this has been the emphasis of Paul's instruction-to widows and widowers (vv. 8-9), married believers (vv. 10-11) and believers who are married to unbelievers (vv. 12-16).

Apparently the widows and widowers at Corinth were being instructed not to marry (vv. 8-9) and married believers were being encouraged to separate (vv. 10-11). Furthermore, believers who were married to unbelievers were apparently being taught that they were defiled by their sexual relations with the unbelieving spouse. Or, perhaps their unsaved spouses were not willing to forego sexual relations as believers were demanding, and as a result the unsaved partners desired to separate or divorce. The fact that Paul rejects divorce with such emphasis in this section suggests that some of the Corinthians had made statements in favor of it.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Fee, 287-88.

<sup>35</sup> Because of the teaching concerning remarriage in verses 11 and 34 it is best to understand "not bound" here to mean not bound to remain in the relationship, and thus, no implications concerning remarriage are given in this verse.

<sup>36</sup> Fee rightly notes that even though one is not to be concerned about his or her social setting, one's social setting is to be seen as assigned by Christ. Yet "that does not mean that one is forever locked into that setting. Rather Paul means that by calling a person within a given situation, that situation itself is taken up in the call and thus sanctified to him or her" (310). One's concern should be to live out the Christian life in whatever social setting he or she is in without concern for one's social setting.

<sup>37</sup> Hurd, 167. Hurd (168) suggests that the substance of the Corinthians communication to Paul which occasioned I Cor 7: 1-24 was as follows: "Concerning problems of sex and marriage: we believe that Christian couples should forego marital intercourse so that they may devote themselves more fully to things spiritual. After all, is it not true that it is well for a man not to touch a woman? For this reason we also think it best that the

*I Corinthians 7:25-40.* The second part of chapter 7 addresses the topic of "virgins" (**Peri>de>twñ parqenwn**, v. 25). It is reasonable to think that because "virgins" are mentioned in each part of the argument (vv. 28, 34, 36-38) that this is the topic of the entire section.<sup>38</sup> The I conclusion of the section is the "so then" in verse 38. The "virgins" are best understood as betrothed couples questioning whether to go through with their intended marriages.<sup>39</sup> The ascetic stance seen in the slogan in verse 1b is also evident here where the betrothed were apparently being taught it would be sin to go through with their marriages (vv. 28, 36). This situation is complicated by Paul's previous instruction (vv. 17-24) to remain in the situation of life one is in; this is obviously difficult for the betrothed. Thus Paul's opponents at Corinth seemingly have him in a corner; while he favors celibacy (v. 7) he opposes asceticism. How can he affirm celibacy without affirming their asceticism?

Paul argues very gently (vv. 25,28,32,36,37) that celibacy is the better option, though marriage is no sin and is certainly a valid option (vv. 28a, 36b, 38). The opening statement (vv. 25-28) teaches that because of the present crises it is good for a person to remain unmarried<sup>40</sup> since those who do marry will experience many difficulties.<sup>41</sup>

In verses 29-35 Paul digresses from the specific topic of virgins to explain the Christian's relationship to the world (vv. 29-31) and the need for all Christians, whatever their marital status, to remain free from concern and live in total devotion to the Lord (v. 35b). It should be emphasized here that Paul's instructions in verses 32-35 are not to restrict the single or engaged in any way concerning their plans to marry (v. 35). If they do not have the gift of celibacy they are to marry (v. 7).<sup>42</sup> Verses 36-38 return to the topic of verses 25-28<sup>43</sup> and give

---

unmarried and widows among us remain unmarried, an attitude of which you must approve since you yourself remain unmarried.

It sometimes occurs that the harmony of a marriage is threatened by the demands of the spiritual life. On the one hand, some of the brothers are unable to refrain completely from their wives; on the other hand, some of the marriages include one partner who is not a believer. In these cases we recommend separation so that the spiritual life of the more devout partner is not hampered."

<sup>38</sup> Fee, 322-24.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 323-28. C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968) and Hans Conzelmann, *I Corinthians*, *Hermeia Commentary Series* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) both adopt the same view. Conzelmann says "what is meant by the term *Itap9tvol* is-superfluously enough-hotly disputed; it means virgins. ..." (131).

<sup>40</sup> Fee, 324.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 333.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 334-55.

<sup>43</sup> *It the Hurd*, 177-78.

further Instructions to an engaged couple. The chapter concludes with a final comment concerning a Christian woman's right to remarry (vv.39-40).

### I CORINTHIANS 7:29-31

The digression in thought and the vocative address in verse 29 suggest that verses 29-35 are an explanatory digression meant for all the Christian community at Corinth.<sup>44</sup> The issue which determines Paul's development of verses 29-31 is the Christian's relationship to the world.<sup>46</sup> The believer is not to withdraw from the world or his relationships in it (vv. 17-24), but instead is to live out the lordship of Christ in this world. As Doughty says, "God's salvation deed in Christ does not translate the believer out of the world, but establishes a new relationship between man and his world. In verses 29-31, Paul elaborates the nature of this new relationship."<sup>47</sup>

The overall structure of verses 29-31 is fairly straightforward. Paul develops the Christian's relationship with the world in five constructions and these five constructions "are bracketed by two assertions which are intended to ground the understanding of existence expressed here."<sup>48</sup> Fee suggests that the basic premise in verse 29a is followed by its purpose or result (the five **wj m**-constructions in vv. 29b-31a); then the section concludes with the reason (**gar**) in verse 31b.<sup>49</sup>

Paul's opening words, "But this I say," certainly point forward to the following phrase,<sup>50</sup> "The time is short."<sup>51</sup> The time (**kairoj**), in which Paul's recipients live, has been determined by God's eschato-

44 Fee, 327.

45 Fee, 52, n. 22 shows that the vocative **adelphoi** often occurs at a shift in an author's argument. He also argues, on the basis of the evidence in I Corinthians (cf. especially I Cor 11:2-16) and in Phil 4:1-3, that women would have been "participants in the worship of the community and would have been included in the 'brothers' being addressed." See also Fee, 31, n. 16.

46 D. J. Doughty, "The Presence and Future of Salvation in Corinth," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 66 (1975):67.

47 Ibid., 67.

48 Ibid.

49 Fee, 338.

50 NIV seems to have the idea of this clause in its translation, "What I mean is this."

51 This construction is best understood as a periphrastic perfect passive according to Fee, 339, n. 14 and Barrett, 176. Fee adds that, "the verb **sustelw**, depending on context, means to constrict, reduce, restrain, or limit in some way. With time it means to 'compress' it. The picture is that of one for whom the future was either nonexistent, as for most Greeks, or off in the vague distance; but the event of Christ has now compressed the time in such a way that the future has been brought forward so as to be clearly visible." Connections with Mark 13:20 are questionable here according to Fee and Conzelmann, 113, n. 22.

logical intervention in Christ (Rom 3:25, 26). The coming of Christ has initiated the "last days" (8eb 1:2; I Pet 1:20; Rom 16:25, 26), and therefore Christians have a different perspective than Old Testament believers. Paul is not emphasizing that the end is imminent as much as he is emphasizing that it is now clear or plain. This truth should radically alter the values and decisions of Christians.<sup>52</sup>

The meaning of Paul's introduction to the five **wj nh** constructions in verse 29b is debatable. It is generally understood that **to> loipon** has a temporal significance and should be translated, "from now on" or "henceforth."<sup>53</sup> The context strongly supports such an understanding. More difficult is the **iha** which follows it. It could be imperatival<sup>54</sup> or it could indicate purpose.<sup>55</sup> The two ideas are close, but purpose is the more standard use of **iha** with **to> loipon**.<sup>56</sup> The **kai** merely begins the series of **wj nh** exhortations, each of which is introduced by **kai**; the first use of it (v. 29b) does not need to be translated.<sup>57</sup> Thus, in verse 29a Paul is affirming that one reason God has compressed (drawn together) the time of salvation is so that for the remaining time believers would have a new perspective concerning their relationship with this present world.<sup>58</sup> This new perspective is described in the five exhortations in verses 29b-31a.

These five exhortations are illustrations of the new perspective that the Christian is to have concerning the world. That they are not

<sup>52</sup> Fee (339, n. 15) makes the following helpful comment. "The analogy of the terminally ill comes to mind. For those who have made peace with it, the amount of time left is less in the forefront than is the change of perspective. They see, hear, and value in a new way. My former student Dr. J. Camery-Hoggatt suggested the analogy of the one who tells a joke. He alone knows the punch line, and because he knows it, it shapes the telling of the joke in its entirety. Through the resurrection of Christ, Christians know the divine 'punch line' (which in this case is no joke but a vivid reality!); they see clearly how the story comes out, and they shape their lives and values accordingly."

<sup>53</sup> See Margaret E. Thrall, *Greek Particles in the New Testament*, New Testament and Studies, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962):25-30, for a discussion of **loipon**. Fee (338) and Barrett (176) support the translation given here. Conzelmann n. 3) lists it as a possibility.

<sup>54</sup> So Barrett, 176; Frederick Blass and A. DeBrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, translated by Robert W. Funk (University of Chicago Press, 1961):195-96; C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979):145; and James Hope Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, 4 vols., vol. 3:Syntax, by Nigel Turner, 95.

<sup>55</sup> Fee (338, n. 10) argues that **to> loipon** may be preceding **iha** for emphasis (cf. Gal 2:10)

<sup>56</sup> Ibid

<sup>57</sup> Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *The First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, ICC, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1914):155.

<sup>58</sup> Fee, 340.

meant to be taken literally but as "dialectical rhetoric"<sup>59</sup> is clear from the context. First, if they were taken literally they would be absurd. Second, a literal interpretation of the first illustration contradicts verses 2-5, and third, they contrast what Paul says in Rom 12: 15 about sorrowing and rejoicing.<sup>60</sup>

It has been argued that Paul's concern in the first statement is to urge celibacy and abstinence from sex within marriage.<sup>61</sup> However, to take the exhortation that literally causes contradiction (cf. vv. 1-5) and would unnecessarily limit Paul's teaching in this clause. Paul is teaching that for the present age, whether one is married or not, he is to live "as if not" because the various relationships of this life are passing away. The obvious reason why he does not have a clause starting "and let those who do not have wives be ..." is because there is no negative counterpart to complete it, not because he is only addressing married couples.

The tension in the **wj mh** expressions is not a temporal one between the present and the future. It instead emphasizes the dialectal relationship between a person and this world. The two present tense verbs in each exhortation emphasize this dialectic.<sup>62</sup> In light of the eschatological nature of the times in which Christians live (v. 31b), in every situation of life they are to live without their relationship to the world being the determining factor, but instead with their relationship to Christ determining their attitudes and decisions. They are to be in the world, but the world is not to dictate their present existence.

Therefore, if they are married they are to maintain their marriage relationship, but at the same time to carefully control the passions or desires that might shape their married relationship (I Thess 4:4ff). Furthermore, the marriage relationship is not what determines or controls their lives; instead their lives are dominated by Christ and a desire to obey Him (7:19b).

For the Christian, rejoicing and mourning take on new meaning (v. 30). The Christian rejoices and mourns in this world concerning things of this world, but not as this world rejoices and mourns. Furthermore, this world does not determine or dictate the Christian's ultimate responses and relationships with other men. The laughter and tears of this world are not the last word.<sup>63</sup>

Christians buy and sell (v. 30), but they do not buy to possess. That is, the world does not determine their reasons for buying and sell-

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Doughty, 68.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>63</sup> Barrett, 178.

ing. Fee notes that "those who buy are to do so 'as if not' in terms of possessing anything. The eschatological person 'has nothing, yet possess all things' (2 Cor 6:10; cf. I Cor 3:22).",<sup>64</sup> This is why the Christian can "use the present world" (v. 31a). The world is not good or evil; it simply is.<sup>65</sup> But the present form of this world is passing away (v. 31b); thus one is not to be "exploiting" it,<sup>66</sup> engrossed in it, or absorbed in it.<sup>67</sup>

The reason for the Christian's new relationship with the world is given in verse 31b; in what is the most important sentence in the section, Paul argues, "The essence<sup>68</sup> of this world is in the process of passing away."<sup>69</sup> The fact that this world is passing away is the basis of the five **wj nh** statements which precede it; furthermore, the meaning of all of these statements is determined by "Paul's understanding of the salvation deed of God in Christ."<sup>70</sup> Fee suggests that the progressive present tense verb form in verse 31b

reflects Paul's already/not yet eschatological perspective. The decisive event is the one that has already happened. In Christ's death and resurrection God has already determined the course of things; he has already brought the present world in its present form under judgement. And so decisive is that event that it has "foreshortened the time." The result is that even now what others are absorbed in, the Christian is free from.<sup>71</sup>

The world is the sphere in which the believer is called to live out the lordship of Christ in this age (7: 17-24)? The believer's life is already in the present determined by the lordship of Christ (7:22) and not by the essence (**sxh̄ta**) of this present world (7:23, 31).<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, as Schrage has observed, the significance of the present tense verb (**paragei**) in the concluding eschatological statement

<sup>64</sup> Fee, 341.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Doughty, 7 I. He has a lengthy discussion of this term in note 47.

<sup>67</sup> Fee, 341.

<sup>68</sup> This is the translation of Conzelmann, 134; Fee (342, n. 23) says it is more than "simply the outward form that is on its way out, but the total scheme of things as they currently exist." TDNT, S.v. "**sxh̄ta**" by J. Schneider (1971)7:956, suggests the translation is "distinctive manifestation."

<sup>69</sup> This is generally understood to be a progressive present tense. See Fee, 342, and the translations in Conzelmann, 130, and Barrett, 178.

<sup>70</sup> Doughty, 73, n. 52.

<sup>71</sup> Fee, 341.

<sup>72</sup> 1Cor 7: 19 teaches that the lordship of Christ is lived out in a life by keeping God's commands in whatever calling that one is in.

<sup>73</sup> Doughty, 73.

in verse 31 b, is that "the future eschatology of apocalypticism has been made present in a radical way."<sup>74</sup> As Doughty says, "Christians are exhorted to live as if the end of history had already arrived."<sup>75</sup> Thus Paul is not concerned here with the future of salvation but rather with "the existence of those who, as a consequence of God's salvation deed in Christ, already stand at the end of history."<sup>76</sup> In this existence the Christian "uses this world"(7:31), yet the world does not determine a man's existence or enslave him.

It must be emphasized, for the sake of comparison with *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, that understanding the five **wj mh** exhortations in terms of an eschatological "already" does not imply an apocalyptic renunciation of the world. While for apocalypticism it could perhaps be said that "the present is nothing but. ..., the future is nevertheless of great (worth)."<sup>77</sup> Paul is suggesting no such rejection of relationships in this world. Doughty summarizes the meaning very well in stating

The dialectic of 'having' and 'not having' is not dissolved by the **paragei**, but intensified! Both sides of the dialectic, both the 'having' and the 'not having,' must be taken with equal seriousness. The meaning of this dialectic for Paul becomes clear in his own summary statement: 'Let those who make use of the world live as though not exploiting the world.' The worldliness of the Christian is not denied. Christians live in the world and continue to make use of the world<sup>78</sup>

The error of both the libertines and ascetics at Corinth was that they were continuing to allow their lives to be shaped by the **sxhna** of this world; the libertines were disdainning this world and the ascetics were renouncing it. Yet both were responding or reacting to the form or essence of this world and allowing it to shape their existence, rather than using the relationships of this world, which have no ethical significance, as a sphere in which they might love one another (12:31-13:13), obey God (7:19), and glorify Him (6:20; 10:31)<sup>79</sup>

#### I CORINTHIANS 7:29-31 IN *THE ACTS OF PAUL AND THECLA*

*The Acts of Paul* is a second century rendition of the missionary ministry and the death of the apostle Paul, which is included in the

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 68, 70.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 68, n. 38.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 68-69.

<sup>77</sup> Wolfgang Schrage, "Die Stellung zur Welt bei Paulus, Epiktet und in der Apokalyptik" *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 61 (1964):145. Schrage argues for an apocalyptic understanding of I Cor 7:29-31. See the rebuttal of Schrage in Doughty, 70-71, and the discussion in Conzelmann, 133, n. 26.

<sup>78</sup> Doughty, 70-71.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 74.

New Testament Apocrypha.<sup>80</sup> This work describes Paul as traveling around the Roman East preaching the message of sexual abstinence and resurrection from the dead.<sup>81</sup> The clearest example of this message is in the series of beatitudes in Paul's sermon at Iconium in *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* 5-6. Among these beatitudes are found the following statements.

Blessed are they who have kept the flesh pure, for they shall become a temple of God.

Blessed are the continent, for to them will God speak.

Blessed are they who have renounced this world, for they shall be well pleasing unto God.

Blessed are they who have wives as if they had them not, for they shall inherit God.

Blessed are they who through love of God have departed from the form of this world, for they shall judge angels and at the right hand of the Father they shall be blessed.

Blessed are the bodies of the virgins, for they shall be well pleasing to God, and shall not lose the reward of their purity.

For the word of the Father shall be for them a work of salvation in the day of his Son, and they shall have rest for ever and ever.

The purpose of quoting from this sermon is to emphasize more clearly the differences between I Cor 7:29-31 and *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*.

First, there are obvious differences between the teaching concerning marriage and sex in I Corinthians 7 and in *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Whereas for Paul marriage includes a sexual relationship (I Cor 7:2-5), for *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* that is not the case. While I Cor 7:2-5 teaches that partners have an obligation to meet each other's sexual needs, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* (5-7, 15) teach one cannot attain to the resurrection from the dead unless he refrains from sexual relations.

Furthermore, in I Corinthians 7 celibacy is a gift (**xarisma** 7:7) and it is no sin to marry (7:28, 36), if one is not able to live the celibate life (cf. also 7:9,11). In *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, by contrast, all are exhorted to renunciation of sexual relations and a life of virginity or celibacy. In fact, in the latter work it is said that Paul "deprives young men of wives and maidens of husbands, saying: 'Otherwise there

<sup>80</sup>Hennecke (2:351) dates the writing of *The Acts of Paul* before A.D. 200. Because it apparently dependent on The Acts of Peter; he suggests a date between 185 and 195. MacDonald dates *The Acts of Paul* between A.D. 150-190 (14) and Koester (2:325) dates these works before the end of the second century A.D.

<sup>81</sup>Other encratite practices are encouraged, but the consistent message is a call to sexual abstinence. See Koester, 2:327.

is no resurrection for you, except ye remain chaste (ayvoi) and do not defile the flesh, but keep it pure (**agnhn**)'."<sup>82</sup> Paul tells the governor at Iconium that God sent him "since he desires the salvation of all men that I may draw them away from corruption and impurity, all pleasure and death that they may sin no more."<sup>83</sup> In I Corinthians Paul never threatens believers at Corinth with the loss of salvation, or of the resurrection, because of sexual expression. In fact, even in cases of sexual immorality, mentioned in I Cor 5:1-5 and 6:12-20, Paul does not necessarily conclude that those sinning are not Christians. In I Corinthians the exhortation to sexual purity is based on God's previous work of salvation in the life of the Christian (6:11,15,19) uniting the Christian with Christ (6:15, 19) and securing his salvation; it is not based on a threat of not participating in the resurrection as in *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*.

It is also worth noting that the simplistic message of Paul in *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* urges nothing more than continence and living chastely.<sup>84</sup> As any student of the apocryphal Acts knows, the contents are always simplistic and superficial when compared with I Corinthians.<sup>85</sup>

Other contradictions between I Corinthians 7 and *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* include the emphasis on maintaining peace in the marriage relationship (I Cor 7:14-16), which is considered unimportant in the *Thecla* story, and the emphasis on living out the Christian life in one's situation in this life, rather than trying to change one's social situation (see I Cor 7: 17-24,27 as contrasts the teaching in *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*).<sup>86</sup>

Perhaps the major difference between the use of the "having wives" statement in I Corinthians and *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* is the eschatological perspective of the two contexts. In the *Thecla* account the "form of this world" is evil and is to be renounced,<sup>87</sup> those who have wives and behave as if they had them not are given a future promise of inheriting God. The apocalyptic perspective of *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* understands the relationships of the present to be of

<sup>82</sup> *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* 12.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, 9.

<sup>85</sup> Hennecke, 350 states that the author of *The Acts of Paul* makes the Apostle the herald of a very simple faith, which can be reduced to a few formulae. ..."

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.* Hennecke notes that the theology of *The Acts of Paul* shows how far Christianity had departed from the apostle by the close of the second century. Koester, 2:327 says that "the flowers of pious fantasy bloom more richly in these writings" (meaning the Apocryphal Acts) than in Luke's writings in the New Testament. For the historical differences between Paul's life as described in the New Testament and *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul*, see Hennecke, 2:344, 347-48.

<sup>87</sup> *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* 5, 6.

no value and the future to be a prize of great worth. This perspective renounces this world and withdraws from it, so as not to be soiled by any aspect of it. In I Corinthians 7 Paul teaches an already/not-yet eschatology. The believer has been saved (6: 11) and joined with Christ (6:14,15,19). Christ is reigning in this world today (15:20-28) and has dominion over death. "In Christ" the future of the Christian has already been determined (15:22), and now as a **douloj Kristou** (7:22) the Christian is to live out the lordship of Christ in this world.<sup>88</sup> The society of this world is not evil, but as said before it merely is, and the believer is to use it for God's glory. In *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* the condition given for married people to inherit God, or be resurrected, is to renounce this world by refraining from sexual relations within marriage (a "spiritual marriage"). By contrast, I Cor 7:29a emphasizes the tension of Paul's already / not yet eschatology. The way for the married to live out Christ's lordship in these last days (since Christ's resurrection and ascension to position of Lord) is to have a complete marriage, including sexual relations (**exontej gunaikaj**, cf. 7:2). Still the believer should not allow his marriage to determine his life; only Christ should do that. Furthermore, the series of five **wj mh** exhortations in I Cor 7:29-31 shows that this principle is not only for marriage, but applies to every relationship and activity of life.

## CONCLUSION

If the argument presented in this paper is correct, it supports the general consensus of opinion that the theology of *The Acts of Paul* has taken quite a departure from the historical Paul.<sup>89</sup> This is certainly not a new discovery; however, it is relevant to the thesis of Dennis MacDonald. MacDonald's thesis, which was summarized earlier,<sup>90</sup> is based partly on the fact that *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* preserve aspects of Pauline teaching, which were handed down to the author of this work through oral legends. On the basis of a general understanding of *The Acts of Paul* one could question MacDonald's theory. It is more questionable when it is realized that the main evidence he gives for the connection between the apostle and *The Acts of Paul* is the use of I Cor 7:29-31.<sup>91</sup> He maintains that fanatic and apocalyptic elements of Christianity, paralleling the radical characteristics of other movements, are seen in Paul and in *The Acts of Paul* in their common use of I Cor 7:29-31. He suggests that the legends behind *The Acts of Paul* "faithfully preserve this aspect of Paul's

<sup>88</sup> Doughty, 74-85 is helpful on this subject.

<sup>89</sup> See note 86 above.

<sup>90</sup> See Introduction above.

<sup>91</sup> MacDonald, 44-46.

teachings.”<sup>92</sup> He argues that Paul's speech to Artemilla, bidding her to abandon her wealth in view of the impending destruction of the world, is consistent with I Cor 7:29-31.<sup>93</sup> He also argues that the impending destruction of the world spoken of in I Cor 7:29-31 "dictates a reappraisal of sexuality",<sup>94</sup> which he takes to mean "a renunciation of sex and marriage."<sup>95</sup> He argues that the general withdrawal from society which is portrayed in the life of Thecla is a continuation of Paul's teaching in I Cor 7:29-31.

This study of I Cor 7:29-31 suggests that the use of this passage to sanction withdrawal from, or renunciation of, the societal relationships of this life is ill-founded. Furthermore, if this is MacDonald's main connection between Paul and the attitude toward society found in The Acts of Paul and Thecla, it certainly raises questions concerning the degree to which *The Acts of Paul* should shape our images of Paul and the religious movement he generated, especially with regard to attitudes toward society.

Finally, in light of the lack of a clear connection between the historical Paul and *The Acts of Paul*, it is fair to ask if the contemporary church should consider *The Acts of Paul* to be a continuation of the teaching of the historical Paul concerning the role of women in society and the church, or concerning any other topic.<sup>96</sup> The basis of the connection MacDonald has tried to make between The Acts Paul and the historical Paul has been shown to be, in reality, a contradiction. In fact, the teaching of *The Acts of Paul* concerning marriage and sex appears to be the doctrine of the opponents of in I Corinthians, rather than the teaching of the historical Paul.

<sup>92</sup>MacDonald, 45. See also 98.

<sup>93</sup>*The Acts of Paul* 7. This is supposedly when Paul is at Ephesus.

<sup>94</sup>MacDonald, 45. "

<sup>95</sup>Ibid.,45

<sup>96</sup>I am not so naive as to think this paper is a fatal blow to MacDonald's thesis. However, if this paper is correct, he has failed to connect with Paul the later ascetic, fanatic, apocalyptic movements, which renounced and withdrew from society. Also, he has misinterpreted the main passage he uses from Paul to support his own thesis! The burden of proof is certainly in the lap of those who would argue that *The Acts of Paul* reflect the historical teachings of Paul. I would be pleased to see a more serious treatment of the Pauline material in the New Testament by those who seek to make this connection.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

Grace Theological Seminary  
200 Seminary Dr.  
Winona Lake, IN 46590  
www.grace.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu