
| RESEARCH ARTICLE**Reengaging Pauline *Didache* on Celibacy, Marriage and Ministry in 1 Corinthians 7:1-9, 25-40****Steve Orseer Akullah¹ ✉ and Magdalyn Aboh²**¹²*Dept of Religious Studies, Federal University Wukari, Taraba State, Nigeria***Corresponding Author:** Steve Orseer Akullah, **E-mail:** steveakullah@fuwukari.edu.ng

| ABSTRACT

The paper examines Paul's nuanced *didache* on celibacy, marriage, and ministry in 1 Corinthians 7 against its first century background and explores the implication of these concepts in the contemporary church in Africa. The apostle submits that both marriage and celibacy are charismata (gifts) from God for the church. Paul's preference for celibacy for the sake of devotion for ministry to the Lord (7:35), however, creates tension for the church in Africa. This dissonance arises as a result of the conflict between clerical formation, pastoral expectations, and African cultural heritage on both marriage and singleness, where marriage implies a profound cultural and social dynamic, but singleness, especially for women, is stigmatized within the framework of the African cultural milieu. The methodology of the study is the Historical-Critical exegesis of 1 Corinthians 7:1-16; 25-35, and Canonical Theology comparing notes on Matthew 19:10-12; 1Timothy 3:2 to understand the diversity of marriage, celibacy, and ministerial status. The study engages Theological analysis of the text and presents the argument that a contextualized reading of 1 Corinthians is the desired necessity to foster a balanced sexual theology for both pro-celibates and pro-marriage for the church in Africa. This can assuage African church leaders, theologians, and scholars to promote a balanced ministerial blueprint that is Biblically based and culturally relevant to African Christians.

| KEYWORDS

Celibacy, Marriage, Church in Africa, African Culture, Tension, Clerical formation.

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1. Introduction

In Africa, marriage is not just a social contract between the bride and the bridegroom; it is a communal engagement involving villages, communities, social groups, and even tribes of both parties. This practice transcends cultures such that one's adulthood and maturity is measured by marriage. The church in Africa is not insulated from this cultural matrix but has continued to face challenges on the twin issue of celibacy and marriage for her clergy and clerical members. There is a strong cultural demand for marriage for adults of marriageable age, and many church denominations readily key in to this practice as a prerequisite for pastoral ordination and leadership responsibilities. Other denominations opt for singleness for priestly ordination and leaders' roles in the church, thus creating no vacancy for married priests. This state of affairs has created a conundrum in the church, as there are a preponderance of high rates of anxiety among seminarians, secret relationships between opposing gender among not only students but even ordained priests who are caught between Paul's balanced ideal, the church, and cultural expectations. This study attempts to bridge the gap between these two divides: celibacy and marriage as valid for

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ministry by analyzing 1 Corinthians 7 historically and theologically and draw out the implications for clerical formation in Africa.

2. Theoretical Framework

This work is predicated on Eschatological Ethics by Gordon Fee, where he explicates that Paul's *didache* in 1 Corinthians 7 does not in any way endorse the universality principle in the application of asceticism in the church of Christ, neither does he promote marriage as the desired obligation, but that asceticism in context is shaped by apocalyptic expectation of "present distress" (7:26), and "time is short" framework, (7:29). The study therefore calls for the interrogation of the conversation on celibacy, marriage and clerical formation in the church that will be relevant to African cultural heritage without undermining Biblical teaching.

3. Historical Context of 1 Corinthians 7

Corinth was a multi-racial Greek city and culture that was under Roman rule. It was made up of many different races and people groups. As a port city, it was a center of trade and commerce for its region, with many local religions and gods worshipping the Greek Pantheon. The philosophies of the city took after the Stoic philosophies of Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle. Sexual immoralities of all types abounded in Corinth as idol worship of false gods saturated the city. The city was noted for its sexual pervasiveness and temple cult prostitution. Capes, Reeves and Richards observed that the ancient Greek city of Corinth earned the reputation as a place where unbridled sexual passions could find limitless opportunities; thus to "corinthianize" was a euphemism for fornication (142). Corinth had an Aphrodite temple cult employing over a thousand sacred priests or priestesses who doubled as prostitutes.

The Corinthian Church was by all means not insulated from the ills of the city. Accordingly, the problems in the Corinthian Church included, among others, divisions (1Cor 2:14-3:1); arrogance of members (1Cor 4:6-7); incest (1Cor 5:1); sexual immorality, idolaters, revelers, drunkards, debtors (1Cor 5: 9-12); court issues (1Cor 6: 1-8); and dietary concerns among many other ills. Church membership was cosmopolitan in nature, with ascetics, hedonists, and Jews. Stoic/Cynic debates were canvassed by Stoic members of the church on the virtue of *εγκράτεια* self-control, teaching that abstinence should be embraced by all, cynically rejecting that members should not marry. The Stoics had the slogan "it is good not to touch a woman," a slogan Paul quoted while addressing their concerns. Paul concedes with the Stoic argument as *καλος*, good; but immediately negates it in 7:2-5. He submits that because of the preponderance of *πορνεία*, sexual immorality among them, marriage should be the answer. Jewish members of the church, however, viewed marriage as necessary and abhorred singleness. In Judaism, marriage is *mitzvah*. Sex, if practiced within marriage matrimony is regarded as holy. Divorce issues are permissible with the validation of divorce certificates. Because of the patriarchal nature of Jews, women are passive in divorce matters.

4. Exegetical Analysis of 1 Corinthians 7:1-9; 25-40

1 Corinthians 7 is the second half of this epistle to the Corinthians, who had written to Paul about the problems they had in the church needing urgent answers. Paul wrote in response to address the issues raised by a letter brought by a delegation from Corinth, which include marriage 7; food offered to idols 8:1-11; concerns with public worship 11: 2-14:40; spiritual gifts 12:1; resurrection 15; and collection meant for the church at Jerusalem 16:1-4.

Paul's response to these issues began with the words: *peri de hon egrapsate* "Now concerning the matters you wrote..." addressed in 7:1 on sexual immorality; v. 25 the unmarried; 8:1 food offered to idols; 12:1 Spiritual gifts; 15:1 the gospel; and 16:1 collection for the Jerusalem church; 12 Apollos. The problem of the Corinthian church had to do with the asceticism and libertinism debates of the church. While the libertines/ hedonists argued for sexual immorality (chap 5, 6:12-20); eating food sacrificed to idols (chap 8-10); drunkenness during the Lord's table (11:17-34), and the likes, which all represent sensual bodily lusts, the ascetic group of the church opted for celibacy in chapter 7. Thiselton refers to these cluster of errors by the Corinthian church as "over realized eschatology," for they saw all the blessings of the age to come as available immediately, without adequacy of the gap that remained between what they were and what they would be after Christ return (510-526). One of the problem in 1 Corinthians 7 that Paul seeks to answer is that of a church asking, "should we marry as Christians, or should we remain single?" Paul replies, giving them a "yes" "but" answer. Paul agrees that marriage is legitimate, as it was instituted by God

(Gen 2:18); however, because of sexual immorality 7:2, singleness is the preferred option, for it facilitates undivided devotion to the Lord 7:32-35. Paul underpins his submission on eschatology, for "the time is short" 7:29. Paul is, however, circumspect as he adds that because of the apparent sexual immorality among the people, they should have sexual relations with their wives.

Jewish Rabbis considered celibacy sinful, because they argued that marriage was an institution created by YHWH for the purpose of populating the earth and companionship. While a group of philosophers and certain Jewish religious sects as the Essenes, advocated for celibacy, other philosophers rejected marriage but believed that sexual relations with prostitutes was acceptable since it did not tie a person down (6:12-20). Three views were held concerning the question of marriage or celibacy: a. Marriage and reproduction are divine imperatives for consenting marriageable adults of both sexes. b. Marriage is an aberration and should never be undertaken. c. Marriage is permitted; however, the exception rule being for those who are committed for devotion to spiritual matters. It was on the basis of these views that Paul wrote to address the Corinthian nagging problem.

5. Marriage as the Gift: v. 1-2

Paul consents to the ascetics' slogan; *kalon anthropo gunaikos me haptesthai*; 'it is good for a man not to touch a woman,' but counteracts ascetic absolutism because of *porneia*. Paul's usage of the Greek *haptesthai* presupposes a euphemism for sexual intercourse. The infinitive verb *haptesthai* "to touch" has its root from verb *hapto* "touch." The Corinthian slogan, "it is good for a man not to touch a woman," reflected Stoic/Cynic ascetic ideology. Paul concedes using the adjective *kalos*, but immediately corrects this position by arguing that "because of *porneia*, sexual immorality (6:12-20), each man should have his own wife (v 2). Paul sees marriage as protection, not defilement (Thiselton 447). The Greek "*hapto*" has its root from the Hebrew verb נָגַח *naga*; used in Genesis 20:6 and Proverbs 6:29 as euphemism for "to lie with a woman," (Strong's h5060). Many church members of the Corinthian assembly like their Greek thinkers had their slogan as 'sex was fine as long as one did not get tied down with marriage' (6:12-20). Some of them were already married and yet abstained from sexual relations with their spouses. Paul argues that those who were already married should not deprive each other except with their collective consent for the reason of devotion to prayer (v. 5). He agrees that "yes" celibacy is good, "but" he rejected absolutizing the concept (Blomberg 176). Both Jesus and Paul were celibates; they never, however, made it mandatory for followers of the Way to be either celibate or married, for they knew these attributes were gifts of the Holy Spirit; one could be given one without the other.

V. 2 *dia de tas porneias*. Paul reasons that because of sexual immorality in the Corinthian church, marriage was needed. Paul notes that marriage with sexual intercourse was much more common among the people, for trying to maintain a celibate life without God's intervening gift would ultimately lead to immorality (v7). Therefore, Paul says that *hekastos ten heautou gunaika echeto kai hekaste ton idion andra echeto*; each man should have his own wife, and each woman with her own husband. Paul uses the present imperative active "*echeto*" "let have" to direct that each man must have his wife, and each woman must have her husband. Carson et al. observe that the verb "have" is also a synonym for sexual relationships (1171). Thus both the husband and the wife have sexual obligations to each other.

6. Marital Mutuality: v. 3-5

Paul calls for radical reciprocity where he charges spouses '*me apostereite allelous, ei meti an ek sumphonou pros kairon*;' do not defraud or deprive ἀποστερεῖτε each other except by mutual agreement, συμφώνου. Paul's imperative *apostereite* to spouses not to deprive each other except there is a *sumphono*s; mutual agreement challenges both Greco-Roman Patriarchy, Jewish law, and African patriarchal norms where the husband has rights over the wife's body, not vice versa. This may explain why some of them were in the habit of going to prostitutes (6:12-20). Paul argues that once married, spouses should submit themselves to complete conjugal responsibility, with the exception of mutual, but not prolonged, abstinence for times of prayer so as to avoid Satan's temptation. He sees marriage as protection, not just for procreation.

7. Singleness as Concession: v. 6-7

Paul argues that singleness should be seen as *kata sungnomen ou kata epitagen*; concession and not a command. Paul affirms that both marriage and singleness are gifts, charisma. He prefers singleness for himself but does not impose it. Thiselton posits that 1 Corinthians 7:6 is Paul's response to Corinthian slogans who consented for cessation of sexual relations within marriage, an ascetic overreach, where the apostle gives a concession not a command." (570-580). It is pertinent to stress that Paul balances preference for singleness with legitimacy of marriage 7:2, 7:9. Paul's strong argument for "undivided devotion" in 7:35 is for the reason of pastoral service and not an act of absolutism. While commenting on Paul's discourse, Clampa, Rosner and Brian highlight Paul's distinction between "the Lord's command" 7:10 and "I, not the Lord" 7:25. These scholars aver that Paul's preference for singleness is missional; for "undivided devotion to the Lord" 7:35 and not grounded on moral authority (295-300). Apparently, as established, there was a group in the Corinthian church that promoted celibacy within marriage. These celibates unilaterally restrained from sex without the mutual consent of the other partner (vv. 3-4), which sometimes led to immorality on the part of the other mate. The apostle spoke against this practice. He directed that henceforth: (a) Abstinence from sexual intercourse must be mutually consented to by both spouses. (b) The time for the abstinence and when it would end must be mutually agreed to, and (c) This refraining was to enable them to devote themselves to prayer and other spiritual matters (Gordon Fee 273). This meant that the act of celibacy had no merit in itself, but only as long as it enhanced greater devotion to the Lord; afterwards, however, spouses come together again, so that they would never indulge in temptation and engage in illicit sex outside of marriage. Even though Paul is single and prefers singleness, he did not absolutize celibacy, for he recognizes that both marriage and celibacy are gifts from the Lord.

8. The Unmarried: Widows and Widowers: v. 8-9

V. 8-9: Paul in this discourse navigates to engage *tois agamois kai tais cherais*, the "unmarried and widows." Exegetes are of the view that the "unmarried" may include the "previously married," as well (Blomberg; NIV Appl 133; Ford, J. M. 82-84; Garland 354). This argument is grounded on the notion that throughout the chapter Paul is writing on husbands and wives, which he refers to 12 times. Thus, the mention of "widows" ought to have its counterpart mentioned, which is the "widowers," which Paul classifies here as the "unmarried." Broadly, the term *agamois* includes the unmarried, a person not in a state of wedlock, whether he or she was formerly married or not. In this class, widowers are included (Gordon Fee 288). Paul additionally uses the word for a woman separated from her husband in v. 11 and also contrasts it with a virgin who has never married before. In other words, Paul is placing side by side the one who was married before and the other who has never married before. In this group, Paul recommends that celibacy is the way to go, for he himself is celibate, or may have been a widower. Paul uses the present infinitive passive *purousthai*, "to burn," to caution that marriage is better than indulgence in lust and sexual immorality since the *agamois kai tais cherais* are not able to control themselves. Again, Paul gives the pastoral realism: it is better to marry than burn with passion. There is no moral hierarchy, just practical advice.

The pro-celibacy group in the Corinthian church may have read from Jesus teaching in Matt 19:10-12 concerning eunuchs, taking it to mean that celibacy was the highest Christian calling that must be practiced by all in the church. Paul does not agree with their interpretation. He affirms that Jesus specifically said that only some have been given the capacity for celibacy, and thus they were getting it wrong (Wenham 246). Paul states that God had given him the ability to live without marriage, and he would that they had the same *ἐγκράτεια*; self-control. But he does not say that celibacy is more spiritual than marriage. His golden rule is "remain as you were when God called you (1Cor 7: 7).

9. Singleness for Undivided Devotion: v. 25-40

9.1 The Present Crisis: v. 25-28

V. 25-28: *Peri de ton Parthenon*; Paul turns his attention to one of the questions which the Corinthians had demanded answers; "concerning the virgins" in the church as to whether to marry or not in view of the pro-ascetics who discouraged marriage. The virgins here probably include those not yet married, whether men or women, whom Paul assumes to be pure for devotion to service to God (Rev 14:4). Some scholars argue that these *parthenon* were the only ones expected to avoid premarital sex in Greco-Roman culture, just as Jewish tradition pre-marital sex was

forbidden (Keener 468). In some pagan sects, there were virgins who did not marry. These were dedicated to the gods. They were temple prostitutes offering their bodies to men so that the men may come in communion with the gods through sexual activity. Wire, affirms that some Corinthian prophetess were in the habit of rejecting marriage and sexual relations 7:1 to gain spiritual status (130-155). Paul answers them on the basis of his apostleship, 'as one who has obtained mercy from the Lord to be a faithful servant (7:6; 7:12).

Paul's ἐνεστῶσαν ἀνάγκην; present crisis in v. 26 is difficult to interpret. First, the word *enestosan* is interpreted to mean 'present' or 'impending,' while *anagken* is distress, calamity, necessity. So the present crisis here may be current distress or some form of economic hardship, or an impending distress or calamity resulting from persecution and or eschatological expectation (1Cor 10:11; 1Pet 1:20; 1Pet 4:7). For whatever reason this present crisis may be, Paul urges that "it is good for a man to remain as he is." It is not timeless law against marriage (Fee 335). Paul's advice is situational. Are you bound to a wife, do not seek to be released...? if you marry, you do not sin v 27-28.

Paul's response in 7:2-9, 7:25-35 is therefore to regulate, not reject, marriage, while at the same time protecting women's new status if that was the gift from the Lord. It is noteworthy to observe Fee's argument 1Cor 7:25-35 is not a universal command for celibacy, but is conditioned by the "present distress" in 7:26 and "eschatology" in 7:29 (323-325). Paul is here emphasizing "anxious/divided" 7:32-34: the unmarried are free to be concerned for the Lord, while the married seem to be preoccupied with the things of the world. Paul's concern here is not to be misunderstood as meaning that all the married "seek the world first" and Godly matters come second; no, Paul does not say so, that is why he does not condemn marriage. One may think that Paul is siding with the pro-celibacy group of the Corinthian church, but no; Paul adds that "his enthusiasm for abstinence does not carry over to the married in v. 27 (Blomberg NIV App 151). He is against the proponents of celibacy in the church who teach that sex and marriage is abhorrently sinful, saying, "are you pledged to a woman? Do not seek to be released. Are you free from such a commitment? Do not look for a wife (1Cor 7:27). Wenham holds the position that the pro-celibacy group was led by some Corinthian women who were advocating sexual abstinence, even for those who were already remarried, as a mark of Christian holiness (246). This assertion may have been validated by the reality that women in the Corinthian church played a prominent and contentious role in church matters (1Cor 11:1-16). So where did these pro-celibacy women, who probably had their male supporters, get their teaching concerning abstinence from? It is possible that their motivation derived from the liberating doctrine brought by Christ, thus new life in the spirit; this new life in Christ broke the cultural boundaries between women and men, thus there was no more male and female, a doctrine which Paul himself taught (Gal 3:28).

Paul's demand for the observance of "status quo" by pro-celibacy group and the pro-marriage group is predicated on {a} *ten enestosan ananken*; impending necessity (1Cor 7:26). Paul elaborates on these impending necessities, where he affirmed that "the time is short...for this world in its present form is passing away." (1Co 7:29-31). (b) Paul's second reason for observance of the status quo by the married is that, "those who marry will face many troubles in this life (1Cor 7:28). Again Paul explains why the married will have troubles in this life. He says, "An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs; how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world; how he can please his wife (1Cor 7:32-33). Hence Paul's basic rule (1Cor 7: 17-24) is that remain as you were when God called you (Capes, Reeves & Richards 151).

10. Implications for the Church in Africa

The church in Africa is not barricaded from African cultural traditions, as it operates in a cultural matrix where marriage is measured as an index of adulthood, social belonging and religious affinity, and conversely, singleness, especially among women, is abhorred, stigmatized and carries psychological distress and ecclesiological marginalization. It is common knowledge that African cultural heritage and some denominational churches share the belief that marriage generally defines a person's worth in society and in the church. Thus, a man's ministry credibility is shaped by marital status among other indices. This is generally so because of the patriarchal nature of African societies, which places much premium on marriage as a sign of maturity and responsibility, while singleness, especially among women of marriageable age, draws more abhorrence and stigmatization from Africans. One

scholar critiques the practice of how “folklore” and proverbs socialize women into marriage as a norm, marginalizing singleness (Oduyoye 85-92). Singleness thus becomes one of the indices of immaturity, irresponsibility, and immorality, a view that has common acceptance among Africans, including the church in Africa. For instance, the church’s teaching of mandatory clerical celibacy encounters cultural resistance in the African worldview of marriage to one’s young ones, just as the mandatory marriage policy for pastoral ordination in some churches is antithetical to biblical doctrine on clerical formation and leadership positions in the church. Paul, writing to Timothy and Titus, both pastors at Ephesus and Crete respectively, is very clear on the qualifications needed for church leadership (1Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). Of particular concern is the criteria on marriage; Paul says an overseer is to be above reproach, *‘mias gunaikos andra; a man of one wife’* (1Tim 3:2; Titus 1:6). Paul’s position here is never to be misinterpreted to mean that an overseer must be married, for that would certainly disqualify him and the Lord Jesus, as none of them was married. What Paul means here is that if he chooses to marry, he must not be polygamous. The early church’s view was that an overseer must not be polygamous, not having given a bill of divorce to a wife and taken another, or not having many wives at once, a practice that was common among Jews of the circumcision for divorcing their wives at the slightest cause to remarry or the Gentiles who had wives and yet kept concubines and girlfriends outside the matrimonial house. Paul stressed this requirement because Cretans of Paul’s day were often polygamous (Tokunboh Adeyemo 1509). Just as Paul encouraged monogamy during his day, African church leaders and indeed Christians are dissuaded from polygamy. Paul’s encouragement of monogamy does not in any way invalidate the position that single men cannot be pastors or elders; if he did, Paul would then disqualify himself, for he was unmarried (1Cor 7:8). This yardstick is equally important in Africa today for church leaders and Christians alike, not just in Paul’s time. One scholar observed that it was Hellenistic asceticism influence on the early church that informed the Catholic church’s insistence on unmarried clergy (Blomberg 366). Conversely, Paul permits and encourages the widowed to remarry (1Cor 7:9, 3; 1Tim 5:15), and it is very unlikely that he would issue a policy that would preclude one from pastoral leadership. Paul vehemently cautions those “who forbid marriage and require abstinence...” (1Tim 4:3). If Paul was against marriage, he wouldn’t have asked the Corinthians, “do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? (1Cor 9:5)

The church in Africa ought to be Biblically Afrocentric in its clerical formation in line with cultural values of communality, with strong community values of respect for elders, care and love for others, and people oriented priorities (Gwamna 16-17). This in no way presupposes watering down the message of the Cross; on the contrary, it means making the salvific message to be more relevant to the yearnings and aspirations of Africans. This is holistic salvific evangelism which Jesus, Paul, and all the apostles preached and taught. The church in Africa needs to contextualize the early church experience of communal love, fellowship, and sharing with Africa’s communal living, adapting cultural practices that do not contradict God’s holy teaching in the Bible.

At the other extreme are church denominations that impose marriage criteria as a prerequisite for ordination of her pastors, elders, and deacons, believing that marriage attracts respectability and pastoral credibility (Kalu 210). This point is buttressed by one scholar who avers that singleness is an aberration among the unmarried African clergy, as it attracts stigma of immorality, blocked promotion, and the pressure to marry, in the pro-marriage advocates (Oladosu 46-53). It is to be noted that both Jesus and Paul neither absolutized marriage nor celibacy, but observed that these are gifts. Barth insists that singleness does not make one less an “image of God” (145-147), nor marriage. Celibacy is only a chaste response to sexual difference equal to marriage. The church in Africa need to dialogue and engage African cultural realities with the aim of transforming them in the light of biblical revelation (Michael 19). Dialogue of culture and the gospel is certainly not to be misconstrued as syncretism, but it is geared towards adapting positive essential elements of African culture that are relevant and consistent with biblical doctrine.

11. Conclusion/Recommendations

The study calls for a constructive reengagement of 1 Corinthians 7 from an African cultural perspective. This conversation is crucial for the articulation of an Africanized strategy for marriage and celibacy theology in the African church. A theology that will engage with African cultural elements that are consistent with the Biblical truths, negating those cultural traits that contradict biblical soundness. The engagement would assuage the church to

dialogue on celibacy and marriage with local African cultures for purposeful priestly and clerical formation strategies that are truly biblical and truly African. Celibacy is honorable, but so is marriage. While Paul Promotes marriage, he himself favors singleness and urges more people to seek the gift of celibacy; yet, he submits that it is God who gives different gifts to people when it comes to the issue of celibacy and marriage relationships. None of these gifts is superior to the other and therefore should not be used as a stumbling block for service to God and humanity.

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