

Appendix 3

Is It Necessary to Have the Gift of Celibacy in Order to Enjoy Long-Term Singleness?

This question stems from the statement made by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:

⁷ I wish that everyone was as I am. But each has his own gift from God, one this way, another that. ⁸ To the unmarried and widows I say that it is best for them to remain as I am. ⁹ But if they do not have self-control, let them get married. For it is better to marry than to burn with sexual desire (7:7-9).

The statement is actually somewhat cryptic in that (1) Paul does not elaborate on what he means by “as I am;” (2) he does not explain the nature of the “gift from God” that each one has; and (3) he doesn’t enumerate his reasons for his preference until the final paragraphs of the chapter.

Interpreters of 1 Corinthians 7:7 explain “the gift” in one of three ways.

Charisma = Spiritual Gift

The traditional view is that Paul is speaking here of “the spiritual gift of celibacy” – the supernatural endowment to serve God joyfully as a single person without being unduly distracted or frustrated by sexual temptation.¹ The idea that this ability is a “spiritual gift” comes from the distinctive Greek word for gift, *charisma*, which Paul uses several times in chapters 12-14 to describe the allocations of grace bestowed on believers for Christian ministry. That this gift grants the individual an unusual measure of resistance to sexual temptation is inferred from the surrounding references to lack of “self-control” in verses 5 and 9. (A persistent lack of self-control would be the primary indicator that one has not received this gift.)

On this view, Paul is spelling out what Jesus meant when he said, “Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given” (Mat. 19:11). Jesus’ words are understood to mean that the only disciples who can “make themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” are those to whom “it [i.e. the ability to exercise self-control] has been given.” So when Paul expressed his wish that “everyone was as I am” (7:7), he was describing himself as a recipient of the gift of self-control. As is the case with other spiritual gifts, some have received this one, others have not.

The statement that “each one has his own gift from God, one this way, another that” is taken to mean that some have the gift of celibacy and others have other gifts (i.e., teaching, healing, etc.) Marriage, on this view, is not thought of as requiring gifting because it is “normal.”² The single state requires this special gifting because men and

women are sexual beings who live in a fallen world and who, therefore, need marriage to prevent fornication.

Most advocates of this view hold that the gift of celibacy is a lifetime provision. While possession of the gift would not technically obligate one to perpetual singleness (1 Cor. 7:28; 1 Tim. 4:3), “. . . those receiving the gift of celibacy should be encouraged to [practice celibacy] as an expression of their service to the kingdom.”³

The misgivings that I have had with this view were substantiated and expanded by the critique offered by Albert Hsu in Chapter 3 (“The Myth of the Gift”) of *Singleness at the Crossroads*, augmented by the summary provided by prolific Bible teacher, Bob Deffinbaugh.⁴ My difficulties with the traditional view are these:

First, Paul does not identify the “gift” he has apparently received as the gift of celibacy. Nor is celibacy ever classified as a spiritual gift in those passages where they are enumerated (1 Cor. 12-14; Romans 12).

Second, while Paul used *charisma* to denote the gift he was talking about, the idea of a *spiritual gift* (in the sense described in 1 Corinthians 12) seems foreign to this context. And even if the so-called gift of celibacy is a spiritual gift, it is clearly different from other spiritual gifts.⁵ For instance, this would be the one gift that provides the supernatural empowerment to *not* do something – commit fornication. On the other hand, *charisma* is used in other ways by Paul that more closely correspond to the usage suggested here. The word, which might literally be translated “grace thing,” and has the sense of “gracious endowment,”⁶ refers to the “free gift” of salvation in Romans 5:15-16 and 6:23. And in Romans 1:11, Paul spoke of a “gift of grace” that he wanted to give the Romans – probably a general way of describing his ministry to them. So the more restricted usage of “spiritual gift” is not required in this passage.

Third, it seems doubtful that Paul would attribute his self-control to supernatural gifting. The virtue of self-control (Greek: *enkrateia*) appears in Galatians 5:22-23; 1 Peter 4:7; 5:8; and 2 Peter 1:6. In each of these passages, the apostle expects that this “fruit of the Spirit” will characterize *every* believer.⁷ Rather than a spiritual gift available to a few, self-control is normally the product of spiritual maturity and dependence on the Holy Spirit, expected of all.

Fourth, there are textual peculiarities that do not fit well with this view. For instance, while Paul “wishes” that everyone would be “as I am,” the only group that he directly solicits to remain celibate are the *previously married* – that is widowers and widows (7:8, 40). That Paul is addressing “widowers” rather than the broader group of the “unmarried” in verses 8-9 is not apparent from English translations. But several commentators argue persuasively that *agamois* in this context refers to men whose wives have died. The most comprehensive explanation is given by Gordon Fee:

First, since being “widowed” in antiquity created special problems for women, most cultures had a word for widows; however, they did not always have

a word for the male counterpart. (Note that even in English, where in most male/female words the root is male and the female counterpart has the suffix [e.g., host/hostess], widow/widower is precisely the opposite.) Greek has such a word, but it appears seldom to have been used, and never in the *koine* period, in which *agamos* served in its place. Second, since throughout the entire passage Paul deals with husbands and wives in mutuality (12 times in all), it would seem to fit naturally into the total argument to see that pattern here as well. After all, if *agamois* refers to all the unmarried, then why add widows? Third, this word appears again in v. 11 for a woman separated from her husband, and in v. 34 in contrast to the “virgin” (one who was never before married), indicating that in his regular usage it denotes not the “unmarried” in general, but the “demarried,” those formerly but not now married. On balance, “widower” seems to be the best understanding of the word here. That would also help to explain the presence of these verses in this context, where all of the cases in vv. 1-16 deal with those presently or formerly married, while vv. 25-38 take up the issue of the never-before married.⁸

If this is correct, those individuals for whom marriage may be preferable to the “burning” of sexual desire were people who *had been sexually awakened* – adults who had become accustomed to the rhythm of conjugal experience.⁹ They would also be those persons within that culture who were more in charge of their own marital destiny (in contrast, for instance, to the never-married).¹⁰ If the apostle Paul was himself a widower (and that is an intriguing possibility)¹¹, then he would be expressing his hope that others who found themselves in his position would be able to “remain as I am.” In his case, the transition from married life to singleness had not been problematic; but that might not be the experience of all widowers and widows.

So what bearing does this obscure textual detail have on our consideration of the “gift of celibacy?” Most advocates for this idea probably conceive of this gift as something bestowed upon single people who never marry. But Paul is talking to people who had already been married, for whom the gift would have been superfluous prior to the death of their spouse. So this gift would have been allotted subsequent to the funeral. That’s possible, but it doesn’t seem likely.

Fifth, if the gift in question imparts the capacity for single living, then it would seem that the first step in one’s decision making process would be to determine whether or not one had received that gift. *How that is to be done is not explained in this text or any other.*¹² But presumably a central component would be self-analysis – am I in frequent danger of being overcome by sexual desire to such a degree that I am likely to give in to fornication? If the answer is no, then one should give serious consideration to the remainder of Paul’s arguments for remaining single. If the answer is yes, then one should expedite the process of getting married.¹³ But that is not how the flow of Paul’s argument unfolds. When Paul does address the never-before-married (in 25-38), he makes his case for the practical superiority of singleness as though it were a live option for everyone – not just those with “the gift of celibacy.”

Finally, this kind of gifting would create two categories of single adults: those who have the gift (and should therefore remain single), and those who do not have the gift (and should therefore get married). If there are only two options, does that circumstance obligate God to provide a spouse for those individuals to whom he has not granted the gift of celibacy? What about those who have neither the gift nor any tangible prospects for marriage? Are there really three categories of single adults: (1) those who have the gift and are happily single; (2) those do not have the gift and subsequently get married; and (3) those who do not have the gift and are doomed to a tortured life without a spouse? Paul doesn't admit to the third category. But I suspect that some single adults have considered themselves consigned to that unhappy club.

Charisma = Singleness

An alternative understanding of “the gift” in 1 Corinthians 7:7, put forward by Albert Hsu and embraced by Carolyn McCulley among others, is that it refers the state of singleness itself.¹⁴ On this view, the gift isn't so much a capacity as it is a condition in life in which one may serve God. From this perspective, marriage is the alternative gift (“But each has his own gift from God, one this way, another that.”) Rather than two categories of singles – those who have “the gift” and those who do not – there is only one group. If a person is single, one reason is that he or she has been given singleness as a gift from God.

This view seems to me to be an improvement. It doesn't have the problems of the traditional view, and actually solves several of them.

First, when Paul said, “I wish that everyone was as I am,” the initial point of comparison was to married people (for whom a “gift of celibacy” would be gratuitous) (7:2-6). On this understanding, Paul's meaning would be: “I wish everyone was as I am – that is, single.” This understanding fits with the thrust of Paul's overall argument favoring the practical superiority of singleness for undistracted service to God.

This view also makes better sense of Paul's appeal to widowers and widows. The problem for those who were not able to successfully sustain a celibate existence would not be the absence of a special gift, but the difficulty they encountered in reverting to a life of abstinence when they had become used to routine sexual engagement.

Also, this perspective corresponds well to the middle section of this chapter where Paul writes, “[A]s the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each person, so must he live. . . . Let each one remain in that situation in life in which he was called” (7:17, 20). As we noted in chapter 12, the “assignment” Paul is talking about is the external circumstances of one's life at the time of conversion – including one's marital status. In the earlier verse (7), Paul refers to singleness as a “gift;” in 7:17-26 it is an “assignment.” These would be two different ways of referring to God's sovereign will for the believer.

Furthermore, viewing singleness and marriage as the alternative gifts maintains the symmetry found throughout the New Testament that identifies these two states as equally valid avenues for service to Christ and his kingdom.

It is interesting that two recent paraphrased versions of the New Testament reflect this view that equates “the gift” with singleness itself:

I wish everyone could get along without marrying, just as I do. But we are not all the same. God gives some the gift of marriage, and to others he gives the gift of singleness (New Living Translation).

Sometimes I wish everyone were single like me – a simpler life in many ways! But celibacy is not for everyone any more than marriage is. God gives the gift of the single life to some, the gift of the married life to others (The Message).

For me, there are two drawbacks to this attractive view. The first is that the metaphor of “gift” does not naturally lend itself to the state of singleness. Being single is our default condition. It’s part and parcel with who we are. So in what sense is our natural state a gift? Carolyn McCulley (who holds this view), describes the disconnect one feels with this equation:

Calling marriage a gift doesn’t surprise me. I understand that. . . . But how and when did I get this gift of singleness? I don’t recall putting it on my “wish list” or asking anyone to give it to me. I don’t remember opening it up and saying, “Ooohh, thank you! Singleness! How did you know? It’s *perfect!*”¹⁵

The incongruity of linking the ideas of “gift” and “singleness” is not fatal. McCulley goes on to explain that we just need to understand that the nature of this gift as it comes from God is different from other gifts we have received. Still, the inaptness of the figure prompts me to explore another possible explanation of Paul’s statements.

My second problem is that the identification of the gift with singleness does not do justice to the grace component resident in the word *charisma*. If it is true, as we noted above, that the term has the sense of “gracious endowment,” that seems to imply some measure of enablement or empowerment.

***Charisma* = Grace**

This energizing quality of grace lies at the heart of a third interpretation of Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 7:7. This view holds that the gift is an on-going provision of grace which enables self-control for singles and self-sacrifice for spouses. While the focus in this passage is on the former, the qualifying phrase “one this way, another that” expands the provision to include married folks. So rather than limiting a “spiritual gift” to the celibate state (because marriage is “normal”), this position recognizes “There is no less need of a gift of grace to use marriage Christianly than to live Christianly in celibacy.”¹⁶

Proponents of this interpretation hold that not only is an extraordinary expansion of capacity for self-control not in view in the passage, it is not necessary for successful navigation of single life. On the other hand, we do need divine aid. There's a sense in which "self-control" is beyond us. So we need sustaining grace. And that is what God promises. Though the provision is not elaborated in this passage, Paul was well-acquainted with the sufficiency of God's grace as he contended with his infamous "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7-10). If Christ's promise, "My grace is sufficient for you," proved adequate for dealing with the comparatively severe distraction of the "thorn" – "a messenger of Satan to trouble me" – it should be equally available to those who confront the distraction of Satan's challenge to sexual self-control.

Since this third view has similarities with and offers corrections to the traditional view, it can be helpful to see the respective features side-by-side.

The Gift of Celibacy	The Gift of Grace
<i>Charisma</i> = spiritual gift	<i>Charisma</i> = gracious provision
Supernatural endowment	Supernatural enablement
Permanent	Provisional
Involves diminution of sexual temptation	Grace for self-control
Success depends on gifting (makes life easier)	Success depends upon reliance on God (makes life challenging)
Limited to recipients	Available to all believers
Celibate life expected	Celibacy or marriage – equal options
Creates two categories of singles	Singles undifferentiated
Gift must be discerned	Gift is assumed and appropriated
Distinctive to celibate state (not required for marriage)	Bestowed for singleness <i>and</i> marriage

Since the apostle did not explain himself further, our determination of the correct understanding of the gift-related-to-singleness will be less than certain. My own preference is for the third view, with appreciation for the possibilities of the second.¹⁷ If Paul's meaning is encompassed by one of these perspectives, the ramifications for marital decision making will be very similar. The answer to the question posed at the outset will be: No, one does not have to have the "gift of celibacy" to enjoy long-term singleness. You will need to avail yourself of the provisions of grace for daily living, and these should prove to be sufficient.

¹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 284-285.

² Richard C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of I and II Corinthians* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1937, 1963) 282; David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 271.

³ O. G. Oliver, Jr., "Celibacy," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), 203.

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- ⁴ Albert Y. Hsu, *Singles at the Crossroads*, 48-62; Bob Deffinbaugh, “Sex and the Spiritual Christian (1 Cor. 7:1-7),” a message from his sermon series, *True Spirituality: A Study in 1 Corinthians* (http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=791, accessed on February 20, 2006).
- ⁵ “Every other gift is related to a function. Every other gift can be converted to a verb. The gift of helps entails helping. The gift of teaching entails teaching. The gift of exhortation entails exhorting. Just exactly what does the gift of celibacy do? So far as I can tell, it does nothing other than to prevent one from having sex.” Bob Deffinbaugh, “Sex and the Spiritual Christian”.
- ⁶ Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publisher, 1994), 86. Cited in Carolyn McCulley, *Did I Kiss Marriage Goodbye?: Trusting God With a Hope Deferred* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 28.
- ⁷ In Galatians 5, the fruit of the Spirit (which includes self-control) is contrasted to the “acts of the sinful nature” – with “sexual immorality and impurity” heading the list (Gal. 5:19-23).
- ⁸ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 287-288. See also Craig Blomberg, *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, 133-134; Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 118-119; and William A. Heth, “Unmarried ‘For the Sake of the Kingdom’ (Matthew 19:12) in the Early Church,” *Grace Theological Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 1, Spring, 1987, 66.
- ⁹ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 276.
- ¹⁰ “[W]idows and divorcees, unlike virgins (whose parents arranged their marriages), had a great deal of say about whom they would marry.” Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 469.
- ¹¹ “It would have been exceptional, though not impossible, for Paul to have been as successful in Pharisaic Judaism, as he claims to have been (Gal. 1:13-14; Phil 3:5-6), without having been married.” David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 276-277. Garland provides a thorough summary of the evidence that Paul was a widower. Then he concludes: “We simply do not know.”
- ¹² Nor is it explained in commentaries. Max Thurian is the rare author who has tackled this question. He suggested four criteria for discovering the gift of celibacy: (1) the “interior witness of the Holy Spirit” which “produces joy and peace in the consideration and choice of [celibacy]”; (2) “the circumstances of life” by which God “can show a man in his life history his intention of calling him to celibacy”; (3) clarity that comes after a decision has been made as “act of faith”; and (4) “spiritual direction” and objective confirmation by the church (reinforced by laying-on of hands). *Marriage and Celibacy* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1959 [English Translation]), 86-88.
- ¹³ Actually, this process of self-evaluation is even more complicated than it appears. For these questions raise other questions for which I have found no suggested answers. For example, if the answer to the question of overwhelming desire is yes, how bad does it have to be? If the answer is yes, why is that so? Is it because one lacks “the gift,” or because one is not taking full advantage of the available spiritual resources, or because one has caved in to self-gratification? And what if the answer is yes, but there are no prospects for marriage?
- ¹⁴ Albert Hsu, *Singleness at the Crossroads*, 58-62. Carolyn McCulley, *Did I Kiss Marriage Goodbye?*, 24-35.
- ¹⁵ Carolyn McCulley, *Did I Kiss Marriage Goodbye?*, 24.
- ¹⁶ F. Godet, *Commentary on St. Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians* (T. & T. Clark, 1889), I, 328, cited in David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians: Life in the Local Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 120.

¹⁷ Either of these positions would understand the meaning of Jesus' assertion in Matthew 19:11 – “Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given” – differently from the traditional view. The latter understands Jesus to be qualifying the option of singleness by limiting it to those “to whom it has been given” – that is, those who have received the gift of celibacy. The alternative views take it that he is referring to the radical idea (“this statement”) of singleness as a viable option for disciples. Coming as it does from the mouth of Messiah, it has his full authority. Therefore, his teaching should be accepted as true, and some should feel free to take the path of singleness.