

Christians and Social Revolution

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 7:17–24

Code: 1830

INTRODUCTION

A. The Basis

Much has been said and written about the social role and responsibility of the church. At times throughout church history, and especially in our own day, people have claimed that Christianity should be an agent of external social reform, even of revolution if necessary. Many sincere Christians have wondered what their role should be in social activism, and whether it is biblically justified. What are Christians, individually or collectively, to do about wrongs and abuses in civil systems and social practices? Paul addressed these issues 1 Corinthians 7:17- 24.

B. The Background

Marriage is the overall context of 1 Corinthians 7. Although the Bible has much to say about marriage, it also talks about those who are single, divorced, and widowed. It has much to say about what is required within a marriage, including God's standards for the husband, wife, and the children. A portion of what is in the Word of God concerning marriage is here in the seventh chapter of 1 Corinthians.

1. The Jewish philosophy

The Corinthian Christians were having many problems in the area of marriage. The problems arose from pressure that was being put upon them to conform to a certain view of marriage. There was a Jewish population that believed to remain single was to defy the law of God. They used Scriptures such as Genesis 1:28 to support their point. If you were single and a new convert in Corinth, there would be tremendous pressure on you to be married. Added to that pressure was the reality that God Himself had given some of the Corinthians the gracious gift of remaining single (v. 7). Although God intended for some to remain single, the Jewish leaders were proclaiming that the only way to receive God's blessing was through marriage.

2. The Gentile philosophy

Another pressure on the Corinthians was the Gentile philosophy of asceticism, the belief that singleness was the only way you could be totally devoted to God. It was thought that if you were married, you should divorce your spouse to be in God's will. And if you were married to an unbeliever, it was thought you must divorce because you were being defiled and your children would be raised as half pagan and half spiritual.

LESSON

First Corinthians 7:17-24 plainly teaches the following basic principle, which is readily applicable to the civil and social conditions in which believers live: Christians should willingly accept the situation into which God has placed them and be content to serve Him there. However, human nature rebels against this principle, so Paul states it three times in these 8 verses so that his readers could not miss the point. We should not be preoccupied with changing our outward circumstances.

I. CHRISTIANITY IS NOT SOCIAL REVOLUTION (vv. 17-19)

"[Only] as [the Lord] hath distributed to every man, as [God] hath called every one, so let him walk. And so ordain I in all the churches. Is any man called being circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Is any called in uncircumcision? Let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing,

and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God." (The brackets indicate the way the verse correctly appears in the Greek text)

A. The Principle of Remaining as You Are (v. 17)

The apostle Paul states in this passage that the Christian life is not social revolution, but spiritual regeneration. When you come to Jesus Christ, there is no reason to say, "Now that I'm a Christian, I have to stop being single" or, "I must dissolve my marriage and be celibate." Paul is not saying that you have to divorce your unsaved spouse because you are defiling yourself.

1. The intention

Christianity was never designed to disrupt social relationships. There were many in the Corinthian church who were using their Christianity as a justification for every kind of social change. Husbands were divorcing their wives and vice versa, single people were being pressured into marriage when they had the gift of celibacy, and slaves were chaffing under the rule of their master. Perhaps they were claiming that since Galatians 3:28 teaches there is neither male nor female, bond or free, but that all are one in Christ, they were justified in developing a revolutionary attitude. But such an attitude would have destroyed the testimony of the Corinthian assembly. For anyone to see Christianity as a social revolution would cast doubt on the reality of Christianity, which is a transformed life. When Christianity becomes closely identified with a social movement, the message of the gospel is in danger of being lost.

2. The impact

There is no question that Christianity has had a profound impact upon society. Christians have rightly been accused of being preoccupied with spiritual things, such as miracles, signs, and wonders; the spiritual equality of the sexes as well as slave and free; and the second coming of Jesus Christ. Ideas of coming judgment, eternal bliss in heaven, and disdain for earthly wealth were concepts that were very hard for the world to understand. Nevertheless, Christianity has had a profound effect on society, apart from these eternal realities.

3. The insurrection

Christianity could have had a very negative effect if it focused on social issues rather than spiritual issues. It was enough that the world was confused about theology without confusing them further by making Christianity merely a social enterprise. social. Paul wants to make sure that the church keeps its proper perspective. There is a need to be involved in certain social issues, but not at the expense of losing the gospel in the process. Christianity in and of itself is not a justification to overthrow the government. When that occurs, you become like every other revolution to overthrow the government and the distinctiveness of the gospel is lost.

4. The influence

Being involved in spiritual concerns doesn't disqualify Christians from involvement in social causes. Christians individually and corporately are to minister in many ways, including the practical, material ways of feeding the hungry, and helping heal the sick and injured. Christianity has been a leader in building hospitals and orphanages, in visiting prisoners, in helping the poor, and in ministering in countless other ways that are considered social services. But those are ministries of individual Christians, not services that they persuade society to perform.

Paul endeavors to show in this passage that being a Christian does not destroy homes or ruin friendships. It does not mean creating chaos by destroying the institutions in which you live. A relationship to Christ is compatible with any social status. Within Christianity, you can be single, married, widowed, divorced, slave, free, Jewish, or Gentile. You can live in any kind of society, whether a democracy or total dictatorship. Whether you live in America, Cuba, China, or the Soviet Union, Christianity is still compatible with any social status. The reason is that Christianity is internal, not external.

Paul was trying to show the Corinthians not to use Christianity as a justification to misrepresent the truth. If a wife becomes a Christian, she should be a better wife, not a rebellious one. And if a

husband becomes a Christian, he should be a better husband. Likewise, if there is a slave who becomes a Christian, he should be a better slave, not a social revolutionary. You can be a Christian in any society because Christianity is a spiritual relationship to the living God, and it has little or nothing to do with your social status.

5. The implication

The principle that Paul lays down was not meant to be a universal command with no exceptions. He is not saying that if you were 13 years old when you came to Christ and single, you have to stay single the rest of your life. It was meant as a general principle, not an absolute law. Paul himself said in verse 10 that if you are married, stay that way. But then he gave an exception in verse 15: "If the unbelieving depart, let him depart." Likewise, Paul gives the general rule in verse 17: "As the Lord hath distributed to every man, as God hath called every one, so let him walk." If you are a slave, stay that way, but if you have the opportunity to gain your freedom, take it. Paul is teaching you not to be preoccupied with the problem of your social status, even if you are a slave, and as a result, create social turmoil.

The overarching reason is again in verse 15: "God hath called us to peace." In whatever state we find ourselves, we are to create peace, not social revolution. It should be obvious that Paul is not telling believers to stay in occupations, professions, or habits that are inherently immoral or illegal. A thief is not to keep stealing, a prostitute is not to continue in prostitution, nor a drunkard to continue to drink. Everything sinful is to be forsaken. The issue for believers is to be content in the social situations they found themselves in when they were saved.

Should Christians Overthrow Ungodly Governments?

Many have said, "The Christians in the Soviet Union should overthrow the government." My response is always, "Why? What biblical justification is there for a Christian revolution like the Bolshevik revolution that brought the Communist state?" Russian believers can be salt and light within their Communist society. When God is ready to change that society, the roots of Christianity spreading through it may bring about its downfall. But if Christianity turns into a social issue, then you will have what's happening in Northern Ireland--and the testimony of Christianity will be destroyed. Their Christianity is nothing but a social issue. It is better that the church leaven society with biblical truth rather than guns, which only confuse the issue. God has called Christians to peace (1 Cor. 7:15). Stay in whatever situation you find yourself. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Matt. 5:9).

a) Romans 12:18--Paul said, "If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men."

b) Romans 14:19--Paul also said, "Let us, therefore, follow after the things which make for peace."

c) 2 Corinthians 13:11--Paul said, "Live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you."

d) Hebrews 12:14--The author of Hebrews says, "Follow peace with all men."

e) James 3:17--James said, "The wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy." If you are exemplifying and communicating divine wisdom, you will bring about righteousness and pervade the world with peace.

f) 2 Timothy 2:22-25--Paul told Timothy to "follow righteousness, faith, love, peace" (v. 22). He went on to say how: "In meekness instructing those that oppose [you], if God, perhaps, will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth." If you are peaceful, patient, and gentle, God will use your testimony to bring people to Christ. The way to evangelize the world is not through social revolution but spiritual regeneration.

Christ made it clear that He did not come to instigate an external social revolution, as the Jewish people of His day thought the Messiah would do. Jesus told Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting, that I might not be delivered up to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm" (John 18:36; NASB). Christ's mission was

"to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10), and that is the mission of His church.

6. The indication

Paul starts verse 17 by saying, "[Only] as [the Lord] hath distributed to every man." The Greek verb for "distribute" is *memeriken*, which means "to bestow" or "to apportion to one his share of something." Paul is saying that if you are a slave, it is the Lord who has apportioned to you that position. Whatever the Lord has allotted to you--be it singleness, marriage, or slavery--continue to walk in that calling. God does not expect a Christian to suddenly discontinue his job or marital status. He has you there for a reason. "Let's show the world," says Paul, "that Christianity brings solidarity to society, not chaos."

B. The Practice of Becoming Circumcised or Uncircumcised (vv. 18-19)

After stating the principle in verse 17, Paul illustrates it in verses 18-19: "Is any man called being circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Is any called in uncircumcision? Let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God." In the epistles, the term "called" refers to an effectual call to salvation. Paul is saying that when a Jewish person is saved, he should not try to become like a Gentile.

1. The recognition

Circumcision was an embarrassment in the Roman world. According to the apocryphal Maccabean works, which were written during the intertestamental period, some Jewish men made themselves uncircumcised (1 Macc. 1:11-15). Josephus tells us that during the Greek rule of the eastern Mediterranean several centuries before Christ, some Jewish men who wanted to be accepted into Greek society had surgery performed to make themselves appear uncircumcised when they bathed or exercised at the gymnasiums. The Roman encyclopedist Celsus, in the first century [SC] A.D., wrote a detailed description of the surgical procedure for uncircumcision.

The practice was so common that considerable rabbinic literature addressed the problem (e.g., Aboth 3:11; Jerushalmi Peah 1 and 16; Lamentations Rabbah 1:20). Jewish men who had such surgery were referred to as *epispatics*, a name taken from the euphemistic term *epispaomai*, meaning "to draw over," or "to pull towards." That is the very term Paul uses here for the word uncircumcised.

2. The reason

Perhaps some Jewish Christians thought this unusual surgery was a way to demonstrate their break with Judaism. They wanted to identify with the Greeks' social status. But Paul is saying if you are Jewish and come to Christ, you are to remain Jewish. Paul's reasoning is clear: The most likely person a Jewish person could lead to Christ is another Jewish person, especially someone in his own household. But if he comes to Christ and immediately renounces his Judaism, he will damage his testimony to his people. If he desires to become uncircumcised and removes the mark of the covenant of God with His people, he would alienate himself from the harvest field that he is most capable of reaching.

For Jews to want to appear as Gentiles or for Gentiles to subscribe to things unique to Jews is both in a spiritual and a practical sense. It is wrong spiritually because it adds an outward form to the gospel that has no spiritual merit or meaning that the Lord does not require. It is wrong practically because it unnecessarily separates believers from their families and friends and makes witnessing to them much more difficult.

3. The reverse

In verse 18, Paul reverses the principle to apply to the new Gentile converts: "Is any called in uncircumcision? Let him not be circumcised." Gentiles who become Christians are not to become like Jews. The problem concerning circumcision was not as serious in Corinth as it was in Galatia, where Judaizers taught that circumcision was necessary for salvation (Gal. 5:2-3). In Corinth the practice may have been viewed as a mark of special recognition or blessing from God. But Paul is

saying that circumcision is not necessary either for salvation or blessing. It has no spiritual significance or value for Christians at all.

4. The result

Paul says in verse 19, "Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God." The only issue Paul sees here is spiritual not social. Obedience is the only mark of faithfulness that the Lord recognizes. It is sometimes costly, but it is always possible, no matter what your circumstances may be. The issue is internal, not external.

II. CHRISTIANITY IS NOT SOCIAL RESISTANCE (vv. 20-23)

"Let every man abide in the same calling in which he was called. Art thou called, being a servant? Care not for it; but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather. For he that is called in the Lord, being a servant, is the Lord's freeman; likewise also he that is called, being free, is Christ's servant. Ye are bought with a price; be not ye the servants of men."

A. The Principles (v. 20)

1. Be Content

For the second time Paul states the principle of being content to stay in the condition you were in when you were saved, whether racial or social. Paul is again commanding that Christians need to be preoccupied with spiritual things, not their social standing, even if it means remaining a slave. Those of us living in America with its many freedoms tend to think we are more mature than other believers around the world. But there are no doubt Christians in communistic countries who are equally mature spiritually. They are as equally devoted to Jesus Christ and might even realize more of the blessing of God because of the persecution involved.

2. Be Realistic

It needs to be stated, however, that the apostle Paul is not saying a person, upon receiving Christ, can never seek to progress. A Christian can seek a promotion, advance in his education, or even seek to increase his income, all of course, with a proper motive. The apostle here is merely emphasizing that you're not to try to change your social status just because you have embraced Christ and expect to have justice prevail on earth. Christianity is compatible with any kind of social structure, as long as the Christian realizes the key ingredient is to keep the commands of Christ, one of which is to obey the government (Rom. 13:1-7). You may have to pay a higher price for your faith in a harsher country, but Christianity is possible anywhere. When the Lord saved you, He didn't save you primarily to change your earthly status, but your eternal destiny.

B. The Practice (v. 21a)

Paul gives a second illustration, this time concerning slaves: "Art thou called, being a servant? Care not for it." Paul's point is not to approve of slavery or to suggest that it is as good a condition to live under as freedom. His point is that, if a person is a slave, he is still able to live the Christian life. He is every bit as able to obey and serve Christ in a state of slavery as opposed to freedom. Slavery is not an obstacle to Christian living.

1. Ephesians 6:5-8--Paul gave this command, "Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, with good will doing service as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free." Paul said for the slave to serve his master as though he were Jesus Christ.

2. Colossians 3:22-24--Paul again said, "Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing God. And whatever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men, knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance; for ye serve the Lord Christ." The Bible does not approve of slavery, but it also does not approve of Christians creating social revolution.

Slaves had a unique opportunity to testify for the Lord. They were to show their human masters that they worked hard and honestly, not because they were forced to, but because they wanted to--out of love for and obedience to their true Lord and Master. They could demonstrate true contentment and peace in the midst of slavery, thus showing the inner provision of salvation.

The important thing is to serve God regardless of your circumstances and God, through the righteous lives of many, will bring about His ends in the world. Paul's point is, if you're a slave, be a good slave and if you're a master, be a good one. If Jesus' goal were to abolish slavery, He would have destroyed it during His earthly ministry. The focus of Christ's ministry was internal change, not external. Slavery is fine if God has called you in that status. And as Christianity penetrates into a society, the dissolution of evil social structures will result.

C. The Parallel (v. 21)

Paul says at the end of verse 21, "If thou mayest be made free, use it rather." Having affirmed the principle of contentment, Paul makes it clear that he did not consider slavery to be the most desirable state. Some people have reversed this passage to teach that even if you are offered liberty, you are more spiritual if you turn it down. But the reality is that freedom is immeasurably better than slavery. And as a Christian, you are not more spiritual for staying in slavery. If a slave has the opportunity to become free, as did many in New Testament times, he should take advantage of it. The apostle Paul himself was content to serve the Lord in jail. He carried on much of his ministry from a jail cell. But when he was freed, he left.

1. The slaves of Rome

I read an interesting historical analysis of the slave system in Rome. I learned that the ratio of slaves to free men was probably three to one from the second century [SC] B.C. to the third century [SC] A.D. The entire number of slaves in Italy would thus have been around 20 million in the first century [SC] A.D. Many of them were in the process of being emancipated, and some were well educated. There were cruel masters, but often the situation was tolerable.

2. The slave of Philemon

The book of Philemon is an excellent illustration of the point Paul was trying to make in this passage. It centers around the runaway slave Onesimus, whom Paul had led to Christ (v. 10). As it happened, Onesimus's owner, Philemon, was a Christian. He was Paul's "dearly beloved, brother and fellow worker," and the church in Colosse met in his house (vv. 1-2). Paul made a strong personal and spiritual appeal for Philemon to forgive Onesimus and to accept him back, not just as a slave, but as a Christian brother (v. 16). Yet, embarrassing as it has been to some Christian activists, Paul did not condemn slavery or question Philemon's legal rights over his slave. He did not ask for social equality for Onesimus. In fact, he even used slavery as analogy for the believer's walk with God.

Some have criticized Paul for not attacking the system of slavery, but if Christianity had encouraged the ending of slavery, it would have been seen as a political revolution and Christians would have been needlessly killed in a revolution. And if Christian slaves had started to disrupt society, the major issue--the gospel--would have been lost.

This is also true today. Each time Christendom has attached itself to a social movement, the message of Christianity has been lost. When the Christian life is lived out, emancipation is bound to happen. But again, Paul emphasizes that as a believer, you should not concern yourself with your earthly state. Your internal spirituality is of far more importance.

D. The Paradox (v. 22)

Paul draws a very interesting paradox in verse 22: "He that is called in the Lord, being a servant, is the Lord's freeman." Paul is saying that no bondage is as terrible or enslaving as that from which Christ redeemed us. In Him we are freed from sin, Satan, judgement, hell, and the curse of the law. Every true Christian has already been delivered from the slavery of sin. In Christ we have the most complete and glorious freedom possible.

But should those who were free when coming to Christ feel boastful or proud, Paul says, "Likewise

also he that is called, being free, is Christ's servant." Our freedom in Christ is not freedom to do our own will, but freedom to do His will (Rom. 6:22).

Paul is saying that those who are free when coming to Christ are now slaves to Him. As a Christian you're the servant of Jesus Christ, yet you are no longer in bondage to sin and judgement. When we focus on our spiritual freedom and our slavery to God, we realize that our status among men is not all-important. It does not matter whether we are physically bound or free, only that we are both spiritually bound and free--the wonderful paradox of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

E. The Price (v. 23)

Paul takes the idea of slavery a step further in verse 23: "Ye are bought with a price; be not ye the servants of men." According to this verse, you do not ever have to consider yourself a slave again. You may be a slave physically, but you are no longer a slave to the ways of the world. Paul is referring to becoming slaves of the ways of men, the world, and the flesh. That is the slavery into which many of the Corinthian believers had fallen. It was this kind of slavery that caused their divisions, strife, immaturity, and immorality.

What is the price Paul is speaking about here? First Peter 1:18-19 explains: "Ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver and gold, from your vain manner of life received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot." We have been bought by God, and we belong to Him. We must never become the moral and spiritual slaves of men, living by their standards and seeking to please them.

III. CHRISTIANITY IS NOT SOCIAL REBELLION (v. 24)

"Brethren, let every man, in whatever state he is called, there abide with God."

A. The Principle Reiterated

For the third time in this passage, the apostle Paul gives the following principle: Christians should willingly accept the situation into which God has placed them, and be content to serve Him there.

B. The Practice Reexamined

However it is you have been saved, and whatever condition you find yourself in, you should be willing to remain. It is by the sovereignty of God that you are where you are and you should not try to change what His purpose is for you in that position. God has you there for a reason. Conversion is no signal for a person to leave his occupation, his spouse, or even to rush into marriage. God allows us to be where we are and to stay where we are for a purpose. If you have recently come to Christ or have been a Christian for some time, and you are wondering why God has you where you are, don't dwell on your situation; concentrate on spiritual service and obedience to Christ. Let God change the social structure through your righteous life-style, even in the midst of a dark and decadent world.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What specific issues did the apostle Paul address in 1 Corinthians 7:17-24?
2. What is the overall context of 1 Corinthians 7?
3. What two groups were pressuring the Corinthian believers concerning singleness and marriage and what were their philosophies?
4. What is the overarching principle concerning Christians and their response to the social structure in which they live?
5. The Christian life is not _____, but _____.
6. What kind of attitude could have destroyed the Corinthian church?
7. True or false: When Christianity becomes closely identified with a social movement, the message of the gospel is in danger of being lost.
8. Are Christians disqualified from involvement in social causes? Explain your answer.
9. Explain Christianity's role in social reform throughout history.
10. Should Christians overthrow ungodly governments? Support your answer from Scripture.

11. What did the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day think the Messiah would do when He appeared on earth?
12. What does Paul mean when he uses the term called in verses 17-24?
13. Describe the historical background of uncircumcision and the reason for it.
14. What was the difference between the circumcision controversy of Corinth and Galatia?
15. _____ is the only mark of faithfulness the Lord recognizes.
16. Is it wrong for a Christian to seek promotion in a job or business? Explain your answer.
17. Must a slave who receives Christ continue in his slavery? Support your answer biblically.
18. What is Paul's advice to those who had the opportunity to be free (1 Cor. 7:21)?
19. Explain Paul's appeal to Philemon concerning Onesimus.
20. Explain what Paul meant when he said that a free man is Christ's servant and a slave is the Lord's freeman.
21. What was the price involved in setting men free from the penalty of sin (1 Pet. 1:18-19)?
22. What is your responsibility as a Christian in your present social state?

Pondering the Principles

1. The first principle we learned is that Christianity does not promote revolution. As the Lord has @sovereignly called to salvation each person within their prospective social status, we should not focus on changing our status. The first illustration given by Paul was that of Jew and Gentile. He explained that if you were Jewish and circumcised when you came to Christ, you were not to become uncircumcised. Likewise, if you were a Gentile, you were not to seek circumcision. The issue is not circumcision, but keeping the commandments of God (v. 19). If you are a believer, do not seek to reform your government because it isn't treating you fairly. Concentrate on the internal--your spiritual life--not the external. Read over the lesson again and ask God to right any wrong motives you might have concerning your attitude toward government.
2. Another lesson we learned is that Christianity is not social resistance or rebellion. The only reason for civil disobedience toward the government is when you are commanded to do something that is expressly forbidden in Scripture (cf. Acts 4:18-20). God's command in 1 Corinthians 7:17-24 is to obey the social structure in which you find yourself, whether it be democratic or totalitarian. Study the following passages and write down each command contained in them: Romans 13:1-7; 1 Timothy 2:1-4; 1 Peter 2:13-15; Titus 3:1-2.

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