Concordia Theological Monthly

Spiritual Marriage in the Early Church

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

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I N his commentary on First Corinthians, Karl Heim writes concerning 7:36: "Now comes the passage the interpretation of which has always caused the greatest difficulties. We are especially handicapped in not having the list of questions which the Corinthians addressed to Paul." [1]

The lack of conclusive materials to reconstruct the problem in Corinth has led to an oversimplification. The ancient exegetes interpreted this section as a father-daughter problem in permitting or prohibiting marriage. Until recent times this interpretation was almost universally adopted.

The nature of this problem also adds to the difficulty of translation. Any translator becomes an interpreter of this passage. A few samples of translations serve to illustrate.

The King James Version reads:

But if any man think that he behaveth uncomely toward his virgin, if she pass the flower of her age, and need so require, let him do what he will, he sinneth not: let them marry. Nevertheless he that standeth steadfast in his heart, having no necessity, but hath power over his own will, and hath so decreed in his heart that he will keep his virgin, doeth well. So then he that giveth her in marriage doeth well, but he that giveth her not in marriage doeth better.

The German translation of Martin Luther reads:

So aber jemand sich lässet dünken, es wolle sich nicht schicken mit seiner Jungfrau, weil sie eben wohl mannbar ist, und es will

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[1] Nun kommt die Stelle, die von jeher der Auslegung die gröszte Schwierigkeit bereitet hat. Hier wird besonders vermiszt, dasz wir die Fragen, die die Korinther an Paulus gestellt haben, den Fragebogen der Korinther, nicht zur Hand haben. Karl Heim, *Die Gemeinde des Auferstandenen* (Muenchen: Neubauverlag, 1949), p. 95.

nicht anders sein, so tue er, was er will; er sündiget nicht, er lasse sie freien. Wenn einer aber ihm fest vornimmt, weil er unge-zwungen ist und seinen freien Willen hat, und beschlieszt solches in seinem Herzen, seine Jungfrau also bleiben zu lassen, der tut wohl. Endlich, welcher verheiratet, der tut wohl; welcher aber nicht verheiratet, der tut besser.

James Moffatt translates:

At the same time, if any man considers that he is not behaving properly to the maid who is his spiritual bride, if his passions are strong and if it must be so, then let him do what he wants — let them be married; it is no sin for him. But the man of firm purpose who has made up his mind, who instead of being forced against his will has determined to himself to keep his maid a spiritual bride — that man will be doing the right thing. Thus both are right, alike in marrying and in refraining from marriage, but he who does not marry will be found to have done better.

Goodspeed introduces another view:

But if a man thinks he is not acting properly toward the girl to whom he is engaged, if his passions are too strong, and that is what ought to be done, let him do as he pleases; it is no sin; let them be married. But a man who has definitely made up his mind, under no constraint of passion but with full self-control, and who has decided in his own mind to keep her as she is, will be doing what is right. So the man who marries her does what is right, and the man who refrains from doing so does even better.

The Revised Standard Version follows this view:

If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry — it is no sin. But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. So that he who marries his betrothed does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better.

These translations serve to demonstrate the problem which this passage raises, since they reflect the three leading interpretations: (1) the father-daughter; (2) the engaged couple; (3) the spiritual marriage, or *virgines subintroductae*.

EXAMINATION OF TEXTUAL PROBLEMS

The only variant indicated for verse 36 in the Nestle text is γαμείτω for γαμείτωσαν. For the singular, we have *D**, *G,* and the *Peshito.* Perhaps Robertson and Plummer are right when they state that the singular was introduced by these witnesses "to avoid the awkwardness" which the elliptic plural causes. The weight of evidence supports the plural, but the awkwardness of providing a subject for the plural verb is not solved satisfactorily by the statement "The plural is elliptic, but quite intelligible: 'Let the daughter and her suitor marry.' " [2]

The position of ἑδραῖος in verse 37 "comes last in its clause with emphasis." Witnesses to this word order are ℵ, A, B, D, E, P, and Vulgate. Although K, L, Papyrus 46, and the Peshito place it immediately after ἕστηκεν, and F, G, d, e, Aeth., Arm. omit it entirely, the weight of Vaticanus and Sinaiticus establish its place at the end of the clause.

Since only K and L omit αὐτοῦ before ἑδραῖος, we conclude with Robertson and Plummer that it belongs in the text.

The only manuscript to omit ἐν each time before τῇ καρδίᾳ in verse 37 is Papyrus 15.

The Nestle text does not refer to the variant αὐτοῦ for ἰδίᾳ with καρδίᾳ in verse 37. Robertson and Plummer comment: "After κέκρικεν, ἐν τῇ ἰδίᾳ καραδίᾳ (ℵ, A, B, P) is to be preferred to ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτοῦ (D, E, F, G, K, L)." Nestle also omits the reference to readings which add τοῦ before τηρεῖν in verse 37. Robertson and Plummer refer to it: "τοῦ before τηρεῖν (D, E, F, G, K, L) should be omitted (ℵ, A, B, P, 17, e, d)." (Page 160)

The most interesting variant reading in relation to this study is ἐκγαμίζων, twice substituted for γαμίζων in verse 38. The oldest witnesses, Sinaiticus (ℵ), Vaticanus (B), and Alexandrinus (A) read γαμίζων, K, L, P and the majority of later manuscripts testify to ἐκγαμίζων. The addition of the prefix ἐκ is clearly a later introduction to the text. One might raise the question whether this indicates a traditional interpretation of a father-

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[2] Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1929), pp. 159 f.

daughter situation or whether this addition of ἐκ is to serve as
a deterrent to any possible spiritual marriages. ἐκγαμίζων, the
compound form, could mean only "to give into marriage" and
would eliminate the possible definition of γαμίζων, "to marry,"
around which much of this problem revolves. We can only raise
the question regarding attempts of the textual editors in the sixth
century. However, one point becomes clear. The text of the koine
(in this case K, L, P, and many other later texts) became the
basis for the Greek Testament of Erasmus. It forms the foundation
for the Textus Receptus, from which came our Authorized Version,
and for the translation of Luther, who used the Erasmus edition.
It thus becomes clear why the translation and interpretation of
a father giving his virgin daughter into marriage came into unan-
imous favor until the development of textual studies in more
recent times.[3] Using the principle of accepting the witness of the
oldest manuscripts, Nestle is right in choosing γαμίζων for the
correct reading.

Another textual problem in verse 38 is τὴν ἑαυτοῦ παρθένον.
It is supported by ℵ, A, and P. The same phrase is found with
an inverted word order in B, D, E: τὴν παρθένον ἑαυτοῦ. The
Vulgate has *virginem suam.* Omitting the phrase entirely is the
koine tradition, including K, L, and others. Because they are based
on the koine, the later Textus Receptus, both Luther and the
Authorized Version omit the phrase in translation. Thus τὴν
ἑαυτοῦ παρθένον is well attested in the text, and one can agree
with Robertson and Plummer that this word order "is perhaps
preferable." (Page 160)

The variations in present and future tense of ποιεῖν in verse 38
are explained by Robertson and Plummer:

καλῶς ποιεῖ (ℵ, A, D, E, K, L, P, p⁴⁶, Vulg.) rather than καλῶς
ποιήσει (B) and κρεῖσσον ποιησεῖ (ℵ, A, B, 17, Copt.) rather than
κρεῖσσον ποιεῖ (D, E, F, G, K, L, P, Vulg.). Copyists thought
that both verbs must be in the same tense; some changed ποιεῖ
to ποιήσει, and others ποιήσει to ποιεῖ, as in AV. (Page 160)

Once the text has been established, the interpreter may proceed
in his task.

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[3] Erwin Nestle, *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Stuttgart: Privileg. Wuertt.
Bibelanstalt, 1956), pp. 68—69.

EVALUATION OF VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS

Karl Heim believes that there are three possibilities of inter-
pretation. He organizes them around the question, "Wer ist der
τις?" (Page 95.) He suggests the possibility of a bridegroom with
his betrothed, or a father with his daughter, or a spiritual marriage
of a man with a *virgo subintroducta.*

There are four possibilities: τις might refer to the father, to the
fiancé of an engaged girl, to the protector in a spiritual engagement
to an ascetic girl, or to the man who is in a "spiritual marriage"
with a virgin.[4]

Five interpretations have been suggested by various scholars, as
far as we have been able to determine. The most complete history
of studies on this question in recent times is Kuemmel's.[5]

The Traditional Father-Daughter View

The oldest and the most general interpretation has looked upon
the τις in verse 36 as the father. Robertson and Plummer allow
for no other possibility in their discussion. Their outline sum-
marizes all the ideas of other interpreters who adopt this position.
According to this interpretation, the Corinthians had asked Paul
about the duty of a father with a daughter who has reached the
age of marriage. This view looks only at the authority of the
father. It is not a question of what the daughter wants to do.
The wishes of the father are paramount, according to the ideas
of that age. Perhaps friends of the father warned him that he was
not behaving becomingly toward his child in not furthering her
marriage.

According to this view, the τις, αὐτοῦ, and ὅς do not refer to
the suitor. "The Corinthians would not have asked about him.
It is the father's or guardian's duty that is the question." Robertson
and Plummer also reject the spiritual marriage idea because they
assume that Paul would not sanction "so perilous an arrangement."
The main argument advanced by those who favor this view revolves

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[4] Philipp Bachmann, *Der Erste Brief des Paulus an die Korinther* (Leipzig:
A. Deichert'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung Nachf. Georg Boehme, 1905), p. 298.

[5] Werner Georg Kuemmel, "Verlobung und Heirat bei Paulus (1 Kor.
7:36-38)," *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft,* XXI (1954),
275—276.

around the use of the word γαμίζων. Robertson and Plummer (p. 159) state that

> γαμίζων everywhere in the New Testament (Matt. 22:30; 24:38; Mark 12:25; Luke 17:27; 20:35) means "give in marriage." (In LXX it does not occur.) In spite of this, some make it mean "marry." . . . The γαμίζων is decisive: the Apostle is speaking of a father or guardian disposing of an unmarried daughter or ward.

A supporting argument is presented:

> The repetition of ἴδιος, respecting his will and heart, and the change to ἑαυτοῦ, respecting his daughter, seem to mark the predominance of the father in the matter.

This view looks upon ὑπέρακμος as referring to the daughter. This school of thought assumes that a father would be of Paul's opinion to have his daughter remain single "because of the present necessity."

In agreement with this view A. T. Robertson explains the phrase καὶ οὕτως ὀφείλει γίνεσθαι:

> Paul has discussed the problem of marriage for virgins on the grounds of expediency. Now he faces the question where the daughter wishes to marry and there is no serious objection to it. The father is advised to consent. Roman and Greek fathers had the control of the marriage of their daughters.[6]

H. Meyer agrees:

> Die erstere Eklärung ist die gewöhnliche und richtige, nämlich: wenn Jemand schimpflich zu verfahren glaubt gegen seine Jungfrau (Tochter oder Mündel, d. h., wenn er Schande über sie zu bringen glaubt, womit aber nicht die Schande des alten Jungfrauenstandes, sondern der Schimpf der Verführung gemeint ist, welchen der Vater oder Vormund durch Verweigerung der Heiraths-Erlaubnis zu verursachen befürchtet.[7]

Bachmann has the same view. (Page 300)

Sickenberger notes that Paul has just spoken of the value of

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6 Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1931), IV, 135.

7 Heinr. Aug. Wilh. Meyer, *Handbuch über den Ersten Brief an die Korinther* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht's Verlag, 1870), p. 214.

virginity. He therefore uses the term παρθένος. Although it does not mean "daughter," he believes Paul is using it in that sense.[8]

In the recent commentary by Grosheide we find the same interpretation. He rejects the possibility of taking τις to refer to the fiancé and brushes away the argument that this fits the plural of γαμείτωσαν. He says:

> The idea of an engagement is absent here as much as in verse 27. It would be strange to suppose that an engaged man would think of acting in an unseemly manner, if he did not marry his fiancée, for the purpose of betrothal is marriage. Besides, verse 37 also excludes the thought of an engagement, since otherwise the words "to keep his own virgin" would have to indicate a permanent betrothal. The expression "his virgin" would also be a peculiar designation of one's fiancée.[9]

He therefore concludes that it must refer to the father. His reference to the causative action of γαμίζω is his final proof for this interpretation.

This interpretation, however, must face some serious objections. Grafe challenged this traditional view in 1899.[10] Peake enumerates the same arguments in an expanded form.[11] Heim (p. 96) and Moffatt likewise find too many problems with this view.[12]

The first objection is in the absence of references to "father" or "daughter." Moffatt (p. 99) says, "Maid (παρθένος) is not equivalent for 'daughter' (θυγατήρ) in Greek, unless a parent has been explicitly mentioned already."

The second objection is found in the use of ἀσχημονεῖν. For a father to "act unseemly" is possible, but is not a natural phrase to use of the father's conduct. (Peake, p. 839)

The third problem is in the plural, γαμείτωσαν. If the previous reference is to the father, this is difficult. The antecedent, in such a case, would need to be supplied. Much more natural is the

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8 Joseph Sickenberger, *Die Briefe des Heiligen Paulus an die Korinther und Römer* (Bonn: Peter Hanstein Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1932), passim.

9 F. W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953), p. 182.

10 Reference in Bachmann, p. 298.

11 Arthur S. Peake, *A Commentary on the Bible* (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, n. d.), p. 839.

12 James Moffatt, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper and Bros., n. d.), p. 99.

identification of τις as the suitor so that he and the virgin become
the subject.

The Allegorical Interpretation of Methodius

A second interpretation has historical interest. It is suggested
by Methodius, the bishop of Olympus, who lived A. D. 260 to 312.
Although the antagonist of Origen, he was influenced by the
method of Origen in allegorical interpretation of Scripture. In his
"Banquet of the Ten Virgins" he comments on our passage:

> But for him who of his own free will and purpose decides to
> preserve his flesh in virgin purity, "having no necessity," that is,
> passion, calling forth his loins to intercourse . . . such an one
> contending and struggling, and zealously abiding by his profession,
> and admirably fulfilling it, he exhorts to abide and to preserve it,
> according to the highest prize of virginity.[13]

Jerome also adopted this view (Kuemmel, p. 277). Of modern
interpreters, no one has taken παρθένος to mean his virgin flesh.

The Engaged Couple Theory

A third interpretation was advanced by W. C. van Manen and
is known as the "engaged couple theory." [14] Both Goodspeed and
the Revised Standard Version so translate. "But if a man thinks
he is not acting properly toward the girl to whom he is engaged"
(Goodspeed). "If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly
toward his betrothed" (RSV). Others who follow Van Manen
are listed by Kuemmel (p. 277): "Van Manen fand Zustimmung
bei P. D. Chantepie de la Saussaye, Studien 4, 1878, 86 f.; J. M. S.
Baljon, A. van Veldhuizen, G. Schrenk, H. D. Wendland (1954)."

Craig refers to the possibility of adopting the "engaged couple
theory." [15] He shows that in later Greek the distinction between
such verbal forms as γαμέω and γαμίζω had begun to disappear.

> Some insist that he has in mind nothing more than any engaged
> couple who might at first have decided to accept Paul's advice

13 Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*
(Buffalo: The Christian Literature Co., 1886), VI, 307 ff.

14 Gerhard Delling, *Paulus' Stellung zu Frau und Ehe* (Stuttgart: W. Kohl-
hammer Verlag, 1931), p. 87, refers to an article by van Manen in *Theologisch
Tijdschrift*, VIII (1874), 612 ff.

15 Clarence T. Craig, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Vol. X of *The
Interpreter's Bible*, edited by George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon
Press, 1953), p. 87.

and refrain from marriage, and then have found that decision increasingly difficult to maintain. (Page 87)

But Craig goes on to cast his vote for the spiritual marriage interpretation.

A recent article supporting this view is that of W. F. Beck. He refers to Bauer, Moulton, Lietzmann, and Blass-Debrunner as grammatical authorities for the use of γαμίζω in the sense of γαμέω. He suggests that only a young man and a woman could be the subject of γαμείτωσαν. He states:

> The first natural impression which we get from the text is that it speaks of a man and a woman who are planning to marry. To describe the girl whom he has in mind, Paul could not say τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ or νύμφην (Rev. 21:9), because these terms mean a wife. He has in mind a woman who has been chosen, but is not yet married; the exact term for such a woman is παρθένος, which is used of the Virgin Mary (Luke 1:27). This "virgin" is "his" (αὐτοῦ) girl, because he has chosen her. Paul is advising a man who has chosen a girl and who is now trying to decide whether he should marry or postpone marriage indefinitely. . . . The decision might be "to keep his virgin intact" (τηρεῖν τὴν ἑαυτοῦ παρθένον). "His virgin" (τὴν παρθένον αὐτοῦ) may imply the mutual pledge to marry. Both may well agree not to carry out their pledge for some time but to stay like Joseph and Mary before Jesus was born (Matt. 1:25). The promise to marry would be a check that is not cashed immediately. Such a condition would not continue permanently but would end with the emergency, during which also married people might not live normally.[16]

Werner George Kuemmel has also adopted "the engaged couple theory," but for different reasons. He refers (p. 292) to the work of J. Neubauer[17] and (p. 292) to Strack-Billerbeck[18] as shedding light on the Jewish customs and laws on engagement. The engaged couple was bound as if married, and the engagement could be dissolved only by divorce. The Jewish bride was considered a married woman, but before the beginning of the actual married

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[16] W. F. Beck, "1 Corinthians 7:36-38," CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY, Vol. XXV (May 1954), 370—372.

[17] *Beiträge zur Geschichte des biblisch-talmudischen Eheschlieszungsrechts.*

[18] *Kommentar zum N. T. aus Talmud u. Midrasch* II.

relationship she was still considered a *Jungfrau*. Kuemmel acknowledges, however, that we cannot conclude that the Corinthian Christians at this time shared the Jewish views of engagement and marriage.

He furthermore supports his view by noting that if Paul held this idea of engagement as a binding act he could not simply tell the man and his virgin to part. There would still be something binding in their agreement. The man was required by Jewish law to provide for her for a 12-month period (p. 293), and therefore Paul would suggest that he "keep his virgin." Kuemmel believes that the pair could have remained engaged, remaining as they were for the present necessity, and that in this way each of them could more fully care for the things of the Lord: μεριμνᾶν τὰ τοῦ κυρίου. (1 Cor. 7:33-35)

Another reason Kuemmel gives for adopting the engaged couple theory is his rejection of the spiritual marriage possibility on the basis that it contradicts Paul's ideas elsewhere. Paul speaks of "caring for the things of the Lord." (1 Cor. 7:32-34.) This would eliminate any arrangement involving an unnecessary tie of the Christian to the world. Marriage is one of these, and therefore Paul does not advise the marriage to be completed without stating his preference for the unmarried estate. He will not forbid them to marry, nor will he overlook the reality of the earthly flesh. Therefore, argues Kuemmel, Paul could not give consent to a relationship between men and virgins, which would add burdens and contradict the fleshly reality. On his interpretation, Kuemmel concludes:

> Und erst recht kann er nicht zu einer Beziehung zwischen einem Mann und einem Mädchen raten, die als ἀφειδία σώματος (Col. 2:23) und in der Haltung der τὴν ἰδίαν (δικαιοσύνην) ζητοῦντες στῆσαι (Rom. 10:3) durch eine besonders anerkennenswerte Enthaltsamkeitsleistung sich vor Gott hervortun möchte. Die asketische Unternehmung einer "geistlichen Ehe," welche Begründung sie bei ihren Vertretern auch immer finden möchte, kann daher von Paulus nicht gebilligt worden sein. (Page 294)

Several objections to this view suggest themselves. As Delling points out (p. 87), there is the use of παρθένος. This is a peculiar designation for a fiancée. Delling suggests that νύμφη would have

been closer to the meaning. Another expression would have been ἡρμοσμένη, as used in 2 Cor. 11:2. In Matt. 1:18; Luke 1:27; and 2:5 μνηστευθεῖσα is used. While Beck correctly says that παρθένος is used for the Virgin Mary in Luke 1:27, he neglects to add that she is called παρθένον ἐμνηστευμένην, "virgin betrothed." Neither does Kuemmel give any evidence for such a use of παρθένος, except ·o mention the general Jewish custom.

A second problem enters with τηρεῖν. It is unclear how this "guarding" or "preserving" of his fiancée could apply. As Kuemmel says, there is no evidence that the Jewish practice of "keeping" an engaged girl in the engaged state obtained in Corinth.

The third difficulty is in consideration of Kuemmel's statement, that spiritual marriage is contrary to Paul's insistence on remaining unencumbered to be more concerned with the things of the Lord. The value of spiritual marriage was to provide for the virgin protection as well as the guidance of a mature Christian man. For the man it afforded companionship and household comforts. For both it was to use the distinctive χάρισμα of virginity, of which Paul speaks (1 Cor. 7:7), in mutual helpfulness to each other.

The greatest difficulty with this interpretation is in the use of παρθένος without any modifying word to indicate that she is a betrothed virgin.

The Spiritual Marriage View of Achelis

The fourth interpretation is the spiritual marriage view. The most comprehensive treatment of this phenomenon in early Christianity is that of Achelis.[19] He gathered all available references to this custom from writings of the fathers and the councils of the early centuries.

Achelis reconstructs the situation in Corinth. He pictures two persons of different sex living under an impossible situation. This could be solved through marriage. When Paul is asked for his advice, he says, "To marry is good, not to marry is better." However, the close association of a man and a virgin in a spiritual marriage caused some dangerous situations. The man might be tempted to

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19 Hans Achelis, *Virgines subintroductae* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrich'sche Buchhandlung, 1902).

lose his self-control. The problem arose, "Can such a virgin, vowed to virginity in a spiritual marriage, be free to marry?"

Achelis explains the origin of this custom:

Die Jungfrau wollte aus religiösen Gründen ihr Fleisch unbefleckt erhalten, die Gemeinschaft mit einem Mann aber aus irgend einem Grunde nicht entbehren. Sie lebte mit einem Christen zusammen, aber nicht als seine γυνή, sondern als seine παρθένος. (Page 27)

He believes this relationship would begin with the knowledge and approval of the congregation. This would necessitate the vow of virginity for the young woman and perhaps for the man. This spiritual marriage permitted every association of marriage with the exception of sexual union. Paul, then, advises the virgin to marry if necessity so dictates. She would not be sinning in such a case.

Achelis also answers the question of Paul's silence in forbidding this custom. He believes that the custom met a need which was apparent to Paul. For the man the "spiritual marriage" was an agreeable household arrangement. The virgin would receive the protection and guidance of a mature Christian. Single girls without protection in the large city needed home and care. Some were servants in Christian homes; others married. Others observed the needs of that time, as outlined by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7. They awaited the παρουσία, and for this reason viewed marriage as a doubtful benefit. Those who decided on a single life, took on a position of respect in the congregation. The result was a spiritual companionship between a man and a woman who shared the mutual vow of the ascetic life. (Page 28)

The question arises, "Why did no translator or Greek exegete take 1 Cor. 7:36-38 as 'spiritual marriage'?" Achelis states that a right understanding of the Corinthian situation was impossible, because the Christian church tried to uproot the *subintroductae* custom in the beginning of the third century. This being the case, no exegete believed that a spiritual marriage ever existed in a Pauline congregation. This would indicate that the position of virgins had already become so established in the second century that the marriage of a virgin would have appeared sinful. For an exegete of this period to believe that Paul could have advised marriage to a virgin was impossible.

Achelis realizes the problem of proving the existence of spiritual marriage at this early period. Was Paul the creator of spiritual marriage, or did it exist from another source? Achelis says:

Möglicherweise lässt sich die Frage beantworten, und zwar mit Hilfe der Philonischen oder Pseudo-Philonischen Schrift *De vita contemplativa.* Denn die Genossinnen der Therapeuten, die Therapeutriden, sind Syneisakten, man mag die Erscheinung deuten, wie man will. Entweder hat es schon vor der Gründung der christlichen Gemeinden im Reich, in jüdisch-asketischen Kreisen, das Institut der geistigen Ehe gegeben, und die Zustände in Korinth erhalten eine naturgemässe Erklärung; oder der christliche Verfasser erzählt unter Philos Namen von Syneisakten christlicher Mönche. (Page 29)

There are numerous interpreters who follow Achelis up to this point, as we shall see. He observes that a man and a woman in the bond of this spiritual marriage are faced with a decision. He sees Paul's advice to mean, "Let the man give the virgin who is bound in the vow of spiritual marriage to another."

Sie sollen indes nicht sich mit einander verheiraten, wie wir Modernen von unsern Anschauungen aus als natürlich annehmen würden, sondern der Mann soll das Mädchen einem andern jungen Christen als Gattin zuführen. Das alles besagt das zweimal gebrauchte Wort γαμίζειν; es kann nicht heiraten heissen, es heisst immer verheiraten. (Page 24)

Achelis does not agree with those who take γαμείτωσαν, "let them marry," as referring to the man and woman in the spiritual marriage. He supports his explanation by referring to the Itala and the Vulgate, which have the singular γαμείτω. The singular he would take as referring to the virgin, "let her marry." (Page 25)

The contrary view has arguments in its favor. In this question we are faced with uncertainty. We do not know whether the *Syneisaktentum* existed at this early period. As we shall see later we have evidence of its existence in the second century. Either to affirm or to deny this view on the ground of evidence is difficult. Peake says: "Our ignorance as to the origin of many things should make us chary of pressing the former point. . . . We must beware of viewing the institution through the scandals which later discredited it" (p. 839). The historical traces of this institution will be treated later.

Another difficulty is presented by Bachmann. "ἡ παρθένος αὐτοῦ kann immer noch leichter jemandes Tochter als die jemanden geistlich angelobte geistliche Schwester bedeuten" (p. 289). This may be true, but it still leaves us with the awkward situation of applying ἀσχημονεῖν to the father.

But even if one were to grant the possibility of a spiritual marriage in Corinth, there is a serious difficulty in connection with the view of Achelis. As Peake points out, it is "wholly unnatural," for the man in this case to give his spiritual virgin to another man. The obvious advice is that the man and his virgin should marry. This is, indeed, suggested by verse 36. Achelis is led to his view by his rigid definition of γαμίζειν. Here, as with the father-daughter view, we need to determine whether this word must always be interpreted in the causative sense. While detailed discussion will be presented later, we can note here that Kittel, Moulton, Lietzmann,[20] and others find that γαμίζω and γαμέω are equivalent in later Greek.

The Spiritual Marriage Resulting in Physical Marriage

The fifth interpretation, as does Achelis, looks upon this passage as a reference to a man and a virgin in a spiritual marriage. However, it interprets Paul's advice to mean that the two people involved in their vow to each other should consummate a physical marriage if that seems to be necessary.

Delling makes a case for this view. His interpretation becomes evident in his translation:

> Wenn aber jemand unanständig gegenüber seiner Jungfrau zu sein meint, wenn sie hochreif ist, und es musz so geschehen, so tue er, was er will; er sündigt nicht; sie mögen heiraten. Wer aber in seinem Herzen ganz fest steht, keinen Zwang hat, Macht hat über seine eigene Wallung, und dies in seinem Herzen für gut befunden hat, seine Jungfrau zu bewahren, der wird recht tun. Daher tut sowohl der recht, der seine Jungfrau ehelich macht, als auch der besser tun wird, der nicht ehelich macht. (Pages 87, 88)

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[20] Gerhard Kittel, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* (Stuttgart: Verlag von W. Kohlhammer, 1953), I, 646. — James Hope Moulton and Wilbert Francis Howard, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1929), II, 409. — Hans Lietzmann, *Handbuch zum Neuen Testament, an die Korinther I—II* (Tuebingen: Verlag von J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1949), pp. 35, 36.

He finds one purpose for this institution to be of spiritual inspiration and help without the added burden of family and children (p. 90). He believes another objective of people entering spiritual marriages was to prove their power over spheres of nature. If one could prove his power over sexual nature in the intimate fellowship of a spiritual marriage, he could become more firmly established in his ascetic devotion to the Lord (p. 91). He refers to later actions of Cyprian, in which those committed to a spiritual marriage could legally be married in the usual way. (Page 89)

Another supporter of this view is Lietzmann. He is convinced of the existence of *Syneisaktentum* on the basis of evidence found in the Shepherd of Hermas.[21] With Achelis he finds the later references in the councils and in the works of Ephraem Syrus convincing. One quote will serve to demonstrate his view:

> Auch Ephrem {sic} Syrus verstand unsere Stelle von einem Syneis-
> aktenverhältnis, wie sein Kommentar ausweist (Herklotz in Bibl.
> Ztschr. 14, 344 ff.); über die geistlichen Ehen in Syrien s. F. C.
> Burkitt Urchristentum im Orient übers. v. E. Preuschen 88 ff. und
> Plooij Z. f. nt. Wiss. 1923, 8 ff. Durch diese Erklärung allein wird
> die ganze Situation ebenso wie dieser Ausdruck τὴν ἑαυτοῦ
> παρθένον verständlich. (Lietzmann, pp. 36 f.)

We have mentioned Peake, who wrestles with the problem that absolute evidence of this institution in New Testament times is lacking. However, he adopts the view of Delling and Lietzmann. He refers to Paul's personal preference for celibacy. In this context, pledges to remain unmarried would receive his praise. Peake thinks that a man and a woman joining

> for mutual encouragement in such a pledge would seem perhaps
> not unfitting. The moral peril would be met by the possibility of
> marriage in case the strain on continence became too severe. And
> we must not underrate the elemental force of a primitive enthu-
> siasm, or too hastily apply to the church of the first century our
> own standards of what is fitting. (Page 834)

He paraphrases verses 36 and 37:

> If in any instance the man feels that he may be guilty of an offense
> against the virgin's chastity, if he is troubled with excess virility

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21 *Parable IX,* 10, 6 ff., in Edgar J. Goodspeed, *The Apostolic Fathers* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950), p. 184.

> and his nature demands marriage, he may carry out the desire
> without sin, let them get married. But if he is firm in purpose
> and driven by no such necessity, and is gifted with self-control
> and resolved to keep his virgin partner intact, he will do well.
> (Page 839)

He does not agree with Achelis, who suggests that the man give
his virgin to another, and he thinks that the rendering "marry"
in verse 38 is legitimate.

The most complete and consistent presentation of this view is
made by Moffatt.

> At the same time, if any man considers that he is not behaving
> properly to the maid who is his spiritual bride, if his passions
> are strong and if it must be so, then let him do what he thinks —
> let them be married; it is no sin for him. (Page 98)

Moffatt does not think this "unseemly" behavior is some kind of
physical outrage. However, he says:

> The man . . . considers that the right, fair course for himself and
> his religious mate is to get married, since the strain of their ideal
> connexion is proving too much for flesh and blood. Paul agrees
> that he should. It is no sin, though it would be better if the pair
> could still have sufficient self-control to live together without any
> sexual union. To the apostle such spiritual marriages are a noble
> experiment, but unfortunately the flesh is so weak that they are
> not wise for all. He contemplates the problem from the standpoint
> of the man. (Page 98)

To Moffatt the natural sense of παρθένος is the virgin who is
the man's spiritual bride. He thinks this is a "case of the elementary,
early relationship which soon afterwards developed into the *virgines
subintroductae* of the later Church." With Lietzmann he refers to
Ephraem Syrus, who knew this institution at first hand and who
interpreted the passage in this sense. Much in the same vein as
Achelis, Moffatt says:

> It was when knowledge of it had vanished, or when the church
> did not care to believe that it had ever existed in the primitive
> days, that the devout either allegorized the passage or readjusted
> Paul's advice to fit a supposed exercise of the *patria potestas* by
> some imperious father who claimed to rule a grownup daughter's
> life by his own rigorist scruples. (Page 98)

The possibility of this view is allowed by Karl Heim (p. 97). He bases his thoughts on the words τὴν παρθένον αὐτοῦ. This could not mean "bride" and could not mean "daughter," for other words would have been chosen. Yet he thinks it is not clear whether two Christians came together in a spiritual bond. To Heim this is a possibility but not a view which he holds with any degree of certainty.

The most recent commentary to espouse this view is the *Interpreter's Bible.* Craig writes:

It is more probable, however, that Paul is referring to the custom of a young man's taking a young woman under his protection, and their living together, but under vows of celibacy. (Page 88)

He refers to the tenth parable of Hermas and admits that although this was at a later time "it seems to be implied here." The word ὑπέρακμος is applied to the man, rather than to the virgin, as fitting the inner struggle to maintain self-control. "If it is too difficult for them to maintain the celibate vow, it is no sin for them to marry." (Page 88)

Of these five views the last is the favorite of more recent interpreters. The father-daughter situation is not in keeping with the choice of terms. The allegorical interpretation of Methodius violates elementary principles of hermeneutics. The engagement view has possibilities, but encounters difficulties in the use of παρθένος. The position of Achelis is untenable in the light of more recent discussions of γαμίζειν.

While the last view is the most widely accepted today, it faces two problems.

The first has already been mentioned — the problem of historical evidence. Does the later evidence in church history indicate a much earlier use of spiritual marriages as an institution for παρθένοι συνείσακτοι? The question can be answered only after the sources have been studied.

The second problem is stated by Schlatter, who says that there is no direct word in this text which would indicate the spiritual marriage relationship.[22]

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22 Adolf Schlatter, *Paulus der Bote Jesu* (Stuttgart: Calwer Vereinsbuch-handlung, 1934), p. 246.