

The Historical Fight over Marriage

A study of the Bible's teaching on marriage and singleness, contrasting the historical positions of early Roman church scholar Jerome and Protestant Reformer John Calvin

Jerome (ca. 340 – 420) has been called “the most accomplished scholar of the early Church.”¹ Second only to his notoriety for translating the Bible into Latin, Jerome is best known for championing the cause of celibacy and monasticism. However, Jerome’s teachings in regard to celibacy seriously deviate from the Bible’s teaching. In this paper I will show how John Calvin provided a Biblical corrective to Jerome’s errant teaching regarding celibacy and helped reform the Church’s understanding regarding marriage and singleness.

Before exploring Jerome’s and Calvin’s teachings in regard to celibacy, let us briefly consider their lives and significance in the church. Sophronius Eusebius Hieronymus, known to most as simply “Jerome” or “St. Jerome,” was born at Stridon, a remote town in northeast Italy. At about the age of thirty, he sensed a call to the ascetic life and joined an ascetic community near his home in Italy. From about 375-377, Jerome lived as a hermit in the Syrian desert of Chalcis, southeast of Antioch, mastering the Hebrew language and transcribing Biblical manuscripts. Yet, “sensual desires continued to preoccupy him, and in spite of severe disciplines he dreamed about the dancing girls in Rome.”² In 386 he settled in Bethlehem, where he spent the last thirty-four years of his life in seclusion. In 405 or 406 Jerome completed his Latin translation of the Scriptures, the *Vulgate*, after over twenty years of toil.

John Calvin (1509-1564) was born in Noyon, France. He was a second generation Reformer, being only eight years old when Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenburg. In 1534 he left the Roman Catholic Church and began his pastoral and teaching labors in Geneva two years later. After organizing and pastoring the first French-speaking Protestant congregation in Strasbourg, Germany (1538-1541), he returned to Geneva and labored there without interruption for the next twenty-three years until his death. During this second Geneva period, he founded the Reformed or Presbyterian church; established the famous Geneva Academy in which he became a professor of theology; preached thousands of sermons; wrote numerous commentaries on Scripture, theological treatises, and letters; and completed the final, definitive (1559) edition of his *magnum opus*, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

Having briefly considered the life and significance of Jerome and Calvin, I will now provide a critical analysis of Jerome’s celibacy teachings, in contrast to the teachings of John Calvin.

In the sixteenth century, Calvin interacted with Jerome’s teaching in regard to celibacy in his commentary on 1 Corinthians. Calvin provides a Biblical corrective to Jerome’s

¹ N.R. Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power, Part One: The Age of the Early Church Fathers* (Durham, England: Evangelical Press, 1998), 237.

² Everett Ferguson, “Jerome: Biblical Scholar,” in *Great Leaders of the Christian Church*, ed. John D. Woodbridge (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 78-88, at 78.

exegesis of Scripture's teaching on celibacy, as a comparison of their teachings will demonstrate. Let us consider three particular teachings: first, the normativeness of marriage; second, the advantages of celibacy over marriage; and, third, Jerome's teaching regarding vows of perpetual chastity.

To begin, let us consider the normativeness of marriage. On the one hand, Jerome claims that he honors marriage. Unlike Marcion and Manichaeus, he does not "disparage marriage," nor does he think "all intercourse impure."³ Jerome does not condemn marriage: "For the Church does not condemn marriage, but only subordinates it. It does not reject it altogether, but regulates it."⁴ Jerome agrees that it is not a sin for a man to marry.⁵ And he acknowledges that marriage is a "gift." He writes,

But since in the Church there is a diversity of gifts, I acquiesce in marriage, lest I should seem to condemn nature. At the same time consider, that the gift of virginity is one, that of marriage, another.⁶

Jerome responds to the accusation that he has condemned marriage, saying, "If I have called virginity gold, I have spoken of marriage as silver."⁷ "I do not detract from wedlock when I set virginity before it."⁸ And in a somewhat bizarre statement, Jerome says, "I praise wedlock, I praise marriage, but it is because they give me virgins."⁹

On the other hand, other statements in Jerome's writings undermine his defense against charges of deriding marriage. For example, he argues that "chastity was always preferred to the condition of marriage," claiming that Adam and Eve were "virgins in Paradise" prior to the Fall but "after they sinned, and were cast out of Paradise, they were immediately married."¹⁰

Jerome goes a step further in scorning marriage by teaching that marriage is "bad" or "evil." He reasons that although it is not a sin to marry, that does not make marriage "good."¹¹ In exegeting 1 Cor. 7:1, Jerome says, "If it is good not to touch a woman, it is bad to touch one: for there is no opposite to goodness but badness."¹² He adds, in regard to 1 Cor. 7:9, "The reason why it is better to marry is that it is worse to burn. Let burning lust be absent, and he will not say it is better to marry."¹³ From this Jerome concludes,

³ Jerome, *Against Jovinianus*, trans. W. H. Fremantle, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, CD-ROM edition, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 6 (henceforward *NPNF* 6), in *The Master Christian Library* (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1997), 748.

⁴ Jerome, "To Pammachius," in *NPNF* 6:204.

⁵ Jerome, *Against Jovinianus*, 768.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 757.

⁷ Jerome, "To Pammachius," 197.

⁸ Jerome, "To Eustochium," in *NPNF* 6:122.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁰ Jerome, *Against Jovinianus*, 771. Jerome's argument seems difficult to reconcile with the pre-Fall declaration that a man and his wife "shall become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24), which hardly seems to refer to a state of virginity.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 765.

¹² *Ibid.*, 754.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 757-758.

When you come to marriage, you do not say it is good to marry, because you cannot then add “than to burn;” but you say, “It is better to marry than to burn.” If marriage in itself be good, do not compare it with fire, but simply say “It is good to marry.” I suspect the goodness of that thing which is forced into the position of being *only the lesser of two evils*.¹⁴

Thus, although marriage is less evil than “to burn with passion,” it is not good. Rather, marriage is the “lesser of two evils.” Hence, marriage is evil, albeit not so great an evil as burning with lust.

Jerome’s exegesis of Paul’s teaching is seriously flawed. First, his argumentation is illogical. Although Paul says that it is “better to marry than to burn” (1 Cor. 7:9), it does not follow that marriage is the “lesser of two evils.” Just because marriage is compared with something evil, it does not follow that marriage is evil. Similarly, just because “it is good for a man not to touch a woman” (1 Cor. 7:1), it does not follow that it is bad for a man to touch a woman. Jerome commits an “either / or” fallacy, overlooking alternative explanations. Paul’s statement may be conditional; he might be arguing that apart from the God-ordained institution of marriage, “it is good for a man not to touch a woman.” However, more likely, Paul means that it is good for a man to touch a woman but better for him not to touch a woman.¹⁵ Just because something is comparatively less good, it does not follow that it is necessarily bad.

Second, Jerome ignores the context of 1 Cor. 7:1. Scripture interprets Scripture; verse 1 cannot be interpreted apart from the subsequent statement in verse 2: “Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband.” This latter statement restricts the force of Paul’s statement in verse 1. Thus, viewed in context, 1 Cor. 7:1 may suggest that there are advantages of celibacy over marriage, but this verse does not teach that marriage is evil.

Third, Jerome’s conclusions cannot be harmonized with Biblical theology. At creation, God ordained the institution of marriage (Gen. 2:24). Furthermore, the marital relationship between husband and wife is said to be a type of the relationship between Christ and His bride, the Church (Eph. 5:22-33). If Jerome is correct in concluding that marriage is evil, then not only did God ordain this evil institution from creation but also the relationship between Christ and His bride, the Church, is an evil one.¹⁶ When viewed in the context of the bridal imagery that repeatedly occurs in Scripture—from Genesis to Revelation—Jerome’s contention that marriage is the “lesser of two evils” must be firmly rejected, for it is patently unbiblical.

John Calvin provides a refreshingly Biblical correction to Jerome’s teaching.

Calvin sees marriage as normative. He writes, “Marriage itself is a remedy appointed by God for our infirmity, which all ought to use that are not endowed with the gift of continency [chaste singleness].”¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid., 758.

¹⁵ 1 Cor. 7:38 effectively destroys Jerome’s claim that marriage is “evil.” For here Paul expressly states that both marriage and virginity are good, although they differ in degree of “goodness.”

¹⁶ By implication, the marriage supper of the Lamb at the last day would also be a most evil event.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, trans. John Pringle, CD-ROM edition, in *The Comprehensive John Calvin Collection* (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998), 224.

First, he notes that marriage is a creation ordinance: “For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24; cf. Matt. 19:5, 6; Mark 10:8; 1 Cor. 6:16). Scripture teaches that marriage is good, honorable, and normative due to human weakness (Heb. 13:4; 1 Tim. 5:14). Calvin responds directly to Jerome’s inference that marriage is bad or evil:

Jerome draws the inference that because “it is good not to touch a woman,” it is therefore wrong to do so. Paul, however, does not make use of the word *good* here in such a signification as to be opposed to what is evil or vicious, but simply points out what is expedient on account of there being so many troubles, vexations, and anxieties that are incident to married persons.¹⁸

So although Paul teaches that celibacy is “good,” he also says those who cannot remain abstinent must not neglect getting married.¹⁹ Calvin writes, “While he advises to abstain from marriage, he always speaks conditionally—*if it can be done, if there is ability*; but where the infirmity of the flesh does not allow of that liberty, he expressly enjoins marriage as a thing that is not in the least doubtful.”²⁰

Second, Calvin explains that celibacy is a gift that is only given to some Christians. While virginity is “an excellent gift,” it is a gift that is not common to all but is given only to a few (cf. Matt. 19:10-11; 1 Cor. 7:7).²¹ Calvin elucidates, “[In 1 Cor. 7:7 Paul expressly declares] that every one has not a free choice in this matter, because virginity is a special gift, that is not conferred upon all indiscriminately.”²² Therefore, Calvin concludes, “Though virginity should be extolled even to the third heavens, this, at the same time, always remains true—that it does not suit all, but only those who have a special *gift* from God.”²³ Furthermore, even the other apostles and Peter²⁴ were married. In his same book to the Corinthian church, Paul asks, “Do we not have a right to take along a believing wife, even as the rest of the apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?” (1 Cor. 9:5). From this we may infer that although Paul had been given the gift of chastity, the other apostles surely had not been given this gift. If marriage is “evil,” as Jerome contends, surely Jesus’ disciples would have taken vows of chastity. But they did not, for they recognized marriage to be good and not necessarily a hindrance to the pursuit of personal piety or to the advancement of the kingdom of God.

Third, Calvin explains that the gift of celibacy is often a temporary gift, which is one reason why vows of chastity should never be made. Calvin writes, “It is possible for a person to live chastely in a state of celibacy for a time, but there must be in this matter no determination made for tomorrow.”²⁵ For example, the patriarch Isaac was unmarried until he was forty years old, remaining abstinent during those years in which “the heats of irregular desire are most violent;” yet afterwards he was called to marry Rebekah.²⁶

¹⁸ Ibid., 185.

¹⁹ Ibid., 184-185; cf. 1 Cor. 7:1-2.

²⁰ Ibid., 195.

²¹ Cf. Calvin, 193.

²² Ibid., 192.

²³ Ibid., 194.

²⁴ Peter is regarded by Roman Catholics as the first pope.

²⁵ Calvin, 194.

²⁶ Ibid. Cf. Gen. 25:20.

And his son Jacob restrained his passionate desire for Rachel for seven long years, laboring for his future father-in-law Laban to earn the privilege of marrying his daughter.

Having examined the normativeness of marriage, let us now consider the advantages of celibacy over marriage. According to Jerome, celibacy or virginity is better because it is more meritorious, more spiritual, or more godly than marriage. Jerome says, "While we honor marriage we prefer virginity which is the offspring of marriage. Will silver cease to be silver, if gold is more precious than silver?"²⁷ Jerome's analogy suggests that marriage is worth less than virginity. Although marriage has worth, it is "less precious" than virginity. Additionally, Jerome claims that "Christ loves virgins more than others, because they willingly give what was not commanded them."²⁸ And while "marriage replenishes the earth, virginity fills Paradise."²⁹ These statements seem to suggest that marriage is earthly and carnal, while virginity is heavenly, pious, and godly.

In contrast, Calvin says that "celibacy is better than marriage, because it has more liberty, so that persons can serve God with greater freedom."³⁰ Calvin's view, unlike that of Jerome, reflects the teaching of Scripture.

Jesus taught His disciples that for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, it is better not to marry (i.e., to remain abstinent). But He also added that "not all men can accept this statement," but only those to whom the gift of celibacy has been given (Matt. 19:10-12). In similar fashion, Paul says that it is better to remain unmarried, just as he was (1 Cor. 7:7-8; cf. 1 Cor. 7:1, 26-27, 32, 34, 38, 40).³¹ In one instance, Paul even employs the word *better* in regard to virginity: "So then both he who gives his own virgin daughter in marriage does *well*, and he who does not give her in marriage will do *better*" (1 Cor. 7:38).³²

Calvin explains that one of the reasons Paul maintains that celibacy is better than marriage is because many troubles are connected with married life. For this reason Paul wishes all to be free from marriage, so that they may be exempt from the burdens associated with marriage (cf. 1 Cor. 7:28).³³ Paul says that the man "who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife" (1 Cor. 7:33; cf. 7:34). The married man's interests are divided (1 Cor. 7:34). He is not wholly and exclusively devoted to God, "inasmuch as he devotes himself partly to God and partly to his wife."³⁴ Thus, those who can remain abstinent should do so. And those who choose to marry should be forewarned of the many inconveniences that they may encounter, lest they fall into depression or despair after encountering them unexpectedly.³⁵ However, as Calvin notes, the troubles associated with marriage do not suggest that marriage itself is evil; rather, they stem from the depravity of man.³⁶

²⁷ Jerome, *Against Jovinianus*, 748; cf. "To Pammachius," 196.

²⁸ Jerome, *Against Jovinianus*, 764.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 772.

³⁰ Calvin, 224.

³¹ Cf. Calvin, 194.

³² See Calvin, 221-224. Paul is speaking to parents who have children under their authority. The virgin daughter under consideration is probably of marriageable age, which, in Calvin's day, was recognized to be 12 to 20 years (Calvin, 221; cf. 1 Cor. 7:36).

³³ Calvin, 213.

³⁴ Calvin, 219, cf. 217.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 216.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 217.

Finally, celibacy is better than marriage because “it has more liberty, so that persons can serve God with greater freedom.”³⁷ If a man possesses self-control, the ability to avoid the fires of burning passion, *and* the special gift of singleness, then it is better for him not to seek a wife (1 Cor. 7:9, 27). Calvin says that such a man must not “rashly ensnare himself, for liberty ought not to be lightly thrown away.”³⁸

Paul wants us “to be free from concern” (1 Cor. 7:32). An unmarried man “is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord,” and an unmarried woman or virgin “is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit” (1 Cor. 7:32, 34). Paul declares that the purpose for which celibacy is to be desired is “to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord” (cf. 1 Cor. 7:35). Calvin explains that celibacy is to be desired

not on its own account, nor on the ground of its being a state that is nearer to perfection, but that we may cleave to God without distraction—*that* being the one thing that a Christian man ought exclusively to look to during his whole life.³⁹

Paul desires for all people to enjoy the liberty of celibacy, so that they may devote all their thoughts and pursuits to the service of Christ. However, he acknowledges that not all people have this special gift from God (1 Cor. 7:7-9, 27-28, 35). Unless one has the gift of celibacy, a pursuit of such wholehearted devotion to the service to Christ will be in vain.

Calvin astutely says,

Where there is burning (1 Cor. 7:9) no love of God can exist. But Paul’s meaning is this—that an unmarried person is free, and is not hindered from thinking of the things of God. The pious make use of this liberty. Others turn everything to their own destruction.⁴⁰

Having examined the normativeness of marriage and the advantages of celibacy over marriage, let us finally consider Jerome’s teaching regarding vows of perpetual chastity. Jerome promotes such vows on the basis that marriage is a hindrance to prayer. And he concludes that since priests must always pray, they must be celibate:

A layman, or any believer, cannot pray unless he abstain from sexual intercourse. Now a priest must always offer sacrifices for the people: he must therefore always pray. And if he must always pray, he must always be released from the duties of marriage.⁴¹

³⁷ Ibid., 224.

³⁸ Ibid., 212.

³⁹ Ibid., 220.

⁴⁰ Calvin, 217.

⁴¹ Jerome, *Against Jovinianus*, 794, cf. 755. Cf. Jerome, “To Eustochium,” 126. Jerome’s argument here has several weaknesses. First, Paul’s admonition to pray always (Eph. 6:18) applies to all believers, not just priests. Second, if a man “cannot pray unless he abstain from sexual intercourse,” then must he also abstain from eating and drinking? If priests must always pray, then in accordance with Jerome’s reasoning, they should always be deprived of food and drink. Furthermore, following Jerome’s line of reasoning to its logical conclusion, priests should never talk to anyone, for they cannot pray unless they abstain from talking to other people.

Because such vows are perpetual, a virgin who marries after consecration is incestuous,” “adulterous,” and “will have damnation.”⁴²

Calvin vociferously opposes Jerome’s teaching regarding vows of perpetual chastity. He writes, “No necessity ought to be imposed, so as to make it unlawful for individuals to marry, if they think proper.”⁴³ Although Paul clearly commends celibacy, we must not forget that “at the same time, [he leaves] marriage as a matter of choice; and not simply a matter of choice, but a needful remedy for incontinency, which ought not to be denied to any one.”⁴⁴

Calvin notes that such vows of chastity are a violation of Christian liberty: “No snare must be put upon men’s consciences, so as to keep back any one from marriage, but that every one must have liberty allowed him.”⁴⁵ Paul writes, “But even if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned” (1 Cor. 7:28). Furthermore, the apostle Paul teaches that forbidding marriage is a heretical teaching—a “doctrine of demons” (1 Tim. 4:1-3).

Thus, vows of perpetual chastity or virginity not only bind the consciences of men where God has not bound them, but also are forbidden in Scripture, by good and necessary inference (cf. 1 Tim. 4:3). Echoing Calvin’s harsh rebuke of Jerome’s teaching, John Knox and his colleagues in the Church of Scotland similarly condemned such vows of chastity in the first chapter of their *First Book of Discipline* (1560):

. . . whatsoever men, by Laws, Councils, or Constitutions have imposed upon the consciences of men, without the expressed commandment of God’s word: such as *vows of chastity, foreswearing of marriage* . . . because in God’s Scriptures they neither have commandment nor assurance, we judge them utterly to be abolished from this Realm; affirming further, that the obstinate maintainers and teachers of such abominations ought not to escape the punishment of the Civil Magistrate.⁴⁶

Having concluded our critical analysis of Jerome’s and Calvin’s teachings in regard to celibacy, let us briefly consider a few historical factors that may have influenced these men. Why did such ideas about celibacy arise and become prevalent in Jerome’s day, and why did they prevail throughout so much of the Western Church?

During the first few centuries of Christendom, the early Church was plagued by Docetism, Gnosticism, Marcionism, and other heresies, which viewed the world of space, time, and matter as evil and, therefore, were often very hostile to sex and marriage. Sex and marriage were often viewed as earthly, unspiritual, and animalistic.

Another factor precipitating the Church’s aversion to sex and marriage was the rampant

⁴² Ibid., 765.

⁴³ Calvin, 224.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 221.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 220, cf. 1 Cor. 7:35.

⁴⁶ John Knox, *The Works of John Knox*, vol. 2, ed. David Laing (Edinburgh: Bannatyne Club, 1855), 185-186, author’s translation, emphasis added.

sexual immorality that plagued the Roman Empire. Many Christians responded to the pervasive sexual deviancy of this licentious culture by viewing sexuality as entirely evil.

Yet, at the same time, Biblical scholars such as Jerome could neither totally ignore Scripture's teaching regarding marriage nor could they outright condemn the means God provided for the propagation of the human race. Therefore, in attempting to reconcile the teaching of Scripture with that of tradition—i.e., the early Church's hostile view toward sex and marriage—Jerome maintained the seemingly inconsistent views of marriage as “silver” and yet as the “lesser of two evils.” Apparently, he either was unable or unwilling to recognize the inconsistency between these two views.

What historical factors may have influenced Calvin? An ardent believer in *sola Scriptura*, which was the formal cause of the Protestant Reformation, Calvin rejected the Western Church's prior understanding on this issue, recognizing that it was a departure from the apostolic tradition (i.e., the Word of God). Moreover, he was keenly aware of the gross sexual immorality that had developed in the Medieval church, among its clergy and in its monasteries and nunneries.⁴⁷ Plain reason and Scripture jointly convinced Calvin that vows of chastity were contrary to God's word and to nature itself. While his exegetical and theological prowess enabled him rightly to interpret Scripture's teaching in regard to celibacy and to avoid the danger of overreacting to the Church's past error by *requiring* marriage, he also was able to recognize and refute the error in the Western church's tradition.

In conclusion, although Jerome is considered to be one of the best scholars of the early Church, his teachings in regard to celibacy were in serious error. By exalting celibacy over marriage and promoting vows of chastity, Jerome set in motion a movement that would lead the Western church to require a celibate clergy. This false teaching promoted an environment conducive to scandalous sexual immorality, which has plagued the Roman Catholic Church from medieval times to the present day. By God's grace, the Protestant Reformation finally returned the Church to a Biblical understanding of celibacy and marriage. John Calvin's writings help us rightly to understand God's revealed will with respect to human sexuality, and they are an invaluable asset for us in an age in which sexual immorality and confusion run rampant in the Church.

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⁴⁷ See, e.g., Calvin, 193-194, 217, 219.