

Stay where you are

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Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts. Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him. Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you — although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to. (1 Corinthians 7:17-24)

Introduction

The message of this passage is very clear: as a general rule as Christians we should stay where we are rather than looking for a change in our situation. The apostle repeats this message three times in this passage. He says in verse 17 "Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him, and to which the Lord has called him." Then he says in verse 20, "Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when the Lord called him." Then again, in verse 24, "Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to."

The context for this passage is that the apostle has been talking about marriage. He has been saying that if you are unmarried it is quite legitimate to stay unmarried, although you can marry if you wish. To those who are married the apostle has said that they should not divorce. If the marriage is in difficulty

they may perhaps separate, but only with a view to reconciliation.

This passage generalises what the apostle has been saying about marriage, and applies it to life in general. The apostle says, in effect, "What I am telling you about marriage is true about life in general. Stay in the situation you were in when you were converted. Do not look for changes in your situation in life."

Now what the apostle says here is very relevant to our present situation. There is a widespread restlessness in our society. People are constantly changing jobs, changing their homes, changing their location, and changing their "partners". And in the church we often see a similar restlessness. Some believers will never settle down, but are constantly changing jobs, changing where they live, or changing churches. Some pastors as well, it has to be said, are always on the move, never staying more than a year or two in any one church.

So what the apostle says goes right against the grain of current living. As we think about this passage, I want us to think about the reasons, implicit or explicit, that lie behind the rule that the apostle lays down.

1. As a general rule, there is nothing wrong with the situation you were in when you were converted

The first thing to see is that, as a general rule, there is nothing wrong with the situation you were in when you were converted. At many points in this passage the apostle uses the word "called". What he is referring to when he uses this word is when a person is converted. When someone becomes a true Christian a miracle takes place. They were previously living their lives without God, and without any desire for him. Then, perhaps through talking with a Christian, perhaps through reading the Bible, or perhaps through reading a sermon like this, God speaks to them. He summons them to turn from wrongdoing and believe on Christ. He calls them. And that call is so strong, so insistent, so persuasive, that the only thing the person wants to do is to obey it.

Now the apostle says that the believers should stay in the position they were in when they were called, or when they were converted. For example he says in verses 18 and 19, "Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised." Then he says in verse 20 "Each one should remain in the situation he was in when God called him." Then again in

verse 21 he says, "Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you." So we see this principle running through the passage: the situation you were in when before you became a Christian is the situation you should stay in now you have become a Christian. The underlying assumption behind this is that there is nothing inherently sinful or non-Christian about most of the situations that people are in when they are converted.

Of course, for some people who become Christians, their old situation will have been so bound up with their non-Christian way of life that when they are converted they will have to change it. For example, someone who previously was a drug trader, or a thief, or a robber or a prostitute, will have to find a new way of making money which is honest and law-abiding, and does not do harm to others. Or, to take another example, if you were living with your boyfriend or girlfriend prior to your conversion, this would have to stop. But for most people there will be no need to change their job or their marital status just because they have become a Christian. Indeed, I would go further, and say on the basis of this passage, in most cases it would be wrong for someone to change his situation in life just because he has become a Christian. The way in which he lives should be totally different from the way in which he lived as a non-Christian, but in most cases there will be no need for the situation itself to change.

Let us apply this to the area of what job you do. Some believers labour under the misunderstanding that there are certain jobs which are more "Christian" than others, and they have the idea that when they are converted, if they are going to be really good Christians, they will need to change their job to a more "Christian" one. The more "Christian" occupations are thought to be ones like being a teacher, or a nurse or a doctor. I have also heard at a Christian conference the suggestion that if you are going to be a really obedient Christian you will heed the call to "full-time" Christian service, and will leave your secular job. Now of course some are called to work directly for the church, but for most believers God calls them to serve him in their current employment, and that is a very helpful and good thing. It is perfectly valid for a Christian to be a plumber, or an electrician, or a builder, or a shop assistant, or a train driver, or a street cleaner, or a lawyer or a banker, or whatever other job there might be, as long as it is honest and law-abiding. Each one makes a valuable contribution to people's lives. Each one can be done to the glory of God. So whatever was your job when you were converted, as a general rule that is the job for you to do as a Christian. That is sensible, because you will be using the skills you already had when you were converted. You will be able to mix with your old friends and work

colleagues and you will be able to witness to them about the change in your life that Christ has brought about.

What is said about your job could equally be said about where you live. Some believers think that certain areas are more “Christian” than others, and that when you become a Christian you should aim to move to a more “Christian” area, perhaps to have a “nicer” environment to bring up the children. But you can live as a Christian in one area just as much as in another area. If you were born and brought up in one area, why move to another, unless you believe God is specifically calling you to move to a new area to serve him? In the area where you have been brought up you have all your old friends and contacts, and most likely your immediate family as well. You are, it is to be hoped, settled in a church where you are being fed and where you are able to help others. Why, then, should you feel you have to move?

2. Your circumstances have been ruled over by God

The second reason that the apostle gives for saying that we should stay where we are is that our circumstances have been ruled over by God. In verse 17 we read “each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which the Lord has called him.” Each one of us has our own particular circumstances allotted to us by Almighty God. He has ruled over the situations we find ourselves in. The circumstances of our lives are not accidental, and are arranged for our good.

This is something that is taught constantly in the Scriptures. For example, when he was preaching to the crowds in Athens, the apostle Paul said “From one man he [that is, God] made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live” (Acts 17.26). Jesus taught something similar in the parable of the talents. He told the story of a man who went away on a journey and called his servants to him, and entrusted his property to them. He gave each person a different number of “talents” to look after, and to use as profitably as he could. The person who went away on the journey corresponds to God, and the people who are given the talents are us. The point is: each person has a different amount given to him or her, as decided by God.

So we see that there is a great variety in the circumstances of our lives, and these differing circumstances are all ruled over by God. In the area of marriage

and family relationships, some are married and some are single. Of those who are married, some have very happy and good relationships, others have strained and difficult relationships. Financially, some are well off, and others find it hard to make ends meet. Some are highly intelligent, others are not very bright. Some are very good looking, others are very plain in their looks. Some have bubbly extrovert personalities, others are quiet and introverted. Some live in very large and elegant homes, others live in small and poorly furnished homes. Some are strong and healthy, others are weak and constantly dogged by ill-health.

The thing to remember is that, whatever the particular circumstances of your life, God has arranged things in the best possible way for you, if you are a Christian. He knows what he is going to do for you. He has plans for you, and they are to bless you and to do you good. He said to his people Israel "For I know the plans I have for you plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29.11). What he said to Israel he says to all true believers. He is for us, not against us. He is, if I may use the term "on our side", or to be more precise, he has put us on his side. He has loved us with an everlasting love, and nothing that he sends our way is sent for any other reason than to do us good.

Sometimes as Christians there can be a deep unhappiness that settles upon us, which results in us having restless spirits. This unhappiness can come from the mistaken idea that somehow we have missed "the best" and we are living a second rate existence. We can have the idea that if only our circumstances were different we would be happy and fulfilled. The teaching of this passage is that God has arranged the circumstances of your life for your good, and he knows best. We do not need to worry about our situation but instead we can trust that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8.28).

3. The outward circumstances of our lives are not important

The third reason for us to stay in the situation that we are in is that our outward circumstances are not very important. The apostle says in verses 18 and 19, 'Was a man circumcised when he was called? He should not be uncircumcised. Was he uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts.'" What the apostle says here would have been quite mind-blowing for some of his readers, because we know from this and

other letters that for many Christians in the first century circumcision was a very big issue indeed. Some who were circumcised thought that those who were not circumcised were of very doubtful worth as believers, and might perhaps not be regarded as believers at all. Others who were not circumcised were tempted to feel a sense of inferiority because they did not have the outward badge of spirituality which circumcision was thought to give. But Paul says that this is a non-issue. It simply does not matter. What matters is obeying the commandments of God.

We could legitimately extend what the apostle says about circumcision to all of the circumstances of our lives. It does not matter whether you are rich or poor, good looking or ugly, strong or weak physically, male or female, black or white skinned, educated or uneducated, married or single, very "successful" in this world's terms or a complete "failure", living in a palace or living in a hovel. None of these things really matters. What actually matters is whether you obey God's commandments. Are you rejoicing in God's love? Are you loving towards your neighbour, and towards your fellow believer? Are you humble? Are you kind to others? Do you keep your word? Are you honest? These are the things that God is interested in, and that he is looking for from your life. "He has shown you O man what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6.8).

Later on in this passage, in verses 22 and 23, Paul underlines what he said about circumcision by mentioning another big issue of the day: slavery. It is hard for us who live in what is called a "free" and "democratic" society where everyone has equal "rights" to comprehend what a massive issue slavery would have been for those who lived under it. But try to imagine what it must have been like to be someone else's property, to be bought and sold at their whim and fancy, and to be forced to do what your master told you to do, on pain of starvation or cruel beating. This would have been a far bigger issue than the sort of things that trouble us today. Yet the apostle says, in effect, it really does not matter whether you are a slave or a free man. All that actually matters is that you belong to Christ. "Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you - although if you can get your freedom do so. For he who was a slave when he was called is the Lord's freedman, and he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave". If you are a slave in human terms it does not matter, because you have been set free spiritually from your sins if you are a Christian. On the other hand, if you are free, that does not really carry much significance, because you have been called to serve Christ as his slave. The

Gospel is a great leveller. It makes our outward circumstances irrelevant. What counts is that we live our lives, each one of us, as “responsible to God” v. 24.

4. Spending too much effort on changing your outward circumstances will be damaging

The fourth reason for being willing to stay with our current circumstances is that spending too much effort on changing our circumstances will be damaging, and will not deliver the happiness that we hoped for. The apostle says in verse 21, “Were you a slave when you were called? Don’t let it trouble you – although if you can gain your freedom do so.” Some slaves were able to purchase their own freedom by saving up the tiny amount of money they earned by working for their masters until such time as they were able to purchase their freedom. Paul says to slaves that it is worth gaining their freedom if they can do so, but if that is beyond their means, they should not let it trouble them. The implication is that if you can change your circumstances without “busting a gut”, then it is worth doing so. But if you cannot improve your circumstances without putting yourself under pressure, then do not let it trouble you.

So, for example, if you are in one job that is very hard work, with long and unsocial hours and low levels of pay, and the opportunity comes up for you to have another job which involves shorter hours and more pay, then it would be sensible and right to take that job. Or, to take another example, if you have a reasonably good mind, and the opportunity comes up for you to go to university, which would open up opportunities for more pleasant and higher paid work than would otherwise be the case, then take that opportunity. But if no such opportunity for a higher paid job or further education comes up, then do not let it worry you. Serve God to the best of your ability in the job you are in now.

And you need to watch out that the so-called new opportunity or promotion that is offered to you is not a twenty-first century form of slavery. There are some management positions which virtually demand that you sell your soul to the company you are working for, where it is expected that you will work very long hours, be on call at night, and often work weekends as well. Some believers get ensnared in these very demanding jobs, perhaps enticed by the pay and perks of the job, and the status they carry. If you are a “high flyer” and are being offered a dazzling career, then take note of what the apostle says in verse 23: “You were bought at price; do not become the slave of men.” If you are a slave through no

fault of your own, do not let it worry you. But do not voluntarily become someone else's slave, someone else's property. If you are a Christian you belong to Christ. Do not throw away your freedom.

So if you are able to improve your situation in life without any great expenditure of effort, fine, go ahead and do so. But if it cannot be improved without a lot of grief, then the best thing is to let things be as they are. Serve God in your current situation, rejoice in God's love, and look forward to the abundance you will enjoy when Christ returns.

In sum, what is the key to what the apostle is talking about in this passage? It can be summed up in one word: Contentment. This is what the apostle Paul had learned. He says in Philippians 4.11 – 13:

I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

If you are content, you will not be constantly on the move trying to find some elusive happiness and satisfaction. How can a person know true contentment? Only through knowing Christ. Without Christ you will always have a vacuum in your life. There will always be an emptiness. So the question is, do you know Christ? Is he your saviour? Has he "called" you? Is he your satisfaction? If you do not know him, then you will never have true peace and contentment in your soul. Come to him. He promises peace – peace that the world cannot give. Come to him. Give him your burdens. Receive from him his love.

But I would also to say to those of us who are Christians today that we need to learn to practice contentment. We need to be careful that we do not get infected with the materialistic, restless and unstable spirit of our age. We need to watch out that we do not swallow the lie that we shall be happy "if only" this or that were different in our lives. If you are a Christian, remember God's love to you. Remember you have been blessed in the heavenly places with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Remember you are loved with an everlasting love. Remember you are adopted as a child of God. Meditate on the fact that in just a short time you will be with the Lord in glory. Remember these things, and, as a general rule, stay put in your current situation and serve God in it to the best of your ability.

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