“ONLY IN THE LORD” by Al Diestelkamp

I recently received a question from one of our readers regarding the application of the apostle Paul’s instructions about marriage options for widows, specifically asking if the same should be expected of widowers. Paul writes, “A wife is bound by law as long as her husband lives, but if her husband dies, she is at liberty to marry whom she will, only in the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:39). Paul then gives his personal judgment that she would be happier if she were to remain unmarried (v.40).

The key to understanding what is expected of a widow who wants to marry is to figure out what is meant in this passage by the phrase “only in the Lord.” In order to determine what the word “only” indicates, we must first determine what the phrase “in the Lord” means in this passage. This is not easy since the phrase is used more than 100 times in the New Testament but does not always have the same meaning. The translators of the New International Version (NIV) tried to settle the issue for us by wording it “but he must belong to the Lord,” and the New English Translation (NET) followed suit with “only someone in the Lord.” However, those are interpretations rather than translations.

There are three differing interpretations among Bible believers as to what is expected of a widow who wants to marry:

1. The phrase “in the Lord” is equivalent to “in Christ.” So if she wishes to marry, she must choose a man who is a Christian.

2. The phrase “in the Lord” means “in accord with the Lord’s will,” so she is free to marry whom she wishes as long as both he and she have a right to marry.

3. This instruction is limited to “the present distress” and is no longer applicable.

I will not try to keep you in suspense as to my conclusion—I believe Paul is answering some specific questions that he received in a letter from the Corinthian brethren (7:1). His answers included instructing a widow who wants to marry to do so only if the one she wishes to marry is a Christian. If my conclusion is correct, I see no reason why he would have answered differently if the question had been asked about a widower. Let me comment on the other proposed interpretations.

A common argument for “only in the Lord” meaning in accord with God’s will is an appeal to similar wording in other of Paul’s writings, especially his instruction to children to “obey their parents in the Lord” (Eph. 6:1). The most common interpretation is that he was telling children to obey their parents as long as what is demanded is in accord with God’s will. However, consider that Paul was writing to Christians in Ephesus where the letter was most likely read in their assemblies where children could be admonished to obey their parents who, as Christians, could be trusted to command what was right.

Another example of similar wording is Paul’s admonition to wives to “submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord” (Col. 3:18). This might be telling wives that obeying their husbands is “fitting” for one who is in Christ.

I readily admit that children should obey their parents and wives should obey their husbands only so long as what is required is according to God’s will. This could be what Paul meant, but it is not the only possible conclusion. There are many examples of the phrase “in the Lord” clearly referring to those “in Christ.” In this very context Paul writes, “For he who is called in the Lord while a slave is the Lord’s freedman.” In the last chapter of Romans, Paul uses phrases “in the Lord” and “in Christ” interchangeably. Note the following: “Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers In Christ Jesus” (16:3); “Greet Andronicus and Junia…who were in Christ before me” (v.7); “Greet Amplias, my beloved in the Lord” (v.8); “Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ” (v.9); “Greet Appelles, approved in the Lord...” There are more—check out verses 11, 12 and 13.

The “present distress” *was* Paul’s reason for advising Christians to “remain as he is” (1 Cor. 7:25ff). It may be that Paul’s “judgment” stated in verse 40 is due to the distress at that time, but it does not necessarily follow that “only in the Lord” was specified for that reason.

It is my conviction that any faithful Christian (whether a widow, widower, or otherwise single) would *want* to marry a Christian, and this is consistent with God’s expectation throughout all generations. The Old Testament, though not a law for us, is our “tutor” (Gal. 3:24), and God’s attitude toward His people marrying outside of His people is evident. The apostle Paul was a single man (by choice), but he made it clear that he had the “right to lead about a believing wife” (1 Cor. 9:5). It is significant to me that the Holy Spirit included the word “believing” regarding Paul’s right.

The marriage relationship is the most intimate relationship between two people. The wife is a man’s suitable “helper” (Gen. 2:15) in ways more than just physically. The Christian should choose someone who will “help” him/her go to heaven. The unbeliever is headed in a different direction than the faithful Christian is. Even if you disagree with my conclusion, I would hope that we could all agree that godly wisdom should motivate a Christian to choose a mate with the same goal—eternal life. So I leave you with the admonition of the apostle Paul: “See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil” (Eph. 5:15-16).

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