

The Gospel Unashamed

"From the cowardice that shrinks from new truth, from the laziness that is content with half-truths, from the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth, O, God of Truth, deliver us."

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Was Paul Ever Married?

We know that Paul was not married when he wrote to the Corinthians. In chapter seven, he says that it is good for the unmarried to remain as he is, that is unmarried. In chapter nine, he asks the rhetorical question about whether he had the right to take along a believing wife like other apostles. This is a question that he could ask only if he was without a wife at that time.

"7 For I wish that all men were even as I myself. But each one has his own gift from God, one in this manner and another in that. 8 But I say to the unmarried and to the widows: It is good for them if they remain even as I am; 9 but if they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion." I Cor. 7:7-9 (NKJV)

"Do we have no right to take along a believing wife, as do also the other apostles, the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas?" I Cor. 9:5 (NKJV)

While some argue that Paul places himself among the divorced or widowed in the I Cor. 7:8 passage, I see nothing in the context that demands this. He is simply discussing whether the unmarried should marry given the "present distress" the Church was in at that time. He argues that it is good to remain unmarried like he is, but only if you can exercise self-control.

"1 Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me: **It is good for a man not to touch a woman. 2 Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband...**26 I suppose therefore that this is good because of the present distress--that it is good for a man to remain as he is:" I Cor. 7:1-2, 26 (NKJV)

There is much more to be said about this passage of Scripture, but those discussions are not relevant to the question at hand.

Since we know that Paul was not married when he wrote the letter of

I Corinthians, the question becomes, was Paul ever married?

There are some who insist that Paul was married and either divorced or widowed. Some go as far as to suggest that his wife might have been martyred, perhaps even by Paul himself before his conversion. While any number of scenarios are possible, not all of them are plausible or probable.

As we consider this question, we need to remember that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. The conclusion that Paul was married at one time and then divorced or widowed requires a chain of reasoning. I propose that we examine each link in this chain of reasoning and check them for weaknesses. We will begin with the first link in the chain.

Link 1: Paul cast an official vote against Christians.

This is based on the statement Paul made to King Agrippa.

"This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority

from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, **I cast my vote against them.**” **Acts 26:10 (NKJV)**

While “vote” is certainly a legitimate and acceptable translation for the Greek word, *psephos*, here, the question is whether this refers to an official vote or whether it is simply a way of Paul saying that he was in full agreement with their deaths. The commentators and language experts are divided on this point. Consider a few of their comments below:

“Lit., *laid down my vote*...Some suppose that Paul here refers to casting his vote as a member of the Sanhedrim; in which case he must have been married and the father of a family. But this there is no reason for believing (compare 1 Cor. vii. 7,8); and the phrase may be taken as expressing merely moral assent and approval.” *Vincent’s Word Studies in the New Testament*

“‘I cast down my pebble’ (a black one). The ancient Greeks used white pebbles for acquittal (Re 2:17), black ones for condemnation as here (the only two uses of the word in the N.T.). Paul’s phrase (not found elsewhere) is more vivid than the usual *katapsêphizô* for voting. They literally cast the pebbles into the urn...If Paul’s language is taken literally here, he was a member of the Sanhedrin and so married when he led the persecution. That is quite possible, though he was not married when he wrote 1Co 7:7, but a widower. It is possible to take the language figuratively for

approval, but not so natural.” *Robertson’s Word Pictures*

“...gave his voice, exerted all his influence and authority, against them, in order that they might be put to death...” Clarke

“Paul was not a member of the sanhedrim, and this does not mean that he voted, but simply that he joined in the persecution; he approved it; he assented to the putting of the saints to death.” Barnes

“Paul was not one of the council, nor, that we read of, in any office or place to judge any person; besides, the Jews are thought to have had no power of life and death; and that St. Stephen was slain rather in a popular tumult, than legally: but Paul may be said to do this, by carrying the suffrages or sentence to the Roman man president, or any others, to get it executed (for so the words will bear); and howsoever, by his approving, rejoicing at, and delighting in their condemnation, (which was indeed giving his voice, as much as he could, against them), this was verified.” Poole

“Belonging to the Sanhedrin was held in such repute that it would be incredible to think that Paul could have belonged to it, appeared repeatedly before it on trial, and still did not refer to his membership one single time...this voting must have been a figurative expression meaning that he cast his voice and influence against the Christians.” L. Edsil Dale

We see similar statements elsewhere in Acts where Paul is

consenting to Stephen’s death, with no reference to any formal vote.

“And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, **I also was standing by consenting to his death**, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.” **Acts 22:20 (NKJV)**

“**Now Saul was consenting to his death.** At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.” **Acts 8:1 (NKJV)**

While it is certainly possible that Paul cast an official vote against Christians, it is far from certain. This link is not without its weaknesses.

Link 2: Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin.

Based on their conclusion that Paul cast an official vote against Christians, some conclude that Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin. But we must ask whether this conclusion is necessary. There are some other possibilities here.

B.W. Johnson suggests that Paul may have been part of a group appointed by the Sanhedrin.

“...some have held that Paul was a member of some lesser court appointed by the Sanhedrin to try the Christians.” *People’s New Testament*

L. Edsil Dale suggests another possible conclusion.

“He had special permission from the Sanhedrin to arrest and to bring Christians to their trial and death. In this sense he voted against them. For all practical purposes he acted for the Sanhedrin as their agent. What one does by commission, he does himself.” Acts Commentary

While it is reasonable to conclude that Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin if he cast an official vote against Christians, it is not a certain conclusion. Paul may have been part of a group that tried to influence the Sanhedrin and cast his vote among that group. He may have been part of any number of other groups and cast his vote there.

We must also remember that the Sanhedrin did not have the power to execute anyone. They had to make their case to Rome if they wanted to put someone to death. Paul is certainly a good example of that. If the Sanhedrin could have put him to death themselves, they surely would have done it. Instead, they appealed to the Roman government. The same can be said of Jesus. In what sense, literal and formal sense could a member of the Sanhedrin cast their vote for anyone to be put to death? Only metaphorically could any of the Jews cast their vote for the death of a Christian. Clearly, Christians were put to death, but they could not be legally condemned to death by the vote of the Sanhedrin.

But there is another weakness to this link. If Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin, why did he never say so. Paul gives his “Jewish credentials” in a number of passages, yet he never claims to

be part of the Sanhedrin. This would seem like an important point to make if it were true. Consider some of these passages below:

“I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers’ law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today.” **Acts 22:3 (NKJV)**

“They knew me from the first, if they were willing to testify, that according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee.” **Acts 26:5 (NKJV)**

“Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I.” **II Cor. 11:22 (NKJV)**

“And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers.” **Gal. 1:14 (NKJV)**

“4 though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: 5 circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; 6 concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. 7 But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ.” **Phil. 3:4-7 (NKJV)**

In any of these passages, Paul could have simply said that he was a member of the Sanhedrin and

rested his case, but he never does that. When Paul was before the council in Acts 23, he could have mentioned it, but he does not. It is hard to believe that he would not refer to this somewhere when we consider how often he found it necessary to defend his zeal for Judaism.

There seem to be some weaknesses in this link as well.

Link 3: Paul was married.

Based on the conclusion that Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin, we are told that he must have been married. After all, a man had to be married to be on the Sanhedrin, right?

That seems to be the case, based on the information that we have. However, we cannot be sure that was the case in Paul’s day. Our source of information on this comes from the Talmud. The Talmud is a collection of teachings about the Torah and commentary on those teachings. This work dates from the fifth century A.D. That is quite some time after Paul’s death. Just how old is the Jewish tradition that members of the Sanhedrin must be married? It is impossible to say with certainty.

Marriage was not the only requirement for members of the Sanhedrin. L. Edsil Dale says that Paul, “would have had to have been married, have had a family, and possessed a flawless physical body.” An article on the Sanhedrin in the Jewish Encyclopedia cites one source from the third century as saying that “they must be tall, of imposing appearance, and of advanced age”.

Regarding Paul's height, Matthew Henry says in his commentary on Acts chapter 9, that, "one of the ancients calls him, *Homo tricubitalis – but four feet and a half in height*".

Further, Paul was likely in his late twenties or early thirties at the time of his conversion and probably in his sixties when he died.

It seems that if we are going to rely on the Talmud for qualifications for members of the Sanhedrin, Paul likely did not qualify either in his physical stature or his age.

Furthermore, if Paul was married, we have to ask what happened to his wife? Was he a widower or was he divorced? We simply have no way to know this, but it had to be one of these. This leaves us wondering why Paul did not refer to his own experience when writing about widows or divorced people. He had a perfect opportunity to do that when he discusses marriage in I Corinthians chapter seven. But all he does there is refer to himself as unmarried.

Paul does mention kinsmen and fellow prisoners who were in Christ before him. But this says nothing about his marital status at that time or earlier in his life. It simply means that he had family who converted to Christ before he did. If he was a widower because his wife had been martyred, then he had good reason to mention that too, but he never did.

"Greet Andronicus and Junia, my countrymen and my fellow prisoners, who are of note among the apostles, who also were in

Christ before me." **Rom. 16:7 (NKJV)**

This link in the chain seems to have its own weaknesses.

Conclusion:

What can we conclude after looking at the chain of reasoning that leads us to believe Paul was married at one time? Is it possible that Paul was married before he became a Christian?

While it is possible that Paul was married at some point, we know that he was not married later in life. Further, we simply cannot say with any certainty that Paul was married earlier in his life. It seems to me that the weight of evidence is against him ever having been married. However, we simply cannot be dogmatic about that either.