

# EXEGETICAL BRIEF: DOES 1 CORINTHIANS 7:39 FORBID A BELIEVER TO MARRY AN UNBELIEVER?

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The NIV translates this verse: "A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, *but he must belong to the Lord.*" The italicized clause is the NIV's rendition of *μόνον ἐν κυρίῳ*, "only in the Lord." *Μόνον* is adverbial, limiting the action described in the verb.

The widowed woman is free to be married (*γαμηθῆναι*) to whomever she wishes; but this marriage must be *ἐν κυρίῳ*. The question, then, revolves around the meaning of the prepositional phrase *ἐν κυρίῳ*. Is it proper to translate it as the NIV does? Is Paul saying that a widow who desires to remarry must marry a Christian? The question is important for its own sake, i.e., the relatively narrow scope of remarriage of widows. But it has even broader ramifications. If a Christian *widow* is permitted to marry only a Christian, it would be only logical to conclude that *any* Christian who desires to marry or remarry is commanded to marry only a Christian. Jay Adams, for example, applies this phrase to the remarriage of a divorced person. After rightly concluding that it is scripturally proper for some divorced persons to remarry, he adds, "So long as they 'marry in the Lord' (i.e., Christians must marry Christians. When they are free to marry, they are not free to marry any and every person; they may marry only believers)" (*Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage*, p. 87).

We could divide the translations of our English versions into three groups:

1. A number of English versions translate the phrase in the way the NIV does (e.g., Living Bible, "but only if she marries a Christian"; New English Bible, "provided the relationship is within the Lord's fellowship"; Goodspeed, "so long as he is a Christian"; Contemporary English Version, "only to a man who is a follower of the Lord"). According to Meyer's commentary on 1 Corinthians, this is the way that a number of the church fathers took it, e.g., Tertullian, Cyprian, Ambrosiaster, Jerome, and Theodoret. The Baur-Arndt-Gingrich Lexicon takes the same approach. It states that "*marry in the Lord*=marry a Christian." A perusal of the commentaries in the Seminary library revealed that the majority of them (13 of the 19 consulted) interpret *μόνον ἐν κυρίῳ* to mean that if a widow desires to remarry, she *must* marry a Christian. This includes some Lutheran commentaries. The note under 1 Corinthians 7:39 in the *Concordia Self-Study Bible* states: "Death breaks the marriage bond, and a Christian is then free to marry another Christian." The *Concordia Commentary* says the same thing: "*In the Lord*, that is, to a fellow Christian."
2. Another group of versions translates the phrase quite literally: "only in the Lord" (e.g., King James, New King James, Revised Standard, New American Standard, New Evangelical Translation, Jerusalem, as well as Luther). This leaves it up to the reader to interpret the phrase.
3. Other versions, like the first group cited above, are interpretive in their translation of this prepositional phrase. But they take *ἐν κυρίῳ* more broadly, e.g., "but let her be guided by the Lord" (Phillips); "only in a Christian way" (Berkeley); "but this must be a marriage acceptable to the Lord" (New Living Translation). Meyer mentions that Chrysostom and Theophylact likewise interpreted *ἐν κυρίῳ*, to mean "as a Christian should," "in a Christian way." Barrett's translation and remarks are representative of commentators who take this approach: "'Remembering only that she is a Christian' . . . . To say, 'Must be a Christian,' narrows Paul's meaning."

This latter approach seems to be the best way to bring out the meaning of the preposition ἐν. The two most frequent uses of this preposition are to take it in the temporal sense, e.g., ἐν τῇ σαββάτῳ, "on (within the time frame of) the Sabbath day," or in the local sense, e.g., ἐν τῇ ἀγορᾷ, "in the marketplace." The local sense is also present with the dative of the person, which is where ἐν κυρίῳ fits (a phrase used 47 times by Paul in his epistles). Moulton brings out in his grammar that in such a case "the local sense [of ἐν] is slightly extended to denote *in the sphere of*, especially of God [and] Christ" (Moulton III, p. 262). The widow who desires to remarry should do so "in the sphere of the Lord."

In a few cases, in particular when Paul uses a noun with ἐν κυρίῳ, this prepositional phrase does clearly indicate fellow Christians, e.g., Romans 16:11, "Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord" (τούς ὄντας ἐν κυρίῳ; cf. also Php 1:14).

But more often Paul uses ἐν κυρίῳ with a verb, e.g.,

boasting in the Lord (1 Co 1:31, ὁ καυχώμενος ἐν κυρίῳ καυχάσθω);

being convinced in the Lord (Gal 5:10, ἐγὼ πέποιθα εἰς ὑμᾶς ἐν κυρίῳ);

testifying in the Lord (Eph 4:17, μαπτύρομαι ἐν κυρίῳ);

being strong in the Lord (Eph 6:10, ἐνδυναμοῦσθε ἐν κυρίῳ);

welcoming someone in the Lord (Php 2:29, προσδέχεσθε οὖν αὐτὸν ἐν κυρίῳ);

rejoicing in the Lord (Php 3:1, χαίρετε ἐν κυρίῳ);

standing in the Lord (Php 4:1, στήκετε ἐν κυρίῳ);

agreeing in the Lord (Php 4:2, τὸ αὐτὸ φρονεῖν ἐν κυρίῳ);

asking and encouraging in the Lord (1 Th 4:1, ἐρωτῶμεν ὑμᾶς καὶ παρακαλοῦμεν ἐν κυρίῳ);

leading in the Lord (1 Th 5:1, προΐσταμένους ὑμῶν ἐν κυρίῳ).

In all of these usages the thought is clearly expressed that in carrying out whatever action the verb is describing the person is (or is encouraging to be) taking into account his or her union with Christ. He is (or is encouraged to be remembering that he is a Christian, and all that this faith-union with Christ implies.

It appears that Paul is saying the same thing with μόνον ἐν κυρίῳ in 1 Corinthians 7:39. Although Paul is expressing a strong caution with this phrase, there is nothing in the immediate context that would lead to the conclusion that Paul here is specifically forbidding a Christian to marry a non-Christian. Had Paul meant to say that, it seems more likely he would have said that widows who want to remarry must τοὺς ὄντας ἐν κυρίῳ. We should also note that the broader scriptural context does not lend support to the interpretation that Paul is forbidding a Christian to marry a non-Christian. Some advocates of the view that Paul is forbidding Christian/non-Christian marriages in this verse maintain that 2 Corinthians 6:14 ("Do not be yoked together with unbelievers") sheds light on the meaning of this passage. A study of the context of 2 Corinthians 6:14, however, makes it clear that the "yoking" Paul is talking about there is not marriage but religious fellowship.

It would thus be too restrictive of the phrase ἐν κυρίῳ to make the claim that Paul is telling the Christian widow she may not under any circumstance marry a non-Christian. To counsel a Christian widow, or any Christian, that it might be best for her or him to marry a fellow Christian certainly could and probably would, be an application of what it means to marry someone "in the sphere of the Lord"; but it cannot be set forth as a biblical precept enunciated by Paul in this verse. Thus Luther is not contradicting the Scriptures when he writes: "Marriage is an outward, bodily thing, like any other worldly undertaking. Just as I may eat, drink, sleep, walk, ride with, buy from, speak to, and deal with a heathen, Jew, Turk, or heretic, so I may also Marry and continue in wedlock with him. . . . A heathen is just as much a man or a woman—God's good creation—as St. Peter, St. Paul, and St. Lucy, not to speak of a slack and spurious Christian" ("The Estate of Marriage," LW 45:25).

Leon Morris is correct when he states that "Paul says no more than 'only in the Lord.' In marriage as in all else, the Christian must remember that he acts as a member of Christ's body" (Tyndale Commentary on 1 Corinthians).