3. 1 Cor 7:32ff.: anxiety and individual decision-making

3.1. Individual decision-making

He does so by taking himself as a paradigm and pointing to his own human "anxiety": consequently, μέριμνα occurs as an anthropological viz. ethical criterion of individual decision-making.

3.2. Sexuality and anxiety: individual decision-making in 1 Cor 7

In 1 Cor 7:32, Paul states: "I want you to be free from anxieties (ἀμέριμνος)." This seems to be close to Paul’s admonition in Phil 4 (s. above). Again, Paul is concerned with the analysis of human existence because, in 1 Cor 7, the context is also full of various temporal, that is eschatological, motifs. Paul says, "the appointed time has grown very short (ὁ καιρὸς συνεσταλμένος)." However, in this frame of correctly perceiving time, Paul does not only admonish his community; rather, he makes his engagement with individual anxiety into the final criterion of sexual ethics.

How does Paul achieve this? The general discourse about sexual ethics is raised by the Corinthians themselves, who write to Paul and ask him about various subjects (1 Cor 7:1; περὶ δέ) which all concern the legitimacy of sexual practice among Christ believers. One central question is whether those who are unmarried should marry. If the Corinthians simply take Paul as an individual paradigm here, they will remain single and live unmarried. And, indeed, Paul recommends his unmarried lifestyle to the Corinthians (v. 8).

At the same time, Paul is well aware of the moral challenges of remaining unmarried. He argues that, if the Corinthians “cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion (πυροῦσθαι)” (v. 9). Paul is clearly aware of erotic affects, and he is realistic enough to consider these affects when responding to the Corinthian questions (cf. v. 36). Since he cannot refer to the Lord’s authority here (v. 10), everything Paul says about the status of being “unmarried” is based upon his individual view: “I have no command (ἐπιταγή) of the Lord, but I give my opinion (γνώμη) as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy” (v. 25). At this point, Paul actually reveals the principles of individual decision-making.

In light of eschatological hope, Paul would like the Corinthians to adopt an adequate type of Christ-believing “anxiety.” For this reason, he does not intend to “lay any restraint (βρόχος) upon” the Corinthians (v. 35). He therefore identifies various options for handling “anxiety” by, of course, sympathizing with how “anxiety” appears among those who are unmarried.31 “The unmarried man

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30 Current studies on ancient emotions have revealed the extent to which Paul was aware of emotionality, which he also made use of as a letter-writer.
31 For Paul’s promotion of celibacy, see F. E. Brenk, “Most Beautiful,” 108ff.
is anxious (μεριμνᾷ) about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious (μεριμνᾷ) about worldly affairs, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman or girl is anxious (μεριμνᾷ) about the affairs of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious (μεριμνᾷ) about worldly affairs, how to please her husband” (v. 32b-34). Paul concludes that getting married “is no sin” (v. 36), but refraining from marriage is a better choice (v. 38).

Paul’s recommendation to remain single is remarkable, especially when seen in the light of Hellenistic-Roman politics and culture: Augustan marriage legislation was designed to increase the birthrate in the early Roman Empire, and Aristotelian politics is rooted in the theory that marriage is the prototype of communitarian life in the polis (pol 1:2). Most evidently, in 1 Cor 7, Paul elaborates on eschatological “anxiety” as an individual tool of decision-making. In Paul’s argument, μεριμνα is a basic pattern of anthropology and ethics. While Paul generally engages in communal affairs, such as the οἰκοδομή (“manner of building”) of the Corinthian community, in 1 Cor 7, he is primarily concerned with each person’s existential “anxiety”; in this way, he reflects on the female and the male person equally. Reflections about “anxiety” and “care” help to develop the experience of the human Self. It is precisely in this that the Corinthians can ultimately follow Paul’s personal example. It is the individual paradigm of decision-making rather than Paul’s personal lifestyle or his case for celibacy (Dieter Zeller) or practices of “temporary abstinence” that the Corinthians should follow.

32 Lex Julia de Maritandis Ordinibus (18 BCE); Lex Papia Poppaea (9 CE) – cf. also: Suetionius, Aug 34. Cf. also: Kolb, Rom, 367 etc.
33 Cf. also H. Flashar, Aristoteles, 108ff.
34 Although the topic might specifically allow for reflections on “anxiety,” Dieter Zeller shows how, in antiquity in particular, the existential experience of “anxiety” applies to the field of marriage and family life. D. Zeller, Brief, 264: “... Dieses existentielle Besetztsein von den Ängsten um den Lebensunterhalt und die Angehörigen kennzeichnet aber nach volkstümlicher Anschauung gerade Ehe und Familie” – with reference to Sophocles, Antiphon, Menander, and Papyrus XIV:17 – Neuer Wettstein II:1:301ff.
36 Cf. D. Zeller, Brief, 278.