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A table of contents for *Irish Biblical Studies* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_ibs-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ibs-01.php)

1 Corinthians 7:14 and Children in the Church

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This verse which is often referred to in discussions of infant baptism is set in the middle of Paul's instructions on marriage and divorce to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 7) and raises a number of important problems most of which are irrelevant to the status of children. In 7.10f Paul quotes Jesus on the rejection of divorce and then continues (7.12-16), apparently on his own without any claim to the authority of Jesus, to permit separation under certain circumstances. In discussing the reference to children we do not need however to ask how Paul regarded his own authority in relation to that of Jesus nor to consider the conditions under which divorce should be permitted. When Jesus spoke about divorce (Mark 10.1-12) he was referring only to marriages between Jews. In Corinth Paul faced a new situation in a largely Gentile church when one marriage partner became a believer and the other did not. He does nothing to encourage such marriages (if Christians marry they should marry within the church, 7.39), but where they already exist may the partners separate? Two different answers are possible depending on the reaction of the unbelieving partner who may either wish to end the marriage and Paul deals with this in v. 15 or may be happy to continue it and Paul deals with this in vv. 12-14. It is while dealing with the latter possibility that he refers to children.

The question probably arose in the Corinthian church because of the vivid sense which believers had of their separation from the world (cf 5.6-13). Christian partners in the marriage may have become worried about their own possible defilement through their association with their unbelieving consorts (6.12-20) or other members of the community become alarmed lest the continuance of mixed marriages should defile the whole community.

It is clear Paul believes the continuance of the marriage is the proper course. How then does he argue for it? He might have quoted Jesus as he did in v.10 or like Jesus have referred to the Old Testament creation story (Mk 10.6-9) and argued for the sanctity of marriage on its basis--the two have become one flesh. While these ideas may have been at the back of his mind his ostensible argument is that of v. 14--note the 'for' at its beginning. This verse itself makes two statements and the second, which refers to children, supplies the reason for accepting the first. Moreover the way Paul puts the argument suggests that he regards the second statement as axiomatic. The marriage is in fact to be continued because both the children and the unbelieving parent are consecrated or holy.

Who are the children referred to in v.14? At first sight the flow of the argument suggests that they are those of the mixed marriage whether born before or after the conversion of the believing partner. However Paul's use of the second person plural 'your children' probably implies that he has in mind all the children of the Christian community, both those from mixed marriages and those from marriages in which both partners believe. We are not told the age of the children and the Greek word is used both of young and 'adult' children (for adult children see Tit. 1.6; 1 Tim. 3.4f; Col. 3.20f; Eph. 6.1-4, where in each case the children are old enough to be held responsible for their behaviour). We can probably assume that the children are still members of the parental household and have not left it.

Paul affirms that these children are not 'unclean' but 'holy' (the term he uses of the unbelieving partner in the marriage, 'consecrated', is drawn from the verb which supplies the adjective 'holy'; to consecrate is to make holy). It is Paul's use of these terms that makes this verse difficult to understand. We normally

Best, 1 Cor 7:14 and Children... , IBS 12, Oct 1990

associate holiness with belief in Christ; how then can those who are children and either too young to believe or as older children and mature members of the household have refused to join the believing partner in the faith be described as holy?

It is occasionally suggested that all Paul is saying is that the children are 'legitimate' (unclean = illegitimate, holy = legitimate). There does not appear to be any evidence for the Greek words being used with this sense. Were the reasoning correct it would imply that (1) all non-Christian marriages were illegitimate, and (2) that the children in mind must be those of mixed marriages alone. Such an interpretation would also fail to meet the worries of both the community and the Christian partners in mixed marriages for their worries do not relate to the legality of the marriages but whether they contaminate the community or the believing spouse or whether the possible strains within mixed marriages necessitate their dissolution. Again this interpretation would imply that a marriage which was previously illegitimate because it was contracted between two pagans suddenly became legitimate when one or both were converted.

Setting aside such a view as irrelevant (it seems to be used only by those who wish to protect themselves from conclusions from scripture which might affect their faith adversely) we need to ask what Paul means by 'holiness' and 'uncleanness'. Both terms are drawn from the Old Testament and were important in the Judaism of his day. In the Old Testament they are used not only of people but also of 'things', e.g. the temple and its vessels. In either case they regularly possess a ritual aspect. Paul however refers only to people as 'holy', with the possible exception of his description of the liturgical 'kiss' (1 Cor 16.20; 2 Cor 13.12; 1 Thess. 5.26). The ritual aspect may therefore be said to be at a minimum for Paul. Uncleanness is also normally used by Paul in relation to people (2 Cor. 12.21; Gal. 5.19), though in the

Best, 1 Cor 7:14 and Children... , IBS 12, Oct 1990

Gospels the demons exorcised by Jesus are often so described. Paul uses the concept 'holy' much more frequently than he does 'unclean', and applies it to believers when he calls them 'saints'. 'Saints' may be defined either as those who believe in Christ or as those who have been baptised (Paul would probably have seen no distinction between these two definitions). The group of saints or holy people form the church which is then holy (1 Cor. 3.17) and is distinct and separate from the world. Used in this way 'holy' describes a 'standing' before God which he gives to those who believe in Christ. To be holy is to be within the church, within the covenant. 'Holiness' is however also used in another way, with an ethical connotation: it is something for which believers should strive (Rom. 6.19-22; 1 Thess. 3.12-13; 5.23). Uncleanness for its part is something which belongs by its very nature to the pagan world outside the church (1 Thess. 4.7; Rom. 6.19).

We can now return to v.14. Some upholders of infant baptism have argued that if the children of mixed marriages are 'holy' this must imply that they had been baptised, but as we have seen Paul has not necessarily babies in mind. Since he refutes the suggestion that the children are 'unclean' it is probable that some in the Corinthian community did so consider them, and they would hardly have thought this if the children had been baptised. On the other hand if households were baptised on the conversion of one member (Acts 16.15,33) the children and the unbelieving consort would have been baptised. If we argue here for infant baptism are we then also to conclude that the unbelieving partner was baptised because he/she is described as 'consecrated', i.e. holy?

If holiness is associated with belief and/or baptism either as status attained or as an ideal which believers should pursue we appear to have in v.14 an unusual use of the concept in which it can be transferred from one person to another even though that

second person does not fulfil the condition of belief or has not been baptised and cannot be said to be 'saved' (v.16 implies this by leaving open the future conversion of the unbelieving spouse). The saints or holy ones are normally taken elsewhere to be those who have been saved. Arguing in this way it has been supposed that Paul has reverted here either to a pagan conception of holiness or to one common in earlier parts of the Old Testament but later abandoned where holiness is regarded in a physical or quasi-physical way (2 Sam. 6.6,7 where Uzzah touches the ark and is struck dead is often given as an example). Holiness would then be transmitted as a kind of fluid from the believer to the pagan partner and the children so that they also could be described as holy. Such an understanding would imply that Paul imparted here a unique meaning to the concept of holiness and while it must be allowed that unique meanings of words and concepts, given a suitable cultural background, are possible, it is always better to look for consistency in the way authors express themselves. Paul assumes that what he says here can be understood by the Corinthians without further explanation which would imply that he taught them this primitive understanding of holiness while he was with them; since however he normally uses another view we might reasonably expect him to differentiate between the two views and to find this 'physical' understanding in other epistles; it is not there.

Sometimes it is argued that the pagan partner can be said to be acting willingly (note 'consents' in vv. 12f) in a holy manner because he/she does not seek to dissolve the marriage, for in so doing they would be showing respect for Jesus' teaching on marriage (v. 10). This argument can however hardly be extended to the children of the marriage for they have no say over its continuance, and the consecration of the pagan partner is based on the holiness of the children (v.14a depends on v.14b). A further difficulty in this argument is the verbal form of 'consecrated'; this is a

perfect tense which in Greek normally indicates an action beginning at a point in the past and having a continuing effect. Was there then a point, perhaps when the believer was converted, at which the pagan partner decided that the marriage should not break down and has that partner continued to hold by this position? It is more probable that the pagan partner gradually coming to realise what the conversion of the spouse meant also gradually concluded that divorce should not be sought. The perfect tense also appears to exclude any idea of the believing partner exercising slow moral influence on the unbeliever until conversion took place. Finally since the perfect tense places in the past the moment when the holiness of the unbeliever and the children began we cannot escape the difficulties of the verse by supposing that their holiness is only potential and to be realised in the future; for Paul the holiness is already in existence.

Is there then any way in which holiness can be seen as capable of being transferred from one person to another? A solution is probably to be found in the coming together of two ideas from two different thought worlds, both of which are found in Paul. The first is that of 'holiness' as we have sketched it; the other is the sense of the inter-relatedness of people which was felt more keenly then than now in our western culture. This idea, sometimes referred to as racial solidarity or corporate personality, is found in a number of different ways in Paul. It lies behind his teaching on the church as the body of Christ, on the dying and rising of believers with Christ (Rom. 6.3ff), on the involvement of all humanity in the disobedience of Adam. Although it is more difficult to point to actual instances of it in Paul in relation to the family it is found in contemporary Judaism. The clearest easily accessible example comes in Dan. 6.24 where not only are Daniel's accusers thrown into the lions' den but also their wives and children (it is foreign to our way of thinking to imprison the families of convicted criminals with them).

In this verse Paul then is influenced by two currents of thought, one associating holiness with people and the other viewing people as affecting one another by their actions and the way they live. Not choosing between these two currents but combining them he views the members of the family of the believer as affected by that believer's faith or baptism so that they in turn may be termed holy. The unbelieving spouse and the children became 'holy' when the believer was converted and continue to be so (hence the perfect tense). No objection can be offered here from 1 Cor. 6.15-17 where Paul teaches that a sexual liaison between a Christian and a prostitute may endanger, if not sever, the connection between the believer and Christ for the liaison with the prostitute is wrong in God's eyes while marriage is something which God has ordained. The discussion of 1 Cor. 7.3-5 shows that if Paul criticises sexual relations outside marriage he approves of sex within marriage.

That moral and spiritual qualities can in Paul's eyes be transferred from one person to another is not out of keeping with what he writes elsewhere. In 1 Cor. 12.26 he speaks of all the members of the church suffering and rejoicing when one of them suffers or rejoices. In 2 Cor. 1.3-7 he writes of his afflictions as comforting the Corinthians; seeing people suffer does not normally comfort others so the comfort must pass from Paul to the Corinthians in a way that seems mysterious to our Western eyes. In 2 Cor. 4.12 Paul says that while death is at work in him life appears in his readers, again not what we normally expect. Admittedly Paul in these cases envisages the transference of a spiritual quality from one member of the body of Christ to another member and not to an unbeliever but it shows that he can think of transference in quite a different way from what we do.

But why does Paul argue from the holiness of the child (v. 14b) to that of the unbelieving parent (v.



14a)? It seems reasonable to assume that where both parents were believers they brought their children to Christian gatherings (the early church met in the homes of its members and children of the 'host' would surely always have been present) and that in some way the children were accepted by the community as 'holy'. In the case of a mixed marriage the believing parent probably also brought the children who would then be accepted as 'holy'. And if the children were holy, why then not also the unbelieving parent because of the solidarity of the family? So v. 14a follows from v. 14b.

Difficulties begin to appear once we attempt to apply this type of argument to church activity in our day. Society has a more individualistic attitude in respect of people so that the family is not as readily conceived as a cohesive unit as it was in Paul's day (the present divorce rate reflects the loss of belief in family coherence). Our more individualistic attitude derives in part from the Renaissance and in part from the Reformation, the latter with its emphasis on the necessity of personal belief. We thus find it difficult to view holiness as passing from a believing member of a family to the remainder of the family. However it is possible to argue that even in our much more individualised society we ought to recognise family solidarity. Supposing we did this to the extent of baptising the children or admitting them to communion where there was one believing parent ought we not also to baptise the unbelieving parent or admit that parent to communion? This is the logic of Paul's argument; he moves from the holiness of the children, not necessarily babies, to that of the unbelieving parent. If this passage is applied then either to baptism or to children as receiving communion ought we not to include the unbelieving parent where only one parent believes?

E. Best

The English translation used here has been the RSV.

Best, 1 Cor 7:14 and Children... , IBS 12, Oct 1990

Apart from the standard commentaries help in understanding this verse can be obtained from

J Murphy-O'Connor, "Works without Faith in 1 Cor. VII,14", Revue Biblique, 84 (1977), pp. 349-61.

G. Delling, Studien zum Neuen Testament und zum Hellenistischen Judentum. Gesammelte Aufsätze 1950-1968 (ed F. Hahn, T. Holtz, N. Walter), Göttingen, 1970, pp. 257-88.

J.M. Ford, "Hast thou tithed thy Meal?" and "Is thy Child Kosher?" (1 Cor. x.27ff and 1 Cor. vii, 14', JTS, 17 (1966), pp. 76-9.

J. Blinzler, "Zur Auslegung von 1 Kor 7.14" in Neuestestamentliche Aufsätze (FS Josef Schmid, ed J. Blinzler, O. Kuss, F. Mussner), Regensburg, 1963, pp. 23-41.

J. Jeremias, Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries, London, 1960, pp. 44-8.

G.R. Beasley-Murray, Baptism in the New Testament, London, 1963, pp.192-9.

G. Walter, "Übergreifende Heiligkeit und Kindertaufe im Neuen Testament", EvTh 25 (1965), pp. 668-74

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