

## ***“Called to Stay”***

Robert M. Thompson, Pastor

**Corinth Reformed Church**  
150 Sixteenth Avenue NW  
Hickory, North Carolina 28601  
828.328.6196 [corinthtoday.org](http://corinthtoday.org)

*(© 2019 by Robert M. Thompson. Unless otherwise indicated, Scriptures quoted are from The Holy Bible, New International Version, Copyright 2011 by New York International Bible Society.)*

***Your first instinct as a believer should be to stay where you are.***

**1 Corinthians 7:17-24**

**May 23, 2019**

(Corinth sermons are available in audio and print forms at [corinthtoday.org/sermons](http://corinthtoday.org/sermons).)

### ***Obamacare and the Tea Party***

I have no words or way to thank all of you for last weekend. The memories of coming together as a congregation to celebrate 150 years of God’s faithfulness will stay with me a long time. I wanted it to be special, to engage old and new members, from children through senior adults. You did that beyond my fondest dreams, and I want to thank everyone who came, who helped and served, and who prayed. It was a wonderfully unifying day in the Spirit, honoring Jesus our foundation.

What’s next? REST. For all of us, since the church schedule slows down for the summer. I hope you’ll get some rest.

What’s next for Pastor Paul and his family is now, as they are enjoying a much-deserved vacation out west. Linda and I have some rest planned as well, but what’s next for us is three out of four weekends of denominational meetings. I’ll be in Indianapolis this next weekend representing Faithful and Welcoming Churches of the UCC. We will take a couple of days away together the following week. The Southern Conference meets the week after that in Greensboro. The weekend after that, June 20-26, Linda and I (along with Pastor Lori) will be in Milwaukee for the General Synod of the United Church of Christ. We need prayer partners! Then in July, it’s off to Hawaii to see our grandson!

As most of you know, Faithful and Welcoming is a small minority within the UCC. Some of you have heard me describe our booth in the Exhibit Hall is comparable to having an Obamacare information booth at a Tea Party convention.

Most people at General Synod who stop by our booth are friendly. But two years ago in Baltimore, a woman who stopped by our booth flared angrily at Linda. The woman was deeply offended by our even having an exhibit there. She went home and told her pastor, and as a result the Michigan Conference of the United Church of Christ has submitted a [resolution](#) to this General Synod in Milwaukee with the intent of asking the Synod to ban our group and groups like ours from space in the Exhibit Hall.

Who we are and what we believe as Faithful and Welcoming Churches are going to be prominent in Milwaukee. John Dorhauer, the UCC President, told me the other day he thinks this resolution is the pivotal item of business and will in some ways define the UCC. Pray we will do so with the fragrance of Jesus Christ.

Why do we stay in the UCC if at times it's difficult and if at times it seems we don't make any difference? One main reason is our text today, 1 Corinthians 7:17-24. This passage may address what's next for you as well – whether to get married or divorced, whether to change jobs or buy a new house, whether to change churches.

### ***Q & A with Paul***

Paul began 1 Corinthians very positively, affirming the church at Corinth as called by God and expressing confidence that God would keep them firm and declare them blameless through Jesus Christ. Then Paul turned to the number one problem in the church, conflict, reminding them Jesus Christ is the only one foundation for the church.

Chapters 5-6 have to do with sexual immorality. Corinth was a very promiscuous city with a reputation not unlike Las Vegas. "What happens in Corinth stays in Corinth." Paul asks, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?" (6:19) Through the first six chapters, then, Paul is responding to what has heard about the Corinthians. What's next is what he heard from the Corinthians.

Chapter 7 begins, "Now regarding the questions you asked in your letter."<sup>1</sup> The best we can tell, some Corinthians had come to believe and argue that if you really grasp what it means to belong to Jesus and if you really want to live a holy life, you should forsake all earthly pleasures, including, you know, *that*. The King James Version renders it literally: "It is good for a man not to touch a woman."

Apparently Paul is quoting the Corinthians. *That* is such a worldly thing. Deny all physical pleasures and just focus on Jesus. Some took it so far as to say that even married people shouldn't do *that*. Others took this even further: if you're married, get a divorce, especially if you're married to someone who doesn't love Jesus like you do.

---

<sup>1</sup> I'm using the New Living Translation today, the version most commonly used in our contemporary service.

In the middle of the chapter, Paul doesn't talk about *that* at all, at least not directly. He broadens the discussion to a very important spiritual principle that applies to all of life's decisions as a Christian.

Here's the principle: *When deciding what to do next, your first instinct as a believer should be to stay where you are.* Paul said it this way three times in today's text: "Remain as you were when God first called you" (17, 20, 24).

Early this week I decided to post a rather awkward statement on my Facebook page: "Great advice I heard this morning: 'Be content in your situation.'" As expected, I had a range of responses - lots of like and affirming comments, but also some comments that were in the category of what I like to call "But Mode."

Shannon Wells posted my favorite response: "Rich, good looking people usually say that kinda stuff." Shawn Callahan poked back at him, "And what kind of people say what you just said? #stirringthepot." Shannon answered, "Butt ugly and broke like me." See what I mean by "But Mode?" Perfect, Shannon! And Shawn! That's what I wanted.

You should both "like" that statement and go into "But Mode." But before you go into "But Mode" let's look at three reasons Paul says you should be to stay where you are.

### ***The Lord (17-19)***

The first reason to stay put is the Lord. Paul says, "Each of you should continue to live in whatever situation the Lord has placed you" (17).

There are two names for God in the Old and New Testaments, often used interchangeably. When you say "God" the focus is on power. When you say "the Lord" the focus is on relationship. We usually say "God created" but "the Lord" directs us. It's not wrong to say it the other way, though.

Paul could have said, "God has placed you," but I think he says "the Lord" on purpose. He knows you. He directs you. When you're on top of the world, you say "The Lord did this." Paul wants you to learn to say that about every situation.

I know that puts you in "But Mode." How can God be in charge when bad things happen? Don't go there. That's above your pay grade. Paul is not trying to explain all the mysteries of what happens in the invisible world. This is about "the Lord" who loves you, guides you, helps you. Stay where you are because you trust him.

Paul goes on to say, "This is my rule for all the churches" (17, emphasis added). He says elsewhere in this chapter that he distinguishes between his rules and God's. He seems to be saying this is one of his. He's hinting this is not absolute.

Paul follows with an example. If you were circumcised before you became a believer, don't try to reverse it (18). That may seem odd to you, but it was possible and it was done. Men competed athletically in the nude, and when Jews wanted to fit in, some underwent a reverse circumcision. (This is not the time to describe it!)

On the other hand, Paul says, if you were not circumcised when you became a believer, there's no need to change that either (18). You're not less of a Christian if you weren't a Jew first. "For it makes no difference," Paul insists, "whether or not a man has been circumcised." In another situation Paul actually had Timothy circumcised. It makes no difference. The focus of Paul's rule is diminishing what is non-essential.

Paul then returns to his God-focus. The important thing is to keep God's commandments" (19). Which commandments, Paul? For a Jew, circumcision is not only a commandment, it's one of the most important. Paul is saying it's not. There are far more important rules: Love God first and only. Love your neighbor. Be holy. Why? Because these are God's commandments that never change.

### ***Peace (20-21)***

The second reason to stay put is peace. Paul first repeats his principle: "Each of you should remain as you were when God called you" (20). Then he gives his second illustration: "Are you a slave? Don't let that worry you..."

The mention of slavery is troubling to us because of our recent memory of the European and American race-based slave trade. Still today, human trafficking is a hidden and horrible worldwide blight. None of that is the slavery Paul is addressing.

To be sure, any slavery violates human dignity. But in first century Greece, slavery wasn't race-based and it wasn't hidden. It wasn't even illegal. People became slaves one of two ways. First, their country lost a war, and they were given a choice to die or become slaves. And second, they couldn't pay their bills. They sold themselves into slavery to avoid homelessness and starvation. We think of slaves only as doing hard labor or perhaps being forced to give their bodies for someone else's pleasure. Some slaves fit those categories, but many were doctors, teachers, or other professionals.

Paul then adds his "But Mode" – "...but if you get a chance to be free, take it" (21). It's estimated that in Corinth one-third of the population were slaves, one-third were ex-slaves, and one-third were free. So when Paul says, "Don't let that worry you," he's saying this. What God wants for you is peace. If you're an unhappy person, an angry person, a worrier, you may think that a change of your circumstance will change your attitude. Peace comes from God at work inside you, not from your situation.

## ***Freedom (22-24)***

The third reason Paul says to stay where you are is freedom. Like peace, freedom is not an income or marital status or family line. Everyone is free and everyone is a slave, especially if you're a believer. "Remember," Paul says in verse 22, "if you were a slave when the Lord called you, you are now free in the Lord."

At the same time, he says, "If you were free when the Lord called you, you are now a slave in Christ." Slavery is not a dirty word for Paul – as long as Jesus is the Master we're talking about. It's the best thing in the world to be his slave.

And remember, he "paid a high price for you" (23). Paul always brings the Gospel in. Grasping the Gospel changes our attitude about everything. Of course I'm loved. Of course I belong. No matter what circumstances I'm in. Jesus died for me.

What's miserable, Paul says, is to "be enslaved by the world" (23). If you think there's freedom to do whatever you want to do, watch those commercials about people who used their "freedom" to start smoking. Go to an AA meeting and listen to all those who were "free" to start drinking or using. Visit a prison and talk to those who were "free" to harm someone or take their stuff. Being "enslaved by the world" is the worst.

## ***Paul's "But Mode"***

The most important word in this passage is the word "called." It occurs nine times in various forms, although depending on your translation you might not count all nine. It's such an empowering word, such an encouraging word. Paul wrote this nineteen centuries before Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone, but the root idea is the same. When you are summoned, someone wants to connect with you.

So, is Paul talking about your original call to salvation, your call to a career or vocation, or your situation in life? Yes! Any and all of that. Let's look again at his examples, and there we will find his answers to our "But Mode."

First example: circumcision. This is about the part of your life where you had zero control. It's the family you were born into and the decisions your parents made for you. You may try to change something about your early life, but after you do you're not likely to find what you were looking for. Your upbringing is part of your calling.

Second example: social status. This is the part of your life where you have some control. Paul says, "Don't let that worry you." Then he adds, "If you're a slave and can gain your freedom, by all means, go for it!" In our world, we would say, "Of course you get an education. Of course you should improve your skills. Of course you should consider that promotion." Your current work and social status are part of your calling.

Third example: marital status. That's the one over which you have the most control, but the control is still not absolute. Ask single people who would love to be

married. Paul says to them, “I’m exhibit A. You have more to give in service to God when you’re single.” As a pastor, I have to admit that I haven’t done a very good job through the years of lifting up the calling of the single life. There are times to change your marital status, but don’t forget that your current status is part of your calling.

Paul is not saying “never” to any of these changes. He’s just saying to assume that where you are is where God put you. Are you so anxious to get out of where you are that you’re not paying attention to the people right in front of you who need Jesus?

That’s given Linda and me a lot of comfort in the United Church of Christ. We’ve had all kinds of opportunities to serve Christ we never would have had. In the meantime, being in the UCC has made us kinder, more compassionate, broader, deeper. Even in the times that were the hardest, we drew closer to the Lord in full dependence.

If you’re feeling an impulse to move on, then do a heart check of your motives. Why do you need to move? Are you just restless to do something different? Are you thinking the next situation will be easier? Are you sure? Are you trying to run away from problems or people? Or are you really running away from you?

***Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!***

Is there any time we should move on? Of course there is. Paul himself moved around as much as anyone. He knew sometimes “what’s next” is God-called change.

Warren Wiersbe says, “The heart of the matter is a matter of the heart.” It’s why I love that Peter Corneliussen titled his Joan of Arc opera, “The Heart of the Maiden.” Joan of Arc was a 15<sup>th</sup> century French heroine who fought the oppression of the occupying Army. Eric Metaxas describes her this way: imagine a teenage farm girl visiting the Pentagon and saying God had called her to eliminate terrorism. All she needs is an Army to command. But Joan of Arc believed this was God’s calling – to leave the farm and give her all. She died at the stake speaking the name of Jesus.

So what are our take homes?

- 1) *Embrace where you are as your current calling.* Assume that’s where God put you. As Jim Elliott said, “Wherever you are, be all there. Live to the hilt every situation you believe to be the will of God.” Look around you. What is God doing in and through you right where you are?
- 2) *Keep checking your obedience to God’s commands.* Your relationship to him and your response to him is primary.
- 3) *Move on when God calls.* How do you know he’s calling? Check your motives. Am I just running away from something or is God calling me to something new? Seek counsel from others. Pray. Read Scripture. Above all, don’t “worry” about it. He’ll direct you.

God moves his people for two reasons – to change them and to change others. These are the same reasons he may call you to stay where you are. Amen.