In the sixth decade of the 1st century CE, a conversation took place between Paul, a Jew who believed in Christ, and a group of gentile believers in Corinth. Some aspects of this conversation survive for us in a series of letters written by Paul. In this correspondence, we get a sense of some of the issues encountered by this community of newly baptized gentiles, attempting to live as a people of the God of Israel. Through these letters, the various dilemmas and choices that the Corinthians encountered – both within the community and relating to outsiders – echoed around the empire for centuries to come. Although the historical situation changed drastically as Christianity itself took shape after Paul wrote, believers asked the same questions: How do we live with our non-believing neighbors? How can we protect the integrity of the body of Christ and the bodies of its members? How do we define ourselves as different from others?

In this study, I focus on one particular topic for which all of these questions were relevant: marriage between believers and unbelievers. In 1 Corinthians 7:12–16, Paul addressed a question that was perhaps asked of him by the Corinthians: how will a marriage work when one spouse is baptized and another is not? Paul’s response was remarkably tolerant and not terribly specific, and thus lent itself to multiple interpretations. Later church writers, the first of whom was Tertullian, expanded on Paul’s comments, and, with some creative exegesis, filled in details to develop a condemnation of mixed marriages. Specifically, Tertullian, writing in the early 3rd century, used the purity language of 1 Corinthians 6 to interpret 1 Corinthians 7:12–14, thus taking Paul’s language about the whole community and applying it specifically to Christian wives. This exegetical move took hold, I suggest, because it meshed with a larger discourse of protecting and controlling women’s bodies. I explore the possibility, however, that Christian writers, ‘published Christians’ like Tertullian, were not the only ones interpreting Paul. We have evidence of ‘unpublished Christians’ – those whose opinions are not represented by their own extant texts, but
whose views might be recovered in the published arguments of others – who read Paul differently. These Christians capitalized on Paul’s tolerant attitude to validate their own mixed households.

To trace these contrasting interpretations, I first discuss 1 Corinthians 7:12–16. Next I turn to Tertullian, who is the first extant published author to use 1 Corinthians to talk about mixed marriages. Then I focus on evidence of unpublished Christians and their interpretations of Paul in order to demonstrate how the apostle’s ideas are used in creative ways to support different positions on mixed marriage.

Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul wrote about topics related to sexual morality and marriage. In the middle of this discourse, he turned to the topic of ‘mixed marriages,’ or believers being married to unbelievers.

To the rest I say (I and not the Lord): if a brother has an unbelieving wife and she agrees to live with him, let him not leave her. And if a woman has an unbelieving husband and he agrees to live with her, let her not leave her husband. For the unbelieving husband is made holy (ἡγίασται) by the wife and the unbelieving wife is made holy by the brother. Otherwise your children are unclean (ἀκάθαρτα); but now they are holy (ἁγια). If an unbelieving man separates, let him separate; neither a brother or a sister is enslaved in cases such as these. God has called you in peace. For how do you know, woman, if you will save your husband? Or how do you know, man, if you will save your wife? (1 Cor 7:12–16)²

This advice is in keeping with Paul’s larger theme in chapter 7, which is to remain as you are (1 Cor 7:17–20). Whether motivated by apocalyptic views, by an interest in preventing social upheaval, or perhaps both, Paul expressed a fairly tolerant and flexible set of instructions for believers married to unbelievers: if it works, stay together. Paul called for harmony and accommodation on the part of both male and female believers. After all, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “God has called you in peace” (1 Cor 7:15).

Paul’s admonition is striking for two reasons. On the one hand, his approach shows little regard for the social context he addressed, and on the other hand, Paul justified his position with an unexpected argument about contagious holiness. The first point becomes apparent in light of the

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¹ For a fuller treatment of this passage, see Johnson Hodge 2010a.
² Translations of biblical texts are by the author unless otherwise noted.