Is Celibacy Unbiblical?

Another confusion is the notion that celibacy is unbiblical, or even
"unnatural." Every man, it is claimed, must obey the biblical injunction
to "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:28); and Paul commands that "each
man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband" (1 Cor.
7:2). It is even argued that celibacy somehow "causes," or at least
correlates with higher incidence of, illicit sexual behavior or
perversion.

All of this is false. Although most people are at some point in their
lives called to the married state, the vocation of celibacy is
explicitly advocated-as well as practiced-by both Jesus and Paul.

So, far from "commanding" marriage in 1 Corinthians 7, in that very
chapter Paul actually endorses celibacy for those capable of it: "To the
unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain single
as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry.
For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion" (7:8-9).

It is only because of this "temptation to immorality" (7:2) that Paul
gives the teaching about each man and woman having a spouse and giving
each other their "conjugal rights" (7:3); he specifically clarifies, "I
say this by way of concession, not of command. I wish that all were as I
myself am. But each has his own special gift from God, one of one kind
and one of another" (7:6-7).

Paul even goes on to make a case for preferring celibacy to marriage:
"Are you free from a wife? Do not seek marriage. . . those who marry
will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that. . . . The
unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please
the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to
please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman
or girl is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to be holy in body
and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about worldly affairs, how
to please her husband" (1 Cor 7:27-34).

Paul's conclusion: He who marries "does well; and he who refrains from
marriage will do better" (7:38).

Paul was not the first apostle to conclude that celibacy is, in some
sense, "better" than marriage. After Jesus' teaching in Matthew 19 on
divorce and remarriage, the disciples exclaimed, "If such is the case
between a man and his wife, it is better not to marry" (Matt 19:10).
This remark prompted Jesus' teaching on the value of celibacy "for the
sake of the kingdom":

Matt 19:11 But He said to them, "All cannot accept this saying, but only
[those] to whom it has been given: 12 "For there are eunuchs who were
born thus from [their] mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were
made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves
eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He who is able to accept [it,]
let him accept [it."] (Matt. 19:11-12). (The word "eunuch" in the last
category ('those who have made themselves eunuchs') does not mean a
castrated male, since Jesus did not teach self-castration).

Notice that this sort of celibacy "for the sake of the kingdom" is a
gift, a call that is not granted to all, or even most people, but is
granted to some. Other people are called to marriage. It is true that
too often individuals in both vocations fall short of the requirements
of their state, but this does not diminish either vocation, nor does it
mean that the individuals in question were "not really called" to that
vocation. The sin of a priest doesn't necessarily prove that he never
should have taken a vow of celibacy, any more than the sin of a married
man or woman proves that he or she never should have gotten married. It
is possible for us to fall short of our own true calling.

Celibacy is neither unnatural nor unbiblical. "Be fruitful and multiply"
is not binding upon every individual; rather, it is a general precept
for the human race. Otherwise, every unmarried man and woman of marrying
age would be in a state of sin by remaining single, and Jesus and Paul
would be guilty of advocating sin as well as committing it.

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The theory that Church leaders must be married also contradicts the
obvious fact that Paul himself, an eminent Church leader, was single and
happy to be so. Unless Paul was a hypocrite, he could hardly have
imposed a requirement on bishops which he did not himself meet.
Consider, too, the implications regarding Paul's positive attitude
toward celibacy in 1 Corinthians 7: the married have worldly anxieties
and divided interests, yet only they are qualified to be bishops;
whereas the unmarried have single-minded devotion to the Lord, yet are
barred from ministry!

The suggestion that the unmarried man is somehow untried or unproven is
equally absurd. Each vocation has its own proper challenges: the
celibate man must exercise "self-control" (1 Cor. 7:9); the husband must
love and care for his wife selflessly (Eph. 5:25); and the father must
raise his children well (1 Tim. 3:4). Every man must meet Paul's
standard of "managing his household well," even if his "household" is
only himself. If anything, the chaste celibate man meets a higher
standard than the respectable family man.
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The truth is, it is precisely those who are uniquely "concerned about
the affairs of the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:32), those to whom it has been given
to "renounce marriage for the sake of the kingdom" (Matt. 19:12), who
are ideally suited to follow in the footsteps of those who have "left
everything" to follow Christ (cf. Matt. 19:27)-the calling of celibate clergy
and consecrated religious (i.e., monks and nuns).

Thus Paul warned Timothy, a young bishop, that those called to be
"soldiers" of Christ must avoid "civilian pursuits": "Share in suffering
as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier on service gets entangled
in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to satisfy the one who enlisted
him" (2 Tim. 2:3-4). In light of Paul's remarks in 1 Corinthians 7 about
the advantages of celibacy, marriage and family clearly stand out in
connection with these "civilian pursuits."

An example of ministerial celibacy can also be seen in the Old
Testament. The prophet Jeremiah, as part of his prophetic ministry, was
forbidden to take a wife: "The word of the Lord came to me: 'You shall
not take a wife, nor shall you have sons or daughters in this place'"
(Jer. 16:1-2).

But is there scriptural precedent for this practice of restricting
membership in a group to those who take a voluntary vow of celibacy?
Yes. Paul, writing once again to Timothy, mentions an order of widows
pledged not to remarry (1 Tim 5:9-16); in particular advising: "But
refuse to enroll younger widows; for when they grow wanton against
Christ they desire to marry, and so they incur condemnation for having
violated their first pledge" (5:11-12).

This "first pledge" broken by remarriage cannot refer to previous
wedding vows, for Paul does not condemn widows for remarrying (cf. Rom.
7:2-3). It can only refer to a vow not to remarry taken by widows
enrolled in this group. In effect, they were an early form of women
religious-New Testament nuns. The New Testament Church did contain
orders with mandatory celibacy.
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Marriage is a holy institution-a sacrament, an action of God upon our souls; one
of the holiest things we encounter in this life.

In fact, it is precisely the holiness of marriage that makes celibacy
precious; for only what is good and holy in itself can be given up for
God as a sacrifice. Just as fasting presupposes the goodness of food,
celibacy presupposes the goodness of marriage. To despise celibacy,
therefore, is to undermine marriage itself-as the early Fathers pointed
out.

Celibacy is also a life-affirming institution. In the Old Testament,
where celibacy was almost unknown, the childless were often despised by
others and themselves; only through children, it was felt, did one
acquire value. By renouncing marriage, the celibate affirms the
intrinsic value of each human life in itself, regardless of offspring.

Finally, celibacy is an eschatological sign to the Church, a living-out
in the present of the universal celibacy of heaven: "For in the
resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like
angels in heaven" (Matt. 22:30).