

# Storylinking in the Global Church: African American Wisdom as a Guide for Discernment in the Central European Context

*The purpose of our paper is to present storylinking as a method of discernment appropriate for Christian students in Central and Eastern Europe. In Soul Stories: African American Christian Education, Anne Streaty WIMBERLY describes a model of Christian education that guides decision making by linking participants' everyday stories with the narratives of individuals from the Bible and biographical data of figures from the African American cultural heritage.<sup>1</sup>*

*While WIMBERLY presents the method primarily as a way for small group discussions in congregational settings to aid in members' discerning vocation and finding liberation, it is our conviction that with some adaptation her technique can bear fruit beyond the parish setting, and in contexts not linked directly to the method's African American experience.*

## I. Conditions for Storylinking to Work as an Aid to Discernment

Storylinking is more than simply a way to present stories of the faith; it is an effort to link them with our own stories as we are currently living them. Since the participants' sharing of their own experiences is essential, we are making three assumptions when applying WIMBERLY's method to a new context.

1. First of all, we are assuming that participants are interested in personal development; that is, that they consciously reflect on their own respective situations, and that they are interested in following God more closely. One of the truths underlying this method is that there will be obstacles in our attempts to fulfil our calling. Perfect obedience is not a requirement for storylinking to help us gain clarity, but the desire to improve is necessary in order for us to do the hard work of overcoming or even simply admitting the difficulties that inevitably arise.
2. Another assumption is that participants' understanding of themselves as Christians leads them to seek the Divine voice in their professional development and career planning. In storylinking, we discover the relevance of Scripture in our most important decisions. This process would be blocked by a worldview that limits religious practice to participation in church programmes only.
3. Finally, because storylinking is about liberation as well as vocation, we take as given not only that participants are seeking God's will for their lives, but that at least once they have sensed some clarity in that search and, likewise, there has been at least one occasion when obstacles caused them frustration in discerning or fulfilling their calling.

As has already been noted, WIMBERLY's approach to storylinking depends on group discussion. Therefore, in a workshop space should be created for conversation. Included at relevant points during this paper are questions that can facilitate discussion.

## II. The Standard Approach to Discerning Vocation

As we take a look at storylinking as a method for discerning vocation, it can be helpful to consider this approach in light of how others have approached the discovering of God's call. One helpful definition is Frederick BUECHNER's sentiment: the place God calls us to is the place where our great joy and the world's great need meet.<sup>2</sup>

Part of the beauty in this thought is the balance it allows. By reminding us of the importance of service to those in need while also recognising there are many ways to serve, BUECHNER's observation is congruent with passages of Scripture.<sup>3</sup>

There can be, though, a temptation to convert the reflection into a kind of formula. Listing the needs of the world in one column and our own gifts or joys in another, literally or figuratively, we search for matches. Such an exercise in and of itself can be useful.

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<sup>1</sup> WIMBERLY Anne Streaty. *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education*. Nashville, 1994.

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<sup>2</sup> BUECHNER Frederick, *Wishful Thinking*. 1973. 95.

<sup>3</sup> For example, 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4.

This is similar to the tests given to new military recruits, whereby their abilities are assessed, and they are then given assignments in which their skills are used to meet a larger strategic need. Even congregations have been known to use *spiritual gifts discovery tests* as a way to delegate the various means of service that keep the ministry running.

As the ultimate tool for making career choices, though, this method can be overly mechanical and less than satisfying. Such analysis also forces us to highlight practical skills. Someone who is good with words, for example, may be led into language teaching, because the need for education is so evident.

It could be the case, however, that the person's true calling is to be a poet. Perhaps because he recognised the danger of an overly utilitarian definition of vocation, theologian and civil rights leader Howard THURMAN urged: "Do not ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

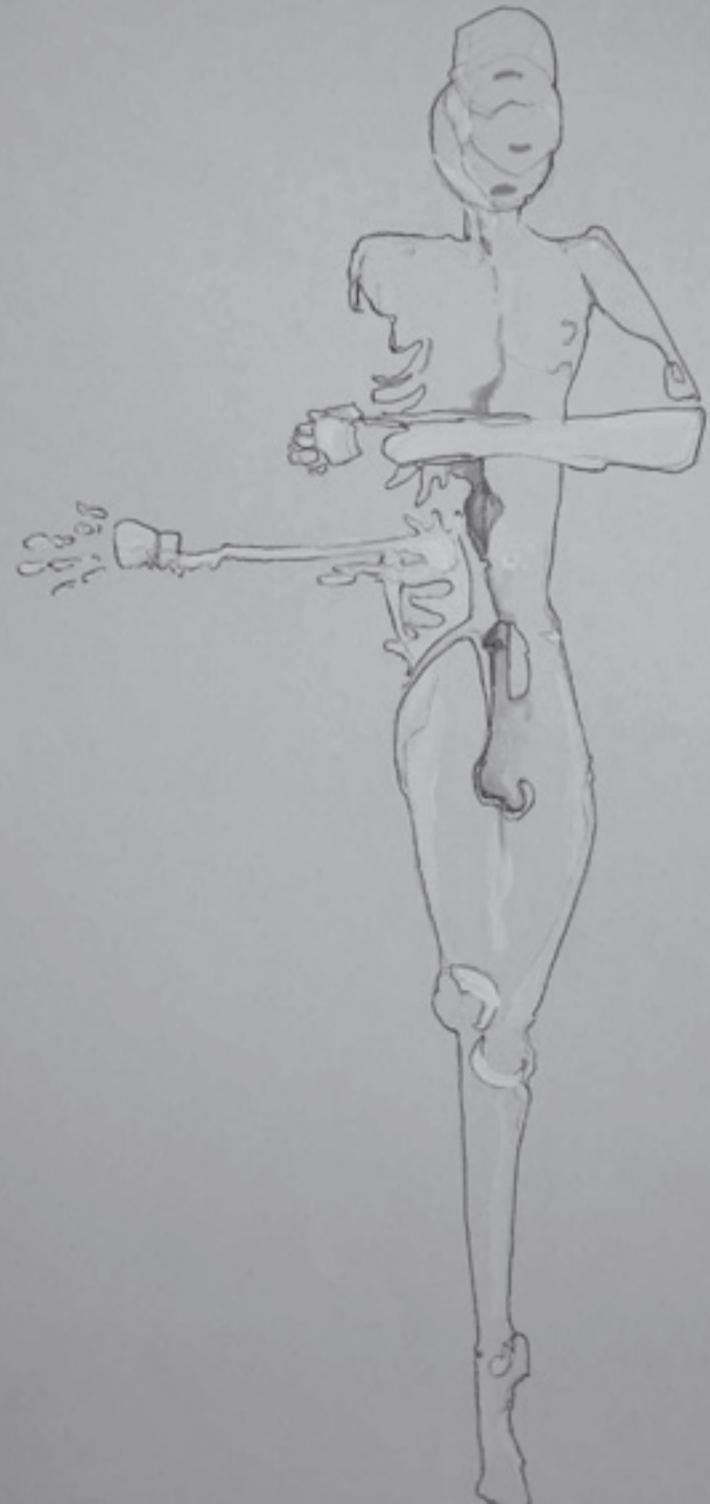
THURMAN's advice should be taken seriously. As much need as there is in the world for doctors and nurses, a disillusioned and disappointed medical professional could ultimately do more harm than good.

Conversely, as fleeting as the value of different sports or entertainment may seem to be, athletes and performers can offer inspiration and motivation in ways that defy formulaic assessments of need.

What is more, for individuals with multiple interests and a wide range of gifts, deciding which particular skills set to focus on may require a discernment all its own, and in a world with a variety of crises, identifying the *world's deep need* can be elusive.

The problem, then, is not that an individual's gifts or the needs of others are taken into consideration, but that attempts to bring these together maybe oversimplify this thing we call vocation.

*So we need to discuss and reflect upon what it is that our heart desires; what some of the world's great needs, or the great needs of Central Europe, are; and whether we can find any places where these desires and needs meet. Furthermore, we must consider whether we have ever felt this kind of analysis helpful to our interests and the world's needs; whether we have ever been frustrated or even misled by this approach; and whether we have ever used it with others and wondered if it were really doing the other person justice.*



### III. From our Gifts and our World to God's Work in God's World

In *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God*, Henry T. BLACKABY and Claude V. KING identify another typical question in the search for vocation, commenting on a flaw that could be present in the method we have discussed so far.<sup>4</sup> According to these authors, the question “What is God’s will for our life?” is problematic in its focus on the speakers. The essence of the question is the individual’s life and a desire to know what God intends to do with it.

Believing such a focus to be egocentric and too narrow, BLACKABY and KING suggest a broader question, one that centres around God rather than the questioners: “What is God’s will?” They go on to elaborate that as we pay attention to God’s will as revealed in Scripture, we must seek to observe what God is doing around us. The idea is that we identify what God is doing in the world around us, and then become a part of God’s activity. We might paraphrase this approach as a shift from “What does God want us to do?” to “How can we be a part of what God is doing?”

We have already observed that reducing vocational discernment to an analysis of personal gifts and global needs can be limiting, but BUECHNER’s definition of vocation rings true in spite of how the thinking it expresses can be misused. So, too, does the question that BLACKABY and KING criticise. The problem is not that “What is God’s will for our life” is such a bad question, but that it needs to be complemented with others, reminding us that calling is about God’s call, and that our role is part of a greater picture where God’s hand is at work.

Following this train of thought, there are a few observations of what God is doing in the world that we feel are particularly relevant for young people seeking a sense of vocation today. These observations will also be useful in understanding why storylinking is appropriate for our context.

1. In recent history, the Church in Europe and North America has lost much of its influence in the lives of individuals. At one time the Church was rivalled only by the state (or the empire) in the amount of authority it held. Rites of passage, cultural identity and national celebrations were all areas of life in which people turned to

the Church. While the historical factors involved vary in Central and Eastern Europe as opposed to Western Europe and North America, it is commonly agreed that this period of great influence, often referred to as the era of Christendom or the Christendom paradigm, is now a thing of the past.

Many individuals are born, come of age, begin families and even die without ever expressing a desire for the Church to have a role in these events. When people do ask for baptism, marriage or funeral ceremonies, it is often done with the same attitude as that with which they might book the caterers or hairdressers. It is as if the Church is perceived to offer a venue and a service, but is not supposed to assert any authority in the areas of belief or certain lifestyle choices, as those are considered personal matters. Great value is placed on individuality, and the Church’s voice is sometimes seen as a threat to that.

Alternatively, the Church is seen as quaint relic of the past. Popular culture, media and technology are exercising more influence on people’s everyday decision making and how they describe themselves. There are some countries or regions where political leaders seek the support of the Church, but there are also areas where policies are indifferent or even hostile to the Church’s teaching.

It is difficult to describe this social change as an act of God, but we should be aware of the change because it influences vocational discernment. The traditional teaching of the Church will not necessarily be a factor even in the lives of young Christians as they seek God’s will for their lives. What is more, individuals intentionally linking their career choices with their faith may encounter obstacles if they refuse to work on Sundays, for example, or if they even make their own religious affiliation known at work.

2. The decline of the Church’s influence described above does not apply to every continent. While the drop in membership worries churches in Europe and North America, the churches in Asia and Africa have enjoyed remarkable growth. The figures may vary from country to country, and the churches that are growing may be quite different from traditional European churches, but the fact is that in these parts of the world, the number of people who call themselves Christians has grown significantly.

As we celebrate the work of God in these areas, we would also do well to note what the changes signify for the world Church. One hundred years ago, churches in North America and Europe were

<sup>4</sup> BLACKABY Henry T. – KING Claude V., *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God*. Nashville, 1990.

supporting missionaries who embarked to serve God in Africa and Asia. With the changes in the demographics of the world Church, though, we must recognise the growing voice of Christians in countries that were once called the “mission field”, even as the Church in Europe and North America is losing its voice, as it were.

If we suspect that at least part of what is happening is the will of God, then our discernment processes must also reflect this conviction. Since rational-analytical approaches to vocational discernment were the product of a European mindset, in the context of the global Church we would do well to ask how discernment is sought in other cultures.

3. A look at the demographics of the world and the Church today must also take note of how the role of women has changed. Although the status of women is not the same in every country or region, there are places all over the globe where women assert more visible leadership than even half a century ago. Women’s rights are more recognised, and the education of girls and women is more widespread than it used to be. In the Church, many denominations now ordain women as ministers. In churches where women are not ordained, the increased influence of the laity has given greater voice to women than they had before.

It is our view that this change is another sign of God’s hand at work, and therefore another factor that should be taken into consideration in vocational discernment. Its significance goes beyond an increase in the number of areas in which women may feel called to serve. Recognising women as servants called by God, women and men alike should be open to the teaching of the Church’s women leaders in the area of discernment. All the thinkers cited in this paper so far have been men. If we are to take seriously the call of women, then we are remiss if we do not seek at least one woman’s voice as regards vocation.

In summary, the role of the Church in various parts of the world has changed at the same time that the makeup of the Church itself has undergone change. For the Christian seeking discernment, the recognition of God’s hand at work should open us up to ways of discernment that may at first seem strange. If Western teaching has often emphasised analytical approaches, we may now open ourselves up to the wisdom of other traditions, such as narrative, and how they have aided the Church in other parts of the world. As the male thinkers of the Church have often been individualistic, the leadership of women may lead us into more communal methods of discernment.

*So we need to discuss and reflect upon to what extent we have observed the changes described in the previous section; to what degree we see these as evidence of God’s hand at work in the World; what are the other changes we are aware of in our world or in the region, and which of these changes we think are the results of God’s will; and how these changes might influence our practice of discernment.*

#### IV. Storylinking as a Method of Discernment for the Global Church in the Post-Modern Era

In our search for vocation we reflect not only on the abilities God has given us and how we might use them to help others, but on how we observe God at work in the world around us. After a cursory look at what God is doing in the global Church, we realise even before the outcome becomes clear that our very methods of discernment will be re-shaped when we take what we have observed into consideration. Vocational discernment in the XXI<sup>st</sup> century must incorporate women’s ways of knowing and the wisdom of the non-Western world.

A model of Christian education used in African American churches is storylinking. We feel this model, which places much emphasis on vocational discernment, can be applied in other settings as well. Before describing it in detail, though, one point must be clarified.

In turning to storylinking as a non-Western model of discernment, we do not mean to suggest that African Americans are not an important population in the West. In her book, though, WIMBERLY repeatedly describes the historical roots and the current reality that lead African American Christians to go about Christian education in ways that warrant special attention. As we will see, part of the method she describes involves recounting stories from the African American faith heritage. If European and North American churches are sometimes described as *Western*, then the African American experience is distinct enough that it can provide new insight.

WIMBERLY defines storylinking as a “process whereby we connect parts of our everyday stories with the Christian faith story in the Bible and the lives of exemplars of the Christian faith outside the Bible”.<sup>5</sup> According to WIMBERLY’s description of this process, it is best experienced in a small group setting, in which the connections between the stories are made in such a way as to assist individual

5 WIMBERLY Anne Streaty. *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education*. Nashville, 1994. 38.

participants in their own decision making. WIMBERLY also notes that the types of decisions with which participants seek help have to do with liberation and vocation.

WIMBERLY's explorations of liberation and vocation are too rich to summarise within the scope of this paper, but of immediate significance is the linking of the two terms at all – the recognition that in seeking to hear and obey God's call, some people face obstacles. Because of prejudice, persecution and other forms of injustice, people are unable to pursue their path in the world until they are freed from the obstacles that block that path. Liberation is necessarily for vocation.

Guided by WIMBERLY's approach, then, we have more questions. In addition to "What is it we feel God is calling us to do?" we now must ask, "What blocks exist in our achieving that purpose?" and even, "How can they be/are they being overcome?" In WIMBERLY's model of storylinking, participants are guided through a four-phase process as they struggle with questions of liberation and vocation.

The first phase consists of engaging an everyday story, or a case study of some kind. The story may be presented as a written narrative or a recorded interview. The medium is not as important as the fact that it is a real person's story from today. The participants are guided in reflecting on the story, and are also asked in what ways they identify with it.

The second phase involves engagement with a story from the Bible. At this stage, the participants view the Bible story as a mirror, considering what the story shows them about the case study and about themselves. In their engagement with the Bible story, the participants may also imagine themselves entering the story and becoming partners with the characters or even with the author. The engagement is not complete until thought has been given to how God is acting in the story and in our stories, and how we might respond to God.

It is in the third phase that participants engage with Christian faith stories from the African American heritage. At this point the discussion involves a recognition of the difficulties faced by an exemplar of the faith, and a search for the mindset that helped and continues to help in overcoming obstacles. Attention is also given to describing strategies for liberation and vocation.

The fourth and final phase is in itself one of the impressive features of WIMBERLY's method, and another deviation from mere analysis, for this stage consists of discerning God's call for concrete

action, and deciding which actions to take. The result can even be a programmatic response to a social problem, including breaking the programme down into steps.

Of these four phases, the only one which may require adaptation for a Central European context is the third one. The emphasis on a story from the African American heritage is more than appropriate in African American church settings and, in fact, these stories are inspiring and educational for people from other countries as well. The model will have more effect, though, if phase three contains a story from the participants' culture.

Just as world music blends elements from various musical traditions, we would suggest that we acknowledge our gratitude to the African American churches for this contribution to Christian education methodology even as we adapt the method to suit our own context. Now we shall use an adapted form of WIMBERLY's storylinking method to discuss vocation; what follows is an outline of how her method can be implemented.

## 1. Engaging the Everyday Story

Although WIMBERLY describes various ways that an everyday case study can be presented to the participants, questions of time and context led me to take another route. We are assuming, as indicated at the beginning of this paper, not only that participants had stories of their own to tell, but that they would be willing to tell them. One of the nice features of this phase, as WIMBERLY presents it, is that it serves as a kind of warm-up period, giving the participants a story that is relevant to their lives without demanding too much self-disclosure so early in the session. There are settings in which such a warm-up could be less necessary.

One aspect of the participants' story could interest us more than any other when applying this method to the Central European context. We could ask for participants to tell us their names and where they are from, perhaps adding their language of preference. We could also ask people how they travelled to the venue.

Although the questions are fairly routine, we listen carefully to the answers and pay attention to body language. In Central Europe, relations between neighbouring nations can sometimes be tense, and at such times ethnic minorities suffer more verbal and physical abuse. Often the way the minorities are identified is by the language they speak. In a setting where prejudice between different nationalities

does not thrive, students are more comfortable sharing information about themselves.

We could then ask how they felt disclosing information about their nationality, and whether there had ever been occasions when they were more reticent to make it known, for example by speaking their own language in public. Because of storylinking's emphasis on liberation, we can handle the usual introductions in a way that might later allow for connections with obstacles to vocation and the need for liberation.

## 2. Engaging the Bible Story

For this part of the session, Daniel 1,1–17 could be read aloud. We review the development of what happened, and then with guiding questions we begin to explore any possible connections between Daniel and the participants of the conference. Some of the questions included could be the following:

Where were Daniel and his friends from? How old were they when they left their homes? What do we know about the languages they spoke? How did their ethnic identity influence the way people viewed them? Based on what we know about Daniel and his friends, what do we think they felt God was calling them to do? What barriers might have prevented them from fulfilling their vocation?

After establishing some sense of who Daniel and his friends were and what they were going through, we may return to discussion of the participants' own lives. We can ask which parts of Daniel's story resonate with them, and might receive a variety of answers.

The fact that Daniel and his friends have different customs than the others around them is something that Christian youth and young adults often identify with. Some of the conference participants might mention how it could be isolating to live by Christian values in a European university setting. Someone else might describe how she was ostracised in her small village because she was pursuing higher education.

## 3. Engaging the Christian Faith Story

Knowing that the participants are coming from different countries, we might decide against choosing the story of someone from any one of those countries. Instead, we might look at the story of Jane HAINING, a Scottish missionary who served in Hungary in the early part of the XX<sup>th</sup> century.

Jane HAINING was born in a rural community in Scotland; when she was only five, her mother passed away giving birth to Jane's younger sister, Helen. Jane did very well in school, winning a competition that allowed her to leave home and study at Dumfries Academy when she was still twelve years old. During her six years there, she won recognition in several subjects, including French, German and Latin.

As Jane had been raised in the church, she continued her church involvement when she moved to Glasgow as a young adult. After hearing a missionary's report and seeing an advertisement in a magazine, she decided God was calling her to be a missionary at the Scottish Mission School in Budapest, Hungary. Her application was not immediately successful, but eventually the Church of Scotland did send her to be the matron of a school in Budapest where Jewish girls and Christian girls lived and learned together.

Once in Hungary, Jane amazed everyone with how quickly she was able to become fluent in Magyar, with how well she managed the business of the school, and with the kindness and compassion she showed all of the girls. Although she was there as a Christian missionary, the Jewish girls would later comment on how she respected their heritage as well.

As Adolf HITLER rose to power and started showing his ambition for the rest of Europe as well and his spite for the Jews, the Church of Scotland tried to call Jane HAINING home, but she refused to go. Eventually she would be arrested for, among other charges, crying when she had to sew yellow stars on their clothes. Ultimately Jane HAINING died at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

As we engage with her story, we again try to make connections. In both Jane HAINING's and Daniel's stories we see people who were gifted with languages and other subjects and who demonstrated leadership ability. Although we do not dwell on the connection too much, the relevance for university students in Central and Eastern Europe is not lost. We may also note how both Jane HAINING and Daniel were persecuted for living according to their religious convictions. In both cases, it may seem to the participants that faith helped both of them put their sufferings into perspective and not lose hope.

#### 4. Engaging in Christian Ethical Decision Making

By this point in the session, the discussion is hopefully very lively, needing more moderation than encouragement. Because we are ‘transplanting’ this approach to storylinking, we might ask the students how appropriate they think it is for the Central and Eastern European context. They might think, for example, that it helped ensure the discussion of discernment did not remain a consideration only of abstractions.

The main purpose of the fourth phase is to come up with plans for concrete action. Because of the time pressures and the newness of this approach, the main concrete action we might consider is whether or not the participants themselves would plan to use this method in their own respective settings. There may be varying levels of commitment to the idea, ranging from openness to enthusiastic commitment.

The participants might agree that for the rest of the seminar, if names of exemplars of the faith from their own respective countries occur to them, they would list these for all to see. The purpose of this activity is to get participants to think about heroes in the faith from their own cultural heritage. It is a bonus that they remain interested in the stories of such figures from other countries as well.

*So we need to discuss and reflect upon people of faith in our own cultural tradition who would be helpful examples for our context: historical figures with whom we identify either nationally, culturally, linguistically, vocationally or because of gender. We might also consider whether this method has raised any insights for us; if this method brought to us something new; if insights arose in it; where we could envision applying this method (for example, in a Bible Study, during times of personal devotion or while counselling our peers), and the concerns we have before using it; whether we feel God calling us in any way to use this method; and whether there are barriers that might prevent us from doing so.*

*The question of what God is calling us to do is both important and challenging. What this paper has set out to show is that how to ask the question is a challenge in itself. We have considered how vocation must be put into a larger perspective than the person actually seeking it, and how in our changing world new ways of vocational discernment are worthy of attention. Finally, the African American model of storylinking is explored as one way of vocational discernment for the global Church in the XXI<sup>st</sup> century.*

Libor MAREK

## Marriage as Vocation and its Value (Based on 1Cor 7,32–35)

*“I should like you to be free of anxieties. An unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord. But a married man is anxious about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and he is divided. An unmarried woman or a virgin is anxious about the things of the Lord, so that she may be holy in both body and spirit. A married woman, on the other hand, is anxious about the things of the world, how she may please her husband. I am telling you this for your own benefit, not to impose a restraint upon you, but for the sake of propriety and adherence to the Lord without distraction” (1Cor 7,32–35).*

### I. Two Kinds of Anxiety

Most people are familiar with using the words “call” and “vocation” as part of religious terminology in areas that are related to the priestly and/or consecrated way of life. At the same time, marriage is usually regarded as something more “ordinary”, which does not fall under this type of terminology. Many people also believe that marriage is, in a certain way, an easier path, and even that it is less valuable and ranks behind the priestly vocation. Such claims appeal to Saint PAUL as if he had approved these ideas. They claim that PAUL, though not being directly opposed to marriage, still placed it somewhere after celibacy. This kind of thinking has existed throughout history and constantly pops up in different forms.

In order to discuss and challenge this point of view, I have chosen a text frequently quoted as supporting such a claim. The passage is taken from the First Letter to the Corinthians 7,32–35. A plain-face reading of this text seems to suggest, and even intensify, the negative idea about PAUL and his attitudes towards marriage.