

MARRIAGE, DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE:
UNTWISTING THE KNOTS OF MAN'S SIN

by

Timothy L. Dane

B. S., UNLV, 1984
M. Div., TMS, 1995
Th. M., TMS, 1996

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM STATED

Without question, the issue of marriage, divorce, and remarriage is one of the most pervasive and difficult challenges facing mankind—a problem that has been present both outside, and inside, the realm of God’s people throughout history. This first chapter will introduce the reader to the problem and the methods by which this present study will offer a solution.

The Immensity of the Problem

One does not need to search long to find someone who has been divorced. The sad fact is that divorce is everywhere and, for that matter, it has been happening for a long, long time. The present writer has felt its impact and in all likelihood, the reader of this paper has been impacted by it at one time or another. Divorce is a sad reality of life in a sin-cursed world.¹

As Jesus put it in Matthew 19:8, though, the hardness of man’s heart has made divorce a painful reality—one that will continue to plague the human race until an age of restoration when Christ Himself purges the earth of sinful ways. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, the marriage rate for the United States as of 2005 was 7.5 per 1,000 and the divorce rate was 3.6 per 1,000². Although this figure shows a

¹ Among other experiences, the present writer has felt the pain of divorce through the divorce of his own parents at a young age and, in recent years, witnessed its devastating impact on a close friend whose life had been dedicated to Christian service on the foreign mission field. No one can deny the devastating impact of divorce. This writer’s theological and ministry background is quite conservative, including membership in the IFCA which at present forbids membership for any divorcee.

² National Center for Health Statistics website, <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/divorce.htm>, accessed 10-05-07.

divorce rate of virtually half of all marriages, some groups have pointed out that a more accurate statistical figure may actually somewhere around 40% or a little more.³

In looking at the statistics, some writers suggest that Christians should not be so naïve so as to think that this problem does not affect them as a group. Despite some claims that Christian divorce rates are way under national averages, there is evidence (as reported by George Barna and others) that Christian marriages may not be (at best) that much under national averages.⁴ One may quibble about precise statistics, but one cannot deny the reality of the problem nor its gravity.

In itself, divorce creates an entire world of problems, but the problems do not end simply with the divorce. Life still goes on after divorce. Questions arise: What should a divorcee do about remarriage? Does the divorcee want to risk another problem marriage? Does the divorcee want to expend the energy and effort that a new relationship would demand? Does the divorcee want to face the challenges that come with existing children and a possible blended family through remarriage? These are all very relevant questions. Beyond these questions, though, comes the question (for the Christian) of whether or not a remarriage is permissible, acceptable, and pleasing in the eyes of God. Does God ever allow or approve of a remarriage, and if so, are there any particular circumstances that either allow or disallow a remarriage.⁵

³ “Advice Articles,” E-Harmony website, <http://marriage.eharmony.com/advice/cmarrriage-advice-8.html>, accessed 10-05-07.

⁴ George Barna, “Variation in Divorce Rates Among Christian Faith Groups,” taken from http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_dira.htm, Accessed 10-05-07.

⁵ John Murray (“Divorce,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 12:1 [November 1949]: 35), certainly a biblical conservative, states “the case is simply that we are not able to find biblical warrant for affirming that the person who has been divorced for adultery commits another act of adultery when he or she remarries.”

The Diversity of Opinion Among Bible Teachers

The fact of the matter is that there is a wide disagreement by theologians on whether or not a remarriage should ever be allowed, regardless of why a former divorce may have taken place. William Heth—who holds to a no remarriage position—notes at least seven major views on the issue.⁶

Among conservative Christian writers there are some, on the one hand, who firmly hold the conviction that no remarriage is permissible after a divorce.⁷ Others, however, believe that remarriage may be allowed in at least certain circumstances.⁸ Among these writers who disagree, the issue is usually not one of commitment to biblical authority. Even writers who hold to inerrancy and a high view of the authority of Scripture still disagree on how to understand and apply the Bible on this topic. It certainly is true, as Weibe put it, “Not everyone, of course, agrees.”⁹

Both sides will at times use historical evidence to support their case. Sometimes the argument is that the evangelical position did not include (or at least accept favorably) the idea of remarriage until after it was popularized by Erasmus. In opposition to the evangelical remarriage position, Heth suggests that “the harmonization of the divorce

⁶ William Heth, “Another Look at the Erasmian View of Divorce and Remarriage,” *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25 (1982): 263. Heth calls these (1) the patristic view, (2) the preteritive view, (3) the Erasmian view, (4) the betrothal view, (5) the unlawful marriages view (in three variations), (6) the no further relations view, and (7) the tradition-historical view.

⁷ One noted writer who takes this position and has written extensively on the topic is William Heth, e.g., “Divorce and Remarriage: The Search for An Evangelical Hermeneutic,” *Trinity Theological Journal* 16:1 (Spring 1995): 63-100.

⁸ A number of evangelical writers allow remarriage in at least some circumstances. Among these many writers would include well-known authors like John Murray, Jay Adams, and John MacArthur.

⁹ Phillip H. Weibe, “Jesus’ Divorce Exception,” *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 32 (1989): 327-333. The immediate statement spoke of acceptance of the exception clause as permitting remarriage after dissolution due to immorality.

texts appears to be settled with the interpretation that was first set forth by Erasmus,” and that the “Erasmian interpretation of Jesus’ divorce logia is not even counted a viable option by the vast majority of nonevangelical scholars.”¹⁰

Historical studies by Snuth have shown some of the following mixed historical observations:¹¹ (1) divorce was common in the Roman world at the time of Christ and most commonly “remarriage was encouraged.” (2) The Shepherd of Hermas (ca. A. D. 140) did not allow a man to remain married to a woman if that woman had been previously divorced due to adultery. (3) Athenagoras (ca. 177) suggests a no remarriage view. (4) Tertullian (ca. A. D. 200) held the marriage bond to be indissoluble (holding the idea that the new law of Christ had abrogated the OT law permitting divorce), but he did accept remarriage if the divorce had taken place prior to conversion. (5) Origen’s writings show that “he did not seem to rule out divorce completely.” Indeed, he admitted that some church leaders “have permitted a (divorced) woman to marry, even when her husband was living” because of the fact that there were times when such was the lesser of two evils. Snuth’s research shows that the general historical opinion of the church has (rightly) been very strong against divorce and that a number of formal statements have shown disapproval for remarriage; however, his research has also shown that remarriage has not always been forbidden. (6) Luther held a view that allowed remarriage when desired due to adultery or desertion due to the fact that “God will not demand the impossible.”¹² (7) Calvin held that both adultery and desertion by the unbeliever leaves

¹⁰ William Heth, “Another Look at the Erasmian View of Divorce and Remarriage,” 263.

¹¹ David Snuth, “Divorce and Remarriage From the Early Church to John Wesley,” *Trinity Journal* 16 (1995): 131ff.

¹² *Ibid.*, 136.

the believer in a position of no longer under marital obligation.¹³ Interestingly, Calvin also allowed for divorce and remarriage for extreme religious incompatibility and impotence and annulment if some physical infirmity prevented conjugal relations.¹⁴ (8) Tyndale saw divorce as permissible due to adultery or desertion.¹⁵ (9) John Knox (ca. 1560) held that marriage could not be terminated unless adultery had occurred. If it did, the guilty party was to be excommunicated following the divorce and the innocent party was free to marry again. As for the guilty party, remarriage after repentance was permitted due to the reality that “if they cannot remain continent, . . . we cannot forbid them to use the remedy ordained by God.”¹⁶ (10) On the other hand, the dominant Roman position of the preceding millennium had been that marriage is an indissoluble sacrament. Once contracted, it can never be broken—the sacramental view that was popularized by Augustine.¹⁷

One thing is certain: historically speaking, the church has never taken divorce lightly or favorably. As the evidence shows, though, the contemporary theologian should exercise caution in making dogmatic assertions that a remarriage view was not really commonly held until Erasmus.

The Method and Goals of the Present Study

The goal of this study is not to do an exhaustive analysis of what has been written on this topic, for the amount and diversity of what has been written is immense.

¹³ Ibid., 137.

¹⁴ Ibid., 138.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 139.

¹⁷ Ibid., 141.

Furthermore, in view of the fact that those on both sides of the debate have written extensively, each with his own convincing arguments, it will not suit the purpose of this presentation to provide a lengthy analysis of all the exegetical details of each side. This study simply cannot provide an exhaustive exegetical defense of every issue. Positions will be set forth and supported and credible authorities will be cited where appropriate.

The goal of this study is to present a broad survey and critique of the major views among major, conservative Christian writers and present the preferred position of the present writer along with the reasoning why this view is being taken. The writer believes that this study may even present some new perspectives on the issue that have not been highlighted by most writers and that some of these perspectives are relevant for how the church should apply all the data.

The study will begin in chapter two with an analysis of the relevant passages in the synoptic gospels. This will be followed in chapter three with a look at relevant passages from the Old Testament. Chapter four will consider statements from the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7, and chapter five will bring a summary and conclusion to the discussion.

CHAPTER 2

PRINCIPLES FROM THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

It is natural for the Christian to look to the New Testament as the primary data source for forming a theology of divorce and remarriage. This section will focus in particular on the teachings of Christ in the synoptic gospels, first on the words of Christ in Matthew's gospel which do have the so-called "exception" clause, then in Mark and Luke which do not have this clause.

Matthew's Gospel

There are two sections in Matthew which contain the "exception clause." One of these is in the Sermon on the Mount (5:31-32) and the other in chapter 19 (1-12).

Matthew 5

In Matthew 5:31-32, Jesus continued this instruction that stood at the head of His public teaching ministry. From 5:21 onward, Jesus gave the masses a series of instructions about how they should view issues of righteous conduct. Many writers have noted that in these teachings Jesus appears to be offering a "more complete and internal perspective" in comparison to the external emphasis that was so commonly propagated among the nation.¹⁸ In other words, one of the common problems of that day was to focus on external laws (whether actual laws in the Bible or oral traditions of Jewish leadership) to the exclusion of addressing heart issues that stand behind outward conduct. The focus on outward conduct, especially as practiced by the Pharisees, created an

¹⁸ Ed Glasscock, *Matthew* (Chicago: Moody, 1997), 127.

environment where one could be satisfied with themselves as long as they believed they were matching (in their mind) some kind of outward standard.

This is certainly not the way that God looks at men for, as Morris put it, “The Pharisaic way is the wrong way.”¹⁹ As Jesus put it, the righteousness God wants must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20) for God, who is “perfect” (5:48), has a standard that is much higher than the kind that self righteous, religious men try to live by.²⁰ Thus, it is important that one bear in mind the purpose and context of the sermon on the mount.

In 5:31 Jesus makes reference to the commonly held belief that a man who divorces his wife has a commandment from God to give her a divorce certificate. Even though the future tense verbs of the Septuagint might lend weight to the idea that God is giving commandment (καὶ γράψει αὐτῇ βιβλίον ἀποστασίου καὶ δώσει εἰς τὰς χεῖρας αὐτῆς καὶ ἐξαποστελεῖ αὐτήν ἐκ τῆς οἰκίας αὐτοῦ),²¹ the Hebrew text does not suggest that the idea of command is present.²² The force of the Hebrew text is that of an indicative mood and is simply making statements of fact about how this situation has developed. This study will focus upon the implications of Deuteronomy 24 in a later section, but at this point it is sufficient to note that a common misconception among many Jews of that time is that the important point was meeting the external standards by

¹⁹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 112.

²⁰ William Heth, “Another Look At The Erasmian View of Divorce And Remarriage,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25 (1982): 257.

²¹ *Septuaginta : With morphology*. 1996, c1979 (Dt 24:1). Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft. Cited in electronic form with Logos Libronix.

²² D. Freeman, “Divorce in the Old Testament,” *ISBE*, G. W. Bromiley, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988). Cited in electronic form with Logos Libronix.

making sure a divorce certificate is given. God never commanded divorce. It simply was one of the sad realities of life—a reality that did include a certain amount of regulation in the Law of Moses. For the common man—especially for those of a Pharisaical view of righteousness, everything was fine as long as the outward details were attended to.

Jesus gives a sharp and authoritative corrective (“But I say to you”) to this kind of thinking in verse 32 when He tells them whoever divorces his wife “makes her commit adultery” and whoever marries a divorced woman “commits adultery.” Although it is true that the culture was patriarchal and the language often appeared to say that women could not initiate a divorce, there is reason to believe that the actual circumstances were often less restrictive for women than might appear. One historical source notes that during New Testament times divorce could be “by mutual consent” and that “either party might divorce the other” although it certainly was true that it was almost always “easier for a man than a woman.”²³ In other words, the Christian today should not make the mistake of saying that a theological necessity makes these issues only apply in one direction.²⁴ The application of these teachings should be applied to the church today on an equal standard between men and women.

Verse 32 states that divorce (and by direct implication a subsequent remarriage despite the fact that some authors deny permission for a subsequent remarriage) creates a situation of adultery when that previously divorced person remarries.²⁵ To this statement,

²³ H. F. Vos, ed., “Divorce,” *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Manners & Customs: How the People of the Bible Really Lived* (Nashville: T. Nelson, n.d.). Cited in electronic form with Logos Libronix.

²⁴ James Weibling, “Reconciling Matthew and Mark On Divorce,” *Trinity Theological Journal* 22:2 (Fall 2001): 222.

²⁵ Heth states his opinion that “whereas marital separation and legal divorce may be allowed in some situations, and advisable in others, we do not think that Jesus explicitly sanctioned remarriage after

though, Jesus adds the additional statement “except for the cause of unchastity” (παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας). The expression “unchastity” translates the Greek term that does not specially denote “adultery” (*moicheia*), but rather it is the term (πορνείας) that usually refers to “sexual sin in general.”²⁶ The expression was used for any of various forms of sexual sin including adultery, but also was much broader than this (*prostitution, unchastity, fornication*, of every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse).²⁷ In other words, sexual sin—including adultery—does create a grounds by which an innocent spouse might remarry without incurring guilt before God. This is the exception give by Jesus.

This is the so-called exception clause that makes the subject challenging. Does this statement mean that a Christian may remarry after a divorce if that divorce had been caused by some kind of sexual immorality on the part of the other spouse? Heth would be among those who say “No.” On the other hand, a number of writers say that this passage gives clear and explicit permission for a remarriage in such cases. As a first comment, this writer dismisses as invalid the argument that Jesus never spoke these

divorce for sexual unfaithfulness,” William Heth, “Divorce and Remarriage: The Search for An Evangelical Hermeneutic,” *Trinity Theological Journal* 16:1 (Spring 1995): 64. In other words, a major argument for Heth is that even though the NT may allow a divorce, a remarriage is not allowed or even implied.

²⁶ Morris, 121, n. 123. Morris notes that the term is sometimes distinguished from adultery (cf. Matt. 15:19) and that its usage often refers to sexual sin in general (cf. 1 Cor. 5:1; Col. 3:5). Some have suggested that the term should be restricted to a break in sexual fidelity during the Jewish betrothal period, but this view is not persuasive despite the fact that an appeal is made to the way that Joseph sought to divorce Mary.

²⁷ W. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, F. W. Danker, F. W., and W. Bauer, eds., (1996, c1979). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature : A translation and adaption of the fourth revised and augmented edition of Walter Bauer's Griechisch-deutsches Worterbuch zu den Schrift en des Neuen Testaments und der ubrigen urchristlichen Literatur* (693). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Cited in electronic form with Logos Libronix.

words (which are not present in Mark or Luke), but that they were simply a redactional insertion by “Matthew.”²⁸

The best argument that some have presented against the possibility for a remarriage (here, but especially in the exception clause of chapter 19) is that the exception clause only applies to the “divorce” part and not to the statement about remarriage. Writers like Porter and Buchanan²⁹ and Phillip Wiebe³⁰ have discussed this view and shown that this argument, though perhaps grammatically possible, is not plausible or preferable. In other words, Jesus was not telling them that divorce itself creates adultery (unless it was caused because of fornication). Rather, remarriage is clearly implicit in the statement. As Carson notes, the most natural reading of Matthew 5:32 is that “the divorced woman will in most cases remarry” (applied equally to the man) and that “divorce is wrong because it generates adultery except in the case of fornication.”³¹ In other words, remarriage is a virtual assumption anytime a divorce takes place and this passage states that an innocent party will not be guilty of adultery when he/she enters into another marriage.

Interestingly, this verse also makes a statement implying to the effect that an innocent party (although not having been guilty of the divorce) is forced into a situation

²⁸ Robert Thomas, “Evangelical Responses to the Jesus Seminar,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 7:1 (Spring 1996): 77. Thomas notes that this is one of the examples where Redaction Critics try to harmonize synoptic texts by saying that the gospel editors practiced creativity (i.e., ascribing statements to Jesus that He never actually spoke), a concept that the present writer categorically rejects.

²⁹ Stanley Porter and Paul Buchanan, “On the Logical Structure of Matt 19:9,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34 (1991): 335-339.

³⁰ Phillip Wiebe, “Jesus’ Divorce Exception,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 32 (1989): 327-333.

³¹ D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, Frank Gaebelein, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 152-153.

of adultery (based upon a remarriage and not simply due to the divorce) and that if someone marries a woman who was wrongly divorced (i.e., an innocent spouse) this person is entering into an adulterous event by marrying that divorced person. Some writers would take this to mean that Jesus had “explicitly abrogated the Mosaic legislation that allowed men to divorce their wives,”³² but this view has little to commend it, especially in view of Christ’s words about the Law in Matthew 5:17-18.

In view of all the data as subsequent discussion will unfold, this statement is might best seen in the light of the immediate context. Jesus has been speaking about a kind of ideal righteousness that the common man did not usually think about (5:20). Jesus was talking about a holy standard that is based on God’s perfect righteousness and perfect ideals (5:48). In the perfect design of God, a man and woman would never separate once they had come together in marriage. Therefore, just as Jesus used hyperbole in his other examples to speak about the seriousness of sin and the need to have a different view of personal conduct, so, too, in this example he used absolute language that must be seen within the entire context to be properly understood. For example, the real intent of vv. 29-30 is not to say that the solution for temptation is bodily mutilation. The point is that God is telling us to be willing to take radical action at dealing with temptation. Likewise, the command to never make an oath (v. 34) is not meant to be an absolute prohibition against oaths, but it is to instruct people about the necessity for absolute honesty that does not require oaths (v. 37). Statements about turning the other cheek (38-39) are not meant to teach pacifism, but to correct the vengeful mindsets that often dominated men’s hearts. Thus, God’s perfect design would

³² W. A. Elwell and P. W. Comfort, eds, “Divorce,” *Tyndale Bible Dictionary* (Wheaton: Tyndale, n.d.). Cited in electronic form with Logos Libronix.

never tolerate a situation in which a woman becomes sexually intimate with anyone other than her husband. Rampant sin and hardness of heart had created a world in which this took place all the time, unfortunately a condition in which “marrying a woman discarded from a previous marriage, a man perpetuates the demeaning process.”³³ It is against this evil that Jesus speaks in very forceful terms in order that He might jar them from their complacency in external, self righteousness.

In summary, this verse teaches that remarriage is fully permissible for an innocent spouse if the cause of divorce in the former marriage had been due to some type of sexual immorality on the part of the other spouse.

Matthew 19

The divorce and remarriage statements in Matthew 19, though slightly different, are quite similar to the ones in Matthew 5. In this pericope, a group of Pharisees had come to Jesus, “testing Him” (v. 3) to try and make Him make some kind of statement that would put Him at odds with popular theological opinions. They asked Jesus if it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all. The well-known background behind their question was the controversy between two schools of thought. One of their famous rabbis by the name of Shammai taught that the only basis for a man to divorce his wife was if she had committed some type of immoral or immodest act, up to and including adultery itself.³⁴ Hillel, on the other hand, taught a much more liberal view

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Charles Ryrie, “Biblical Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage,” *Grace Theological Journal* 3 (1982): 183. Death by stoning, though given in the Law of Moses as the penalty for adultery was not widely practiced by the time of Christ as has been noted by many; Verhey, “Divorce in the New Testament,” *ISBE*. Verhey notes that according to T.B. Sanhedrin 41a, the death penalty for adultery was formerly dismissed about A. D. 30 and had probably been little used for some time before.

(and much more popular as the prevailing opinion) that said in effect that a man could divorce his wife for basically any reason at all for any “unseemly thing” even as trivial as the burning of his toast.³⁵ For hard hearted sinners, this latter legal opinion was very attractive.

In vv. 4-6, Jesus first responds by rebuking these spiritual leaders. He brings to their attention the fact that their jaded view of marriage was radically corrupted from the perfect design and will of God in His creation order (a point to be taken up in a latter section). Jesus’ point is that God’s moral will calls for a permanent marriage relationship, the kind of thing that they casually ignored.

Their response was to ask why the Old Testament gave a command for a divorce certificate to be given, once again betraying their biblical ignorance and hardness of heart. The discussion of this point in chapter 5 will show that the Hebrew text of Deuteronomy 24 does not command divorce, but rather describes a case law situation where one has taken place. It is descriptive and prescriptive.

In verse 8 Jesus again rebukes them for their sinfully hard heart. He reminds them that God’s perfect order would never include divorce or divorce legislation, but their hardness of heart has made such legislation necessary. Just as God gave legislation on all other kinds of evils, he also gave legislation on divorce.

The key statement with the exception clause comes in verse 9 when Jesus tells them, “And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.” Although the terms used are slightly different (“except for immorality and marries another,” μή ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ καὶ γαμήσῃ ἄλλην), the

³⁵ A. D. Verhey, “Divorce in the New Testament,” *ISBE*, G. W. Bromiley, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988). Cited in electronic form with Logos Libronix.

force of this exception clause is the same as it was back in chapter 5. Jesus is making the declaration that a remarriage after a prior divorce will be considered adulterous unless the person getting remarried is doing so because the former spouse had been guilty of some kind of sexual immorality.³⁶

As one writer put it, “divorce on the grounds of unchastity usually frees the innocent partner to remarry without incurring the guilt of adultery,” perhaps for the reason that “a person dissolves his marriage by creating a sexual union with someone other than the marriage partner.”³⁷ Though the idea that sexual sin has dissolved the former marriage may not necessarily be true,³⁸ the implications of this verse for remarriage are that

both here and in Matthew 5:32 Jesus specifically allows remarriage by the innocent spouse in order that he or she might have opportunity to enjoy again the blessings of marriage that were destroyed by the other partner’s adultery. The qualification **except for immorality** clearly permits the innocent party who **marries another** to do so *without* committing **adultery**³⁹

This writer agrees with this conclusion and commends it as the proper interpretation of the passage and being directly applicable to the church.

³⁶ Blomberg, Craig, “Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, And Celibacy: An Exegesis of Matthew 19:3-12,” *Trinity Theological Journal* 11:2 (Fall 1990): 177. Blomberg notes that once again as in Matthew 5, the Greek term used for sexual immorality is the term *porneia* which can include adultery, may include other sexual kinds of such as “incest, homosexuality, prostitution, molestation, or indecent exposure.”

³⁷ R. F. Youngblood and F. F. Bruce, and R. K. Harrison, eds. “Divorce,” in *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: T. Nelson, n.d.). Cited in electronic form with Logos Libronix.

³⁸ James Weibling, “Reconciling Matthew and Mark On Divorce,” *Trinity Theological Journal* 22:2 (Fall 2001): 227. Weibling writes that “Infidelity does not itself dissolve a marriage; it does so only if it is accompanied by a refusal to continue to honor the commitment to ‘leave and cleave.’”

³⁹ John MacArthur, *Matthew* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989). Cited in electronic form with Logos Libronix.

Mark and Luke

One of the biggest challenges in understanding this whole topic is the fact that the passages of Mark 10:2-12 and Luke 16:18 (parallels to Matthew 19:4-6) do not contain the exception clause. Various attempts to explain the absence of the exception clause would include (1) the idea that Jesus never actually gave the exception clause but that it was a redactional addition by Matthew,⁴⁰ (2) the idea that the exception clause inclusion was only necessary to curb the problem of Jewish men divorcing to marry Gentile women,⁴¹ (3) the idea that Matthew 19 really does not allow for divorce and remarriage,⁴² or, among others, that (4) the idea that the absence of the clause in Mark and Luke are due to hyperbole in showing a general rejection of divorce and remarriage as being acceptable, although specific situations would permit for a remarriage.⁴³

The truth of the matter is that by and large, whether one was in the Gentile world (to which Mark and Luke wrote as a primary audience), most divorces took place then (and now) simply because of the failures within the relationships (and not necessarily because of marital unfaithfulness). Hiebert notes that “Among the Jews the prevailing reason for divorce was for the very purpose of marrying another,”⁴⁴ but the same thing

⁴⁰ This author cannot accept such ideas for bibliological reasons. If the gospel writers say that Jesus said something, Jesus actually said it. Certainly the evangelists practiced selectivity and arrangement as they produced the inspired text, but they did not practice creativity. Along this same lines, this writer cannot accept any explanation based upon the recent theory of Marcan priority. Early testimony speaks of the gospels with genealogies as being the first gospels with Matthew being first. Thus, it is highly tenuous to use a Historical Critical argument like Marcan priority.

⁴¹ Weibling, 219.

⁴² Ibid., 223.

⁴³ Ibid., 221.

⁴⁴ D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Gospel of Mark* (Greenville: Bob Jones, 1994), 280.

was also true among the Gentiles. Divorce was very common and there was little demand for justifying it. Given this kind of context for the Gentile audiences of Mark and Luke, it is no surprise that Mark and Luke omit the Old Testament background that gave the covenant nation an implicit permission to remarry. The Gentile world needed no such permission, for remarriage was always an assumed possibility.⁴⁵ The Gentile backdrop also helps explain why Mark would also include the reciprocal kind of statement (not in Matthew) that would apply the standard equally to men and to women in such a way that was not quite the case in Judea.⁴⁶

Thus, the absence of the exception clause can be understood based upon the nature of the author's immediate audience, but the absence of the clause in these two gospels does not obviate or overrule its presence in Matthew. All the data has to be taken into account when forming a systematic theology on any particular doctrine. Each text must be allowed to make its own respective contribution to the whole. Certainly, though, as Hiebert notes, "the effect of Jesus' teaching is to condemn all divorce as contrary to God's will and to set forth the highest standards of marriage for his disciples."⁴⁷ As Saucy has put it, "The absence of the exceptive clauses in the gospels of Mark and Luke can be harmonized."⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Blomberg ("Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, And Celibacy: An Exegesis of Matthew 19:3-12," 179) notes that Jewish writings (e.g., m. Git. 9:3) make it clear that "remarriage was viewed as a fundamental right by virtually all Jews in antiquity." In view of this, "if Jesus had wanted anyone in his audience to understand that he was forbidding all remarriage, he would have had to have said so much more clearly." The reaction of the disciples in Matthew 19 was due to the corrective that Jesus had just made that one cannot divorce for just any reason (182).

⁴⁶ Walter Wessel, "Mark," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, Frank Gaebelin, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 712.

⁴⁷ Hiebert, 281.

⁴⁸ Robert Saucy, "The Husband of One Wife," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 131:523 (July 1974): 232. Saucy believes Jesus was teaching that divorce can be permitted on the basis of adultery and that in

Synopsis of Findings from the Synoptics

The teachings of Christ as seen in the synoptic gospels provide explicit permission for a remarriage of an innocent party when sexual sin has been the cause of a divorce. This situation would never be an ideal, and it certainly was never part of God's original purpose as will be shown in the following section. Regardless of the fact that marriage is never an ideal according to the moral will of God, it is one of the realities of life in a cursed world. Divorces do happen and they happen for many different causes. Based upon the Mosaic laws of the covenant nation, Jesus affirmed that if the failure of the marriage had been due to some kind of sexual sin, an innocent spouse could remarry without fear of divine disapproval.

teaching this, Jesus was abolishing the erroneous, false ways that many handled Deuteronomy 24, namely the Hillelite position that permitted divorce and remarriage for any reason. Matthew's gospel included this exception clarifier due to the common Jewish problem, but Mark and Luke omitted this statement due to the fact that it was not a debate among the immediate Gentile audiences of these two evangelists.

CHAPTER 3

PRINCIPLES FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT

This section will look to a second source of inspired data, the Old Testament. The Old Testament is sometimes neglected in this discussion and not allowed to have its proper input. By going to the Old Testament the reader is first of all reminded about the need to recognize that commands from the Mosaic Law to the covenant nation Israel sometimes have a different application to the church age. The church never has been under that covenant code (Gal. 3:25), and so one must work with care when seeking to identify what kinds of principles might actually be normative and how these principles can apply today.

This section on the Old Testament will include discussions on (1) God's design and normative ideals for marriage, (2) the realities of God's rule over man in a sin-cursed world, (3) certain passages which effectively command divorce for particular situations, and (4) the idea that God Himself has been party to a kind of divorce involving the nation Israel. The objectives of this paper prevent lengthy discussion on any single topic. The reader is encouraged to take all of the broad teaching into consideration as part of a unified theology of divorce and use the concepts for detailed personal studies on the topic.

The Divine Design and Normative Ideal

There is no debate among any writers that God's desire and purpose has always been for man to enjoy His perfect blessings through faith and obedience to the revealed will of God. Along this line, God has never wanted divorce nor was it ever part of His

original, creation purposes. Sadly, though, the entrance of sin has created a situation in which things do not always happen according to God's moral will. The following section will first consider portions of the Old Testament that reflect that perfect creation ideal before moving on to a discussion about the actual realities of how sin has caused these purposes to experience frustration.

Genesis 1-2

Genesis 1-2 show what it was like in a perfect world—a world in which marital bliss was unending, and the concept of divorce was unthinkable. Genesis tells the reader that the creation of mankind included one male and one female, a perfectly matched pair through whom the earth could be populated. The initial creation order, with one man and one woman, did not even allow the possibility of divorce and remarriage. The perfection of this creation order is reflected in the words “very good” (1:31).

Genesis also says that Eve was created by God to become a “helper suitable to him” (2:18). In other words, the one woman would become the perfect companion for all of life. The woman was made from the man and for the man so that the two of them could enjoy the closest and most intimate of covenant relationships, as is reflected in the words of Adam: “This is bone of my bones . . .” (2:23). The divine commentary in 2:24-25 reflects the idea that God's design for this morally pure creature was a permanent, unbreakable bond of loving devotion. Man was created to “cleave” to his wife in a permanent relationship. This is the divine design and normative ideal of all ages, an ideal that finds agreement among all commentators.

God's Wisdom

Several texts within the wisdom literature of the Old Testament reflect upon this perfect design of one man and one woman in a lifetime bond. In Proverbs 5:18, for example, Solomon exhorts the young man to “rejoice in the wife” of his youth and to be “exhilarated with her love.” Furthermore, satisfaction in one’s own spouse and loyalty to one’s spouse in every way is reflected in the statement, “Drink water from your own cistern and fresh water from your own well” (5:15). Unending marriage love and unbreakable devotion to one’s spouse is God’s perfect design and will for all people at all times.

In the Song of Songs, Solomon’s “Shulammitte” girl pleads for this kind of love and devotion when she says, “Put me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm. For love is as strong as death, and jealousy is as severe as Sheol. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the Lord” (8:6). In other words, genuine love is something that reflects the very nature of God Himself. The idea is that genuine love is eternally unbreakable and loyal. Unending marriage love and unbreakable devotion to one’s spouse is God’s perfect design and will for all people at all times.

The Realities of God's Rule in a Cursed World (Deut. 24:1-4)

The sad truth of life in a cursed world, though, is that reality does not always correspond to God’s perfect design and moral will. In fact, the whole creation sits in agony due to the fact that it is in “slavery to corruption” due to sin’s curse (Rom. 8:21). The entrance of sin (Gen. 3) means that things do not always happen according to God’s perfect moral will. This does not mean that God approves of deviations from His moral will, nor does it mean that He does not punish it in the end. What it does mean, though,

is that He has willed so as to allow moral evil, and in so doing He has also made provision for ways of allowing for it and regulating it.

One particular passage of the Old Testament (Deut. 24:1-4) shows the way that the evils of divorce and remarriage took place within God's covenant nation, but also how it was addressed and regulated by God. As noted earlier, Deuteronomy 24:1-4 was the major Old Testament passage that spoke of and regulated divorce and remarriage. It is crucial that one not misinterpret the straightforward commands of the passage for the truth is that many people see this text as "providing grounds for divorce and the right of remarriage in the cases of adultery or sexual sin."⁴⁹ A proper understanding to this passage is therefore important.

As Laney notes, verses 1-3 form a single protasis statement that is answered by the apodosis statement in verse 4.⁵⁰ In other words, the divorce, remarriage, and subsequent end of marriage in verse 1-3 are neither commanded or commended (i.e., the granting of a divorce certificate was not part of some command from God). Rather, as is common in biblical kinds of case law, these verses are simply describing the situation.⁵¹ Much debate has centered in the meaning of "some indecency" which was shown as the cause for divorce in the first marriage (v. 1). The Hebrew expression *erwath dabar* (עֲרוּת דְבָר) would literally read as "the nakedness of the matter/thing," and as it

⁴⁹ Carl Laney, "Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and the Issue of Divorce," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (1992): 3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

stands is somewhat ambiguous.⁵² The ambiguity of the text is the reason why this passage has been so hotly debated over the ages, not only in the church, but even among the Hebrew speaking Jews over the ages including the rabbis of the first century. One writer describes it thus:

The **something indecent**, which a husband might find in his wife, cannot refer to adultery for which the penalty was death (22:22). Nor can the indecency refer to the wife's premarital intercourse with another man for which the penalty was also death (22:20-21). The precise meaning of the phrase is unknown⁵³

Whatever the exact nature of the offense was (or whatever range of conduct it might have embraced), it seems that it had something to do with immoral conduct, although not necessarily being adultery itself. To this extent it would appear that the School of Shammai was correct in the way that they understood this law, an understanding that was upheld by Christ Himself.⁵⁴

Regardless of why the first divorce took place and regardless of how the second marriage ended, the main command is explicitly clear in verse 4: never under any conditions is one to remarry a former spouse if there has been another intervening marriage. The intent of the legislation "is to forbid the remarriage of a divorced wife to her former husband after she has married another man who has divorced her or died."⁵⁵

⁵² Freeman points out that the first Hebrew term "nakedness" occurs with reference to (1) illicit sexual intercourse (Lev. 20:18), (2) human excrement (Deut. 23:15, MT), (3) other forms of nakedness (Ex. 28:42; 1 Sam. 20:30; Is. 47:3; Lam. 1:8; 4:21; Ezek. 16:8, 36) as well as the idea of shame (Is. 20:4).

⁵³ J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible knowledge commentary: An exposition of the scriptures*, 1:305 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-85). Cited in electronic form with Logos Libronix.

⁵⁴ Laney notes that the Septuagintal rendering was "equally obscure" (5).

⁵⁵ Freeman.

Many writers have debated why this remarriage was forbidden: (1) to discourage divorce in the first place, (2) to protect the second marriage, (3) to prevent a love triangle, (4) to prevent financial manipulation by the first husband, (5) to prevent what might become an incestuous kind of situation, etc.⁵⁶ The fact that remarriage is forbidden even if the second husband had died mitigates against many of these views. One thing is certain, in the eyes of God this kind of situation would be detestable, and for this reason it was absolutely forbidden!

One final observation is that the Old Testament, without giving endorsement of any actions, does not forbid the divorce or the remarriage of either party, regardless of why the divorce took place or who was at fault.⁵⁷ The Old Testament assumed the reality of these evils and gave specific legislation with reference to only one narrow issue. This does not say that divorce is good, but only that it was not forbidden to the covenant nation. The presence of divorce is assumed and the assumption of remarriage by both parties regardless of fault is also assumed.

Those writers who take the New Testament exception clause in Matthew 5 and 19 as referring to a sexual violation during the betrothal period have some serious challenges to overcome to sustain their view.⁵⁸ It is true that they can point to Joseph (Matt. 1) as an

⁵⁶ Laney, 210-213.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 6. Laney notes that the Mishnah included the wording “Behold, you are free to marry any man” (Gittin 9:3). In another words (as noted in Deuteronomy and echoed in the legal opinions of the teachers), divorce brought a legal dissolution of the marriage that permitted remarriage without restriction.

⁵⁸ Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 332-333. With reference to 1 Corinthians 7, Fee suggests that Paul’s use of the expression “loose” with the Corinthians should be understood as referring to the breaking of a betrothal and not to divorce since “loose” was not the common term to refer to a divorce situation. The problems to this suggestion are that (1) it remains a conjectural view based on silence, (2) the expression can easily mean divorce, and (3) the Gentile world of Corinth (which would have included some Jews, but Hellenistic Jews in every likelihood) argues against a Jewish betrothal idea, especially in the absence of any clarifying statement to designate it as such.

illustration of one who was going to break the a betrothal for this cause, but it is tenuous to use the virgin birth pericope as an exegetical grid for these other, unrelated, contexts. Another major challenge to this view is the fact that the betrothal position is an argument from silence and conjecture. Nowhere in the relevant texts (e.g., Matt. 5; 19; Deut. 24; 1 Cor. 7, etc.) does any writer add the qualifier that these statements are to be held as only during the betrothal period. The context in all of these cases is most naturally understood as referring to an existing, consummated marriage.⁵⁹

There are two other particular Old Testament passages that also shed light on the idea of permissibility of divorce and subsequent remarriage. One of these is the situation in Deuteronomy 22:13-19 dealing with situations where a man has falsely accused his new bride of not being a virgin at the time of marriage. Execution of the girl was the penalty if the girl were not a virgin, but the key point is to take note of what would happen if the charge were false. A false accusation meant a fine of 100 shekels from the groom to the girl's father along with the explicit command that "he forfeits all right of divorce."⁶⁰ In this rare kind of scenario, there is a formal prohibition against divorce. Such prohibition did not apply in general.

A second interesting situation arises in Deuteronomy 22:28-29. This case deals with a situation where a man rapes a single, non-betrothed girl. The penalty is that the

This question was a new question to Paul and the absence of explicit statements to fit the very narrow "betrothal" view makes this interpretation extremely unlikely; Robertson notes that "betrothal to an unmarried woman is not included" (A. T. Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* [Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1953], 153).

⁵⁹ As noted in *The New Bible Dictionary*, it certainly is true that betrothals in the ancient Near East were almost as binding as marriage itself. However, the Bible itself (unlike one sees in the Code of Hammurapi) "does not legislate for broken betrothals" (D. R. Wood, and I. H. Marshall, eds., "Marriage," *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. [Downers Grove: IVP, n.d.]. Cited in electronic form with Logos Libronix).

⁶⁰ Sprinkle, Joe, "Old Testament Perspectives On Divorce And Remarriage," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40:4 (December 1997): 533.

man must (1) marry the girl, (2) pay the father a fine of 50 shekels, and (3) never divorce her “as long as she lives.” As Sprinkle puts it, “were it not for the original offense it would be assumed that he could divorce her.”⁶¹ Clearly, divorce, though never ideal, did happen in the Old Testament and remarriage always had assumed permission.

“Commands” for Divorce

Beyond the former two examples that show that divorce (and by implication remarriage) was allowed within the covenant nation, one must also take into account four different situations in the Old Testament in which divorce was more or less mandated as being the lesser of two evils—a means of protection for wives who were under abuse and as a means (apparently) of protecting the family from even worse evils should the family unit stay intact.

Exodus 21:10-11

Exodus 21:10-11 gives regulations concerning situations where a man takes a slave girl to be his wife. The commandment is that this man is to provide her with proper marital love for her entire life. Later, if this man were to marry a second wife, he could not neglect the first wife from the normal needs of marital life. If he was unwilling to care for her in this way, God commanded that he divorce her without any payment of money. As Sprinkle notes, “the purpose of this law was humanitarian . . . [a way] to give the woman full wifely privileges” with a command to divorce if the husband was not

⁶¹ Ibid.

willing to meet those needs.⁶² Thus, although divorce is not part of God's ideal, it is a reality and as shown in this situation, at times the lesser of two evils.

Deuteronomy 21:10-14

Similar to the former example, Deuteronomy 21:10-14 gives legislation on how Israel was to treat foreign women who were taken in warfare. Most commonly, warfare in the ancient world (and today) results in men being killed and women being raped. The Bible gave legislation to Israel that would serve in some way to protect such women against future abuses. It did so by stating that a man who took such a wife (after shaving her head and having to wait for one month to see if he still wanted her) would have to give her proper marital love for her entire life. The Bible forbid him from either treating her as a slave or selling her as a slave. If a point came that he did not want her, the text says that he must "let her go wherever she wishes," standard Hebrew terminology to indicate divorce (cf. such terminology in Deut. 22:19, 29; 24:1, 3; Jer. 3:1). Thus, if he was unwilling to care for her as a wife, God's command was for him to divorce her so that she might have her own freedom and peace. Once again, as Sprinkle notes, the purpose of this law was "humanitarian" for women to prevent abuse.⁶³ Thus, although divorce is not part of God's ideal, it is a reality and as shown in this situation, at times the lesser of two evils

Genesis 21:8-14

A third illustration of divinely sanctioned divorce is the well known situation involving Abraham and Hagar. The conflicts from this polygamous situation had become

⁶² Ibid., 533-534.

⁶³ Ibid., 534.

so bad that God told Abraham to follow the desire of Sarah and divorce Hagar. On the one hand, the situation was bad for Sarah and Isaac since Isaac was being “mocked” by them (21:9). On the other hand, the situation was also bad for Hagar and Ishmael for they were disliked by Sarah. Thus, so to speak one might say, “irreconcilable differences” had made divorce “the lesser of two evils.”⁶⁴ This does not say that divorce was good or according to God’s moral will, but it was a reality of life in a cursed world and, as the text shows, something that was directed by God Himself.

Ezra 9-10/Nehemiah 13/Malachi 2

The situation in Ezra 9-10/Nehemiah 13 should be seen in association with some of the statements in Malachi 2, all of which come from within the same basic historical context. Malachi 2 records the way the fact that Jewish men were divorcing their Jewish wives—the covenant wives of their youth—with the apparent purpose of being able to marry younger, foreign women whom they felt were more attractive and alluring than their aging Jewish wives (Mal. 2:14; cf. Ezra 9:1-3, 12; 10:3).

The Book of Ezra describes these events and shows how furious Ezra was over the wickedness of their actions. Ezra was even fearful that this kind of covenant disloyalty (both against God and one’s spouse) might even lead to them being judged with another dispersion, such as they had experienced with the Babylonian captivity earlier (9:14). Although this text does not give explicit statement that God commanded these divorces nor that He approved them, the context suggests to some that the actions of Ezra were justified in view of the evils that such marriages were creating,⁶⁵ especially

⁶⁴ Ibid., 535.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

since these marriages seemed to be taking place due to divorces from Jewish wives. Families were being destroyed by men “hating their wives” so as to divorce them.⁶⁶

Regardless of this particular example, there is as has been shown significant illustrations of times in the Old Testament when divorce became the lesser of two evils, an action that carried with it the instructions of God for the protection of innocent spouses.

“Divine Divorce?”

Several passages of the Old Testament make reference to Israel’s apostasy from the Mosaic covenant with the result, apparently, that God grants a “divorce” to His covenant people. This is not to say that God was a guilty party, nor that Israel can never be restored, but only that the persistent unfaithfulness of Israel (the wife of Yahweh) resulted in a God-given divorce.

Isaiah 50:1

The first passage to consider is in Isaiah 50. God is being forced to confront defiant Israel over the consequences of the Babylonian captivity. It would appear that Israel was beginning to cast accusation against the Lord by charging Him with a failure of covenant loyalty. For example, in 49:14 Isaiah makes note of the way that Zion was saying “The Lord has forsaken me and the Lord has forgotten me.” Such was far from the truth. The Lord did not forget Zion; rather, Zion had abandoned the Lord. God’s

⁶⁶ Sprinkle, 536. Sprinkle makes note of the Hebrew grammar of 2:16 which in all probability should not be taken to have God saying “I hate divorce” but that it should be understood with the former clause. Thus, the expression would read something like “Let no one deal treacherously with the wife of your youth so as to hate.” For one, the English translation “I hate divorce” simply is not possible with the Masoretic text and furthermore, the idea of “hate” as being part of standard kinds of Jewish divorce language is well attested.

reply to this accusation is to force Israel to examine the historical facts of why she went into captivity. God commands her to bring out the divorce certificate so that she might be reminded of the fact that it was her disloyalty, and not His, that led to the divorce.⁶⁷

Hosea 2:2

The context of Hosea 2 is the same as in Isaiah. Israel (as symbolized by Gomer) has been unfaithful to her Lord/husband (1:2). Just as Hosea was very patient with Gomer, God, too, was very patient with Israel. The age of patience ran its course, though, and the tragic results of divorce came crashing down—Hosea granted the divorce to Gomer and Yahweh granting the divorce to Israel. Hence, the reader sees the words “She is not my wife and I am not her husband” (2:2).

Israel, though unfaithful and playing the part of a divorced woman, never does remarry. Later in the story one reads about Hosea buying Israel back from the slave market. All of this is to demonstrate the fact that Yahweh will one day restore Israel and bring her back into a marriage relationship (2:14-21; 3:1-5).

The applicable principle, though is this: God’s “marriage” relationship with Israel demonstrates the fact that at times the wickedness of unrepentant sin makes divorce a forced reality—the lesser of two evils.

Jeremiah 3:1-8; 31:31-32

This reality gets confirmed by at least two passages in the prophet Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 3:8 God makes the explicit statement, “And I saw that for all the adulteries of faithless Israel, I had sent her away and given her a writ of divorce.” In standard divorce

⁶⁷ This interpretation flows from the context and is to be preferred over the alternate view that God is denying that a divorce has taken place as Sprinkle himself holds.

language, God makes it clear that he (reluctantly) granted the divorce that His people wanted so badly.

Later in 31:31-32, God assures His apostate and divorced people that one day He will restore the nation of Israel/Judah to Himself by making a “new covenant.” In verse 32 God reminds them that the failure of the first marriage (the first covenant which is the Law of Moses) was not due to His failure, but to theirs. He also assures them that the new covenant will be one that they will never ever break, for the faithfulness of Yahweh to restore His people in redeeming grace will assure its continuity.

Synopsis of Findings from the Old Testament

The key observations from the Old Testament include the following facts: (1) Divorce was a reality in the Old Testament. (2) Remarriage for both parties was generally an assumed reality regardless of fault in the divorce. (3) All of these texts show that marriage should best be understood as a covenant that can be broken due to the failure of one or both parties. Thus, marriage should not be strictly defined according to a “one flesh” concept with the resultant idea that it is thus never dissoluble.⁶⁸ (4) Divine commandments for divorce and divine participation for divorce show that this unwelcome reality is nonetheless a reality—oftentimes a necessary reality due to the widespread presence of evil. The multiple illustrations of remarriage for divorced parties shows that remarriage was never forbidden. (5) Despite the presence of these kinds of laws, none of the examples undermine the fact that God’s moral will is for marriages to endure through tender hearts and repentance. (6) The reason why God made allowance for divorce was due to the hardness of man’s heart and the fact that sometimes divorce is

⁶⁸ Sprinkle, 537-539.

the lesser of two evils, a way to protect weak wives from the abuses of a godless husband. (7) The legislation of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 must be seen as the backdrop to the teachings of Christ that a divorce due to a sinning wife provided both for a legal divorce as well as freedom to remarry.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ D. R. Wood, and I. H. Marshall, eds., "Marriage," *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove: IVP, n.d.). Cited in electronic form with Logos Libronix.

CHAPTER 4

PRINCIPLES FROM THE APOSTLE PAUL

The final data that one must consider when forming a theology of divorce comes from the teachings of the Apostle Paul, especially from his detailed statements on the issue in 1 Corinthians 7.⁷⁰

This section will first look at the basic problems that Paul had to deal with in Corinth and then suggest an interpretation of the chapter which addresses these issues. As with former sections, this one, too, must be concise to stay within the purposes of the study.

The Basic Corinthian Problem on Sexual Issues

Hodge notes that “it is evident that there was a diversity of opinion on the subject of marriage among the Corinthian Christians.”⁷¹ The Corinthians had questions on many issues, marriage and sex being among them. Paul “takes up these items one by one, most of them being introduced by the Greek *peri de* (“now concerning”; cf. 7:1, 25; 8:1, 4; 12:1; 16:1, 12).⁷²

The text seems to show a situation in which newly saved Corinthian Christians were trying to figure out how they could best live a holy and God-pleasing life since their

⁷⁰ Saucy (“The Husband of One Wife,” 233) and others note the statements in Romans 7:1ff. deal in context with the soteriological discussions about the relevance of the law and “those who know the law.” Thus, in that context Paul is “stating the general rule of marriage and not considering divorce for adultery.” Thus, the statement about being bound until death due to the Law should not be taken as the single, determinative principle that governs every situation.

⁷¹ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 108.

⁷² Fee, 267.

call to salvation (“call”/“calling” being a major, recurring concept throughout the chapter). It appears that Paul had two kinds of problems that he was having to deal with in Corinth. On the one hand (as seen in ch. 6) he was having to deal with “libertines who argued that everything was permissible, and in particular that sexual license was a matter of ethical indifference” while on the other hand (chapter 7) he also had to deal with ascetics who “argued that sexual relations of every kind were to be depreciated.”⁷³ Here in chapter 7 Paul addresses the problems the Corinthians had with understanding the relationship between marriage and sexuality with their newly acquired calling as children of God.

How to Live a Godly Christian Life

Paul’s instructions to the Corinthians on godly living must be understood as addressing a wide range of circumstances. As will be noted, the grammar of the chapter suggests that Paul addressed at least eleven different topics beginning in verse 1. This section will give a brief survey of these eleven issues and how they inform the church about a theology of divorce and remarriage.

The first issue Paul addresses (1-2) is the notion that singleness and celibacy can be a good way to live, a question that they no doubt had posed to Paul. Paul responds by telling them that celibacy is a good thing. However, he quickly qualifies this in verse 2 by reminding them that the realities of sexual temptation are often best handled by seeking marriage rather than living a life of sexual frustration. Thus, “for an individual to

⁷³ F. F. Bruce, *The New Century Bible Commentary: I & II Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 66.

try to maintain a celibate state apart from the enablement of God (cf. v. 7) would lead to immorality. For that reason Paul encouraged people to marry.”⁷⁴ In these verses, the issue of a former marriage cannot be determined.

The second issue Paul addresses (3-7) concerns the false notion that even within marriage, abstinence from sexual relations would be a higher form of holiness. Paul’s corrective to the Corinthians is to instruct them that sexual relations between a husband and wife is good, blessed by God, and to be practiced on a regular basis, in part as a way of helping to deal with temptations to sexual sin. MacArthur notes that “Physical love is to be a normal and regular experience shared by both marriage partners alike, as a gift from God.”⁷⁵ Thus, the Corinthians were to cease from depriving their spouses on the basis that this would lead to a higher form of holiness.

The third issue Paul addresses (8-9) reflects Paul’s personal preference that Christians stay single and use their singleness to serve Christ more fully, an idea that he repeats many times in this chapter (1, 8, 17, 20, 24, 26, 29-35). It would appear that Paul’s statement about the “unmarried” (ἀγάμοις) would best be taken as including those who have never been married as well as those who were divorced before their call to Christ. As Morris puts it, this would include “all not bound by the married state”⁷⁶ (the same root term of ἀγάμοις is used in v. 11 to make explicit reference to one who has

cf. *confer*, compare

v. verse

⁷⁴ J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible knowledge commentary: An exposition of the scriptures*, 2:517 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-85). Cited in electronic form with Logos Libronix.

⁷⁵ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984). Cited in electronic form with Logos Libronix.

⁷⁶ Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians* (London: Tyndale, 1958), 108.

divorced a spouse and is no an unmarried divorcee). Paul’s instruction to this class of Christians is to stay single and serve Christ if they can, but if they feel sexual temptations, the best thing to do is to get married for marriage with sexual fulfillment is better than burning with lust. These two verses, then, would seem to be giving explicit permission for a formerly divorced person (i.e., divorced before their call to salvation) to freely remarry without any qualification of why the former divorce happened nor whether or not the former spouse was remarried or even still alive. In agreement with this position, the Bible Knowledge Commentary notes that “the unmarried included divorced persons of both sexes as well as widowers, with widows mentioned separately (cf. vv. 39-40).”⁷⁷ Some may try to argue that “unmarried” only refers to those who have never been married, but that group would appear to be designated by the expression “virgins” (cf. v. 28ff.). Furthermore, Paul’s use of the expression ἀγάμοις in verse 11 makes it explicit that he can use the term as a reference to one who is divorced.

The fourth issue Paul addresses (10-11) deals with two married people who both profess a covenant relationship to God through faith in Christ.⁷⁸ With reference to this situation, Paul distinctly makes note that his instruction on this issue was something that Christ Himself addressed in His earthly ministry (Matt. 5; 19; Mk. 10; Lk. 16). The

cf. *confer*, compare

vv. verses

⁷⁷ J. F. Walvoord and R. b. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible knowledge commentary: An exposition of the scriptures*, 2:518 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-85). Cited in electronic form with Logos Libronix.

⁷⁸ Morris, *1 Corinthians*, 108. This writer realizes that the text does not say “covenant” relationship, but this theological qualifier is being added for the sake of helping the reader consider the fact that the church age does not look upon new converts as having had any former covenant relationship to God as one would have with corporate Israel under the Law of Moses (cf. Eph. 2:12ff.).

scenario assumes that one of these two professing Christians has left the marriage (although a formal divorce may or may not have been finalized). Paul's command here is that no Christian spouse should divorce another Christian spouse, but if they do then they have only two options: (1) stay celibate or (2) get reconciled with the innocent spouse. This teaching is in full accord with the teachings of Christ that called for a permanent marriage. For the situation where both are believers, these instructions should be taken as the general principle of divorce and, presumably, deal with cases where no marital unfaithfulness have been the cause of the divorce.⁷⁹ The general instruction for two married Christians is clear. If you divorce, you must stay single (perhaps other qualifiers would apply in specific circumstances) or reconcile.

The fifth issue Paul addresses (12-24) addresses a class of people that has not already been addressed in detail (Τοῖς δὲ λοιποῖς, i.e., “the rest”), “those not covered by the straightforward categories of verses 8 and 10.”⁸⁰ This situation deals with cases where a married person has gotten saved but the spouse has not gotten saved—“those not bound in ties of Christian marriages.”⁸¹ In speaking to this kind of situation, Paul is addressing the kind of situation that could never have been addressed in the Old Testament or in the gospels, for neither the Old Testament nor the gospels made this kind of sharp distinction among the people of Israel. To be a Jew within the corporate people of God in the covenant nation granted one status as part of the covenant people, a status that usually did not question issues of personal regeneration. “The rest” Paul refers to,

⁷⁹ Ibid., 109. One should also take note of the fact that Paul and other writers employ a variety of expressions to describe things like marriage and divorce. The interpreter should be cautioned about creating a strong difference of meaning between these common expressions.

⁸⁰ Bruce, *The New Century Bible Commentary: I & II Corinthians*, 69.

⁸¹ Morris, 109.

then, refers to Christians who were married to non-Christians. Jesus, in the course of His ministry, never had addressed this issue (cf. vv. 10, 25).”⁸²

This situation raises a very interesting hermeneutical point that impacts the way one should interpret and apply all these issues. Under the Old Covenant, there was the implicit idea that everyone lived under the Law of Moses as the covenant people of God. This status rarely addressed the issue of individual regeneration. Rather, it looked at the whole nation as bearing a covenant relation to God due to their status as Jews. It is entirely possible that this distinction between Jews under the Law of Moses and Gentiles who had recently gotten saved (without any former kind of covenant relationship to God) created a different kind of principle in terms of divorce and remarriage. To be specific, for the divorced Gentile who had just gotten saved, the cause of divorce before his call to Christ was of absolutely no consequence. On the other hand, Jesus, when addressing those of the covenant nation, did make a couple references about remarriage that suggested an adulterous kind of result (even, apparently, if the party was innocent in the divorce; e.g., “whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery”).

Thus, one possible explanation in trying to harmonize the statements of Christ with those of Paul is to remember that Christ was a Jew living in the land of Canaan under the Law of Moses. As such, all of His teaching would have been as from a covenant Jew unto covenant Jews. On the other hand, Paul’s instructions to “the rest” dealt with a different situation—Gentiles who had no former kind of covenant

vv. verses

⁸² J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible knowledge commentary: An exposition of the scriptures*, 2:518 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-85). Cited in electronic form with Logos Libronix.

relationship with God (hence, Jesus made no statements to address this kind of context). For this reason, Paul gives no restrictions for a subsequent remarriage if divorce had taken place before salvation (vv. 8-9), or even after salvation if it was due to desertion by the unbeliever (vv. 12-24). Paul's instructions to men or women in this situation is that the former marriage bond is no longer binding, thus giving them freedom to marry again without sin (15). Thus, "should this occur, the Christian was not bound to maintain the marriage but was free to marry again (cf. v. 39)."⁸³ Thus, verses 12ff. give yet another explicit command that permits remarriage for a Christian, this one being in cases where he or she has been deserted by an unbelieving spouse.

The sixth issue Paul addresses (25-26) concerns another class of individuals about whom Christ gave no marriage instructions. This group consists of those who are virgins and have never been married.⁸⁴ As noted earlier, Paul's personal desire for single people is that they stay single and dedicate their energies to serving Christ.

The seventh issue Paul addresses (27a) deals once again with those who are currently in the state of being married (δέδεσαι: note the force of the perfect tense which lays stress upon both the past act of entering into marriage as well as the ongoing state of being married). Paul's instructions to this group of people is this: stay married and do not seek a divorce—a "loosing" (μὴ ζητεῖ λύσιν)! As noted earlier, it is highly

cf. *confer*, compare

v. verse

⁸³ J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible knowledge commentary: An exposition of the scriptures*, 2:518 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-85). Cited in electronic form with Logos Libronix. This opinion is held by a number of other writers including, among others, the editor Ron Youngblood in the discussion of "Divorce" in *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*.

⁸⁴ Although the expression often refers to virgin girls, the NT also uses it with reference to virgin (unmarried) males.

improbable (as suggested by Fee) that Paul is referring to betrothed Jews. The statement is a plain reference to marriage. Someone has taken action in the past to get bound in marriage and they are at the present time in that state of being married. Paul says, “Stay married.”

The eighth issue Paul addresses (27b-28a) is the situation where someone had been previously married, but gotten divorced before his/her call to salvation (λέλυσαι ἀπὸ γυναικός: once again, it is important for one to note the force of the perfect tense which lays stress upon both the initial past act of getting divorced as well as the ongoing state of being divorced). Paul’s two-fold instructions to those who had gotten divorced before salvation are (1) do not seek to get remarried, but (2) if you should get remarried there is no sin to do so (ἐὰν δὲ καὶ γαμήσης, οὐχ ἥμαρτες). This passage provides perhaps the most explicit teaching in the Bible that remarriage is never a sin if the divorce took place before one’s call to salvation. No conditions—good or bad—are brought into the picture. The statement is direct and explicit as “Paul again makes it clear that it is not a sin for single believers to get married, as long as it is to another believer (v. 39; cf. 2 Cor. 6:14).”⁸⁵ Thus, as Paul has made clear, remarriage by a Christian should never be restricted if one’s divorce came before personal salvation.

The ninth issue Paul addresses (28b-35) once again deals with the subject of those who have never been married. Paul’s teachings once again make the point that his personal preference is that single people stay single so that they can devote their energies

v. verse

cf. *confer* (Lat.), compare

⁸⁵ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984). Cited in electronic form with Logos Libronix.

to the Great Commission. Nevertheless (28b), if a single person who has never been married wants to get married, it is no sin!

The tenth issue Paul addresses (36-38) deals apparently with a situation in which a Christian father was considering having his unmarried Christian daughter stay single for the purpose of serving Christ with all of her energies. It would seem that some fathers, in association with the voluntary commitment of their virgin daughters, had made commitments to keep their daughters single for Christian service. Subsequent to these hasty commitments, both the fathers and the daughters began to recognize the folly in these hasty declarations. Paul's instruction to these folks was that they had the freedom to maintain that former declaration, or, if they thought it was wrong, to allow these young ladies to enter into marriage. MacArthur elaborates on the problem

In light of the extant teaching about the advantages of singleness, some of the fathers in Corinth apparently had dedicated their young daughters to the Lord as permanent virgins. But when the daughters became of marriageable age, many of them no doubt wanted to be married, and their fathers were in a quandary. Should they break the vow they made for the girl? It is likely that many of the girls did not have the gift of singleness and were struggling with their desire to get married and their desire to please their fathers and the Lord. The problem was among those mentioned in the church's letter to Paul (7:1)⁸⁶

Thus, as noted by MacArthur, the choice to marry was a personal one to be selected by the individual with the guidance of her father, not one dictated by the church.

The eleventh and final issue that Paul addresses (39-40) concerns Paul's final instructions on the whole matter of marriage, sex, divorce, and remarriage. Verse 39

⁸⁶ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984). Cited in electronic form with Logos Libronix.

makes a blanket and general declaration about the permanency of marriage (cf. Rom. 7:1-4) by saying that “a wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.” With the interpretive assumption in this verse being that its reference is to two Christians, Paul repeats the instructions that he gave back in verses 10-11 that marriage is a life-long bond. The options for two Christians then are (1) stay married, (2) stay celibate if you divorce, (3) get reconciled if you have divorce, or (4) seek remarriage, but only if your former spouse has already died and only to another Christian (something which applies to every Christian).

Synopsis of Findings from 1 Corinthians 7

The teachings that God brought to the church through the Apostle Paul greatly illuminate the way God’s people should view marriage, sex, divorce, and remarriage. The teachings of the Old Testament and the sayings of Christ in the synoptic gospels provide a significant amount of instruction for the church, but none of this is complete apart from Paul’s instruction here. Explicit is the permission for divorce (though never an ideal according to God’s moral will). Explicit is the permission for remarriage if a divorce (regardless of cause) took place before personal salvation. Explicit is the permission for remarriage if a Christian has been deserted by an unbeliever. Explicit is the permission for remarriage if one’s former spouse has died. One can be thankful for God’s mercy in providing such rich instruction for sinners who are so needy of help.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In closing this study, the writer would like to propose a summary of some of the major observations that could be seen as normative and applicable for the church: (1) Both the OT and NT recognize the reality of divorce although they do so without necessarily approving of it. (2) Both the OT and NT make full allowance for the remarriage of an innocent party after a divorce. (3) The OT spoke of remarriage even by those who had been the guilty parties of a former divorce and does so without giving explicit prohibition against it. (4) Both the OT and NT speak of sexual sin as a provision that permits an innocent believer to remarry with a clean conscience before God (with the qualifier that the OT does not really employ such “believer” language as one explicitly finds in the NT). (5) Several OT examples show that God made provision for divorce in certain kinds of extreme situations so that a divorce and remarriage would be the more compassionate way of protecting innocent parties (situations that imply the presence of perhaps physical or sexual abuse or desertion). (6) Jesus gave explicit permission for an innocent party to remarry with a clear conscience if a former divorce had been due to the sexual sin of the former spouse. (7) In addressing the church, the Apostle Paul commanded celibacy or reconciliation for the case of two Christians who have divorced for reasons other than sexual sin. (8) In the case of a situation where one spouse professes a covenant relationship with Christ but the other does not, Paul advised a continuation of marriage with the unbeliever if possible in the hopes that the marriage be preserved and that the unbeliever might get saved. (9) If an unbeliever deserts a believer, the unbeliever is free from the wedding bond and permitted remarriage with a

clear conscience. (10) The guilty party in a divorce does not have permission to remarry, but in reality the specific guilt of adultery, immorality or desertion is the least of that person's problems. Their need is personal regeneration and forgiveness. (11) As an ideal, no one should seek divorce. (12) If one has undergone a divorce before his call to salvation, this believer is free to marry with a clear conscience anyone he/she wishes as long as they are saved. (13) Regardless of why or when a past divorce may have taken place, the believer can feel free to marry with a clear conscience if the former spouse has died. (14) Regardless of why or when a past divorce may have taken place, the believer can feel free to marry with a clear conscience if the former spouse has already entered into another marriage. (15) Due to the extremely strong statements of Deuteronomy 24:1-4, it would seem wise that no Christian should ever remarry a former spouse if that spouse had been joined to another in an intervening marriage.

As Blomberg notes, certainly, "divorce should never be considered unless all other approaches to healing a broken relationship have been exhausted."⁸⁷ In no wise is the present study seeking to promote a loosening of convictions about the importance of fighting for marriage. What this study has shown, though, is that divorce did take place in the Bible and remarriage was not forbidden in most of these situations.

The preceding summary statements will certainly find disagreement with some. However, in view of the relevant passages, these declarations can be supported with confidence as being reasonable explanations of the biblical text—a view which this writer commends as being acceptable as a theology of marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

⁸⁷ Blomberg, 196.

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