

# But If You Do Marry ...

*a study in marriage, divorce, and remarriage*

**by Jay Guin**

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## Chapter 1. Preface

These are notes first used to teach a Sunday School class on 1 Corinthians 7 (and thus necessarily on divorce and remarriage) in late 2000. Several members of the class asked me for written notes. Not having any at the time, I typed my class materials over the next several weeks. As the writing caused me to focus more closely on the material, I supplemented my work with additional research.

After distributing the original notes to the class, I've continued to do research and to add to the text as time has permitted. Ultimately, I've learned that I'm no Greek scholar, and so I'm forced to lean on the conclusions of those far more knowledgeable than I. Unfortunately, even the best scholars disagree on many, many points. Indeed, even a cursory review of the many commentaries on divorce and remarriage show just how little agreement there is on this subject, even (or especially!) among the experts.

To me, the test of truth must ultimately be based on trueness to the heart of God. As a highly left-brained individual, I will always look first for a sound analytical answer to any scriptural question, but my analytical nature tells me that objective textual analysis – in isolation – does not always reach the right answer. I mean, there are countless scriptures that we instinctively understand correctly, realizing that a law-based interpretation would entirely miss the point. For example –

*Matt. 5:29-30* "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell."<sup>1</sup>

This passage comes immediately before –

*Matt. 5:31-32* "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."

I'm sure you can't help but notice that we vigorously enforce our law-based interpretation of verses 31-32 while we have never even seriously considered enforcing verses 29-30! And yet they are part of the same sermon, even the same argument.

We correctly interpret verses 29-30 as hyperbole – an exaggeration for effect – understanding that the underlying principle is the point Jesus is truly insisting on. What should we conclude is the underlying principle of Matthew 5:31-32? And what is its underlying principle?

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture references are to the NIV, original version, except when otherwise noted.

I must also note my reliance of John Edwards' book, *An In Depth Study of Marriage and Divorce*.<sup>2</sup> I've borrowed liberally from his research and have not consistently footnoted to this book.

I really have only two complaints with Edwards' work. First, I think he has failed to argue his case has persuasively as he might have. While Edwards argues the case well from 1 Corinthians 7:27-28, he fails to make this the centerpiece of his case, as it should be. It really is his strongest argument.

Second, Edwards centers his case on the argument that "commit adultery" in Matthew 5:31-32 is, in the Greek, in the passive voice, but this argument has come under fire. Gary Collier – who is far from being a legalist and who is clearly a very capable Greek scholar – has seriously challenged Edwards' arguments.

I should also note my reliance on David Instone-Brewer's *Divorce & Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context*.<sup>3</sup> This book is very, very important. I don't attempt a thorough review and critique of this work. Rather, I commend it to the reader's reading.

I was really hoping to make this all a simplified, more direct summary of Edwards' book for the benefit of my class, but – alas – the subject just doesn't lend itself to simplicity.

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<sup>2</sup> (Revised edition. Joplin, Missouri: College Press Publ. Co., 1990). This book is now out of print.

<sup>3</sup> (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co. 2002) (hereinafter "Instone-Brewer").

## **Chapter 2. Introduction**

When I was a child, growing up in the Churches of Christ during the 1950's and 60's, divorce was much discussed in our classes and from our pulpits – but the discussion was very much in the abstract. I mean, in the congregation where I grew up, of some 200 members, we only had one couple that had experienced divorce. Times have surely changed! Nowadays, over 50% of all marriages end in divorce. It's not surprising that many are calling for a renewed emphasis on the traditional teachings of all Christian churches on divorce and remarriage. It is hoped that, perhaps, a return to the stricter rules we grew up with will slow the Church's decline into ever more frequent divorce – and who would disagree with the desire to reduce the divorce rate that afflicts even our members?

Is the solution to divorce a stricter doctrine? Well, it's just not right to modify doctrine to suit the needs of the day. Rather, the answer will be found in God's truth, which doesn't change.

### Chapter 3. The traditional view – doctrinal background

The struggle to understand the Bible’s teachings on divorce and remarriage is not unique to the Churches of Christ. Indeed, it is easy to find literature from all denominations dealing with the same issues and making most of the same arguments found in Church of Christ literature. Thus, the “traditional” view is not only the view traditional in the Churches of Christ, it is also the view traditional in Roman Catholicism and most Protestant denominations. The traditional view is so pervasive that it has even affected the law of most Western nations and even our language and vocabulary.

The traditional view is based on the King James Version translation of certain sayings of Jesus in the Gospels. In particular, most teaching is based on the following two passages in Matthew:

*Matt. 5:31 KJV* It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: *32* But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.

*Matt. 19:3 KJV* The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? *4* And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made **them** at the beginning made them male and female, *5* And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? *6* Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.

*7* They say unto him, Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away? *8* He saith unto them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so. *9* And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except *it be* for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.

Now let’s start with Matthew 5:31-32. This is part of the Sermon on the Mount. As translated, Jesus declares that if a husband divorces his wife, he causes her to be an adulteress and also makes her second husband an adulterer. He makes an exception for fornication by the wife, however.

In Matthew 19 Jesus addresses the husband’s situation. If he divorces his wife, except for fornication, and marries another, he commits adultery. In the King James Versions, Jesus repeats the declaration of Matthew 5:32 that whoever marries the divorced woman also commits adultery. However, this declaration is not found in the oldest Greek manuscripts and was certainly not written by Matthew. Therefore, few later

translations include the second clause. This is important because in Matthew 5, Jesus says the husband “causes” the wife to commit adultery, but as wrongly translated in the KJV, Matthew 19 just says she’s an adulterer. As we’ll see, this is likely one major cause for our misinterpretation of this passage.

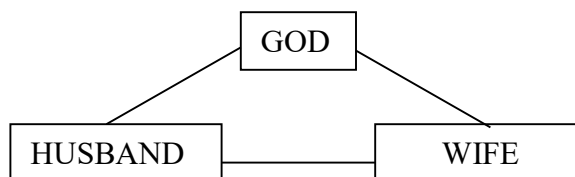
Traditionally, these passages have been interpreted thusly:

1. Any divorce not based on fornication is an “unscriptural” divorce. In God’s eyes, such a divorce never took place at all. The couple is still married in God’s eyes, so that a second marriage is actually not a marriage at all. Thus, sexual relations in the second marriage are a sin against the still-existing first marriage and therefore adultery. In other words, the traditional view is that, other than for fornication, a couple cannot actually divorce.
2. In the case of fornication, there is a “guilty” and an “innocent” spouse. Most concede that that the guilty party cannot remarry. Matthew 19:9 certainly seems to imply this result. Christians have disagreed as to whether the innocent spouse may remarry. Most believe that the innocent spouse is free to remarry. However, some have disagreed, relying on other Gospel passages where Jesus does not mention an exception for fornication (Mark 10:1-12; Luke 16:18). And some have contended that there never really is an innocent spouse, so that neither spouse is permitted to remarry.

While the majority view appears to be that in the case of fornication the innocent spouse may remarry, this creates the odd notion that the guilty party is still married to the innocent spouse (and so can’t remarry) but the innocent party is not married to the guilty one!

3. The even more troubling question is the fate of the spouse divorced in an “unscriptural” divorce, that is, a divorce not for fornication. Suppose a husband abandons the marriage, obtains a divorce, and never remarries or commits fornication. May his innocent spouse remarry? Some say yes, but the majority view is no, based on the evidently plain statements in Matthew 5:31-32 that seems to prohibit marriage by the wrongly divorced wife where fornication is not involved.

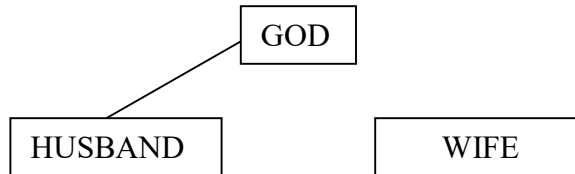
Now this seems very unfair to anyone not brought up on this teaching. After all, if a wife is wrongly abandoned by her husband, why shouldn’t she be allowed to remarry? The rationale for this is usually given by this chart:



The argument is that a marriage is a covenant between a man, a woman, and God. While a husband and wife might attempt to end the marriage by breaking the bond

between each other, the marriage bond with God is unbreakable except for fornication. Thus, an unscriptural divorce, that is, a divorce not based on fornication, is no divorce at all. The couple is still really married in God's eyes, regardless of how they or the government perceives the marriage. This makes sex with anyone, even a second spouse, adultery.

The next phase of the argument is that in the case of fornication (let's say by the husband), God releases the wife – the innocent party – from the marriage bond but not the husband:



And so the husband is still subject to the marriage covenant, having been guilty, while the wife is not – giving the somewhat incongruous result that in God's eyes, the husband is married but the wife isn't!

This view has raised a number of troubling issues over the years. And as divorce has become increasingly common over the last 40 years or so, these troubling issues have become commonplace for churches everywhere.

- a. What about a couple unscripturally divorced and remarried prior to conversion? Does baptism cleanse the former sin and allow them to remain married? Christians have disagreed, but it has often been taught that no one can be saved without repentance (undeniably true!), repentance requires a change away from former sin (such as adultery), and so the divorced and remarried couple must divorce one another – putting their wrongful marriage behind them – to be eligible for baptism. Of course, the problem with this view is that we have preachers and elders telling couples to divorce to please God – often when they have children at home – causing unspeakable pain and harm: the very pain and harm that Christ's teaching against divorce is supposed to prevent!
- b. Some have taught that, rather than divorcing, such a couple may live together so long as they do so without sexual relations. And yet, as we'll see, this seems to contradict Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 7 – that husbands and wives may not deny one another sexual privileges – not to mention being the occasion of much temptation and sin. I mean, while I know of cases where this has been done, how many couples have been driven out of the church by such teaching? Or have lived together and engaged in what they have been taught to be wrong? As Jesus (Matt. 19:11-12) and Paul (1 Cor. 7:7) both teach, not everyone has the gift to live a celibate life!
- c. And how should we treat our church members who have divorced? The majority view would be that divorce is wrong (unless scriptural, that is, for



fornication) but forgivable. However, many churches have, for reasons not clearly articulated, treated divorced members as second-class members – not “in good standing” – and denied such members the privilege of teaching class, attending the Lord’s Table, or preaching. Indeed, if a preacher’s wife leaves him and can’t be shown to have been a fornicator, the preacher’s career is over, no matter how innocent he may have been. In some cases, even where the wife was unfaithful, the preacher has become a pariah on just the notion held by some that there really never is an innocent party.

- d. While divorce has been viewed as semi-forgivable sin, remarriage after an unscriptural divorce is viewed as unforgivable. The problem is that under the logic of the triangle drawn above, the second marriage is no marriage at all, but is cohabitation in violation of the first marriage, and adultery is committed every time the couple have sexual relations. Because adultery is committed more or less continually, forgiveness is unavailable. The only path to forgiveness is repentance, which means divorcing the second spouse – regardless of the impact on the children. Not surprisingly, remarried couples generally leave a church that takes this position and find a more indulgent denomination or else leave Christianity altogether.

It has been said that it would be better to kill your wife than to divorce her, since having killed her, you could obtain forgiveness and remarry! Just divorcing her leaves no path available for a second marriage.

- e. Elderships sometimes have to face other daunting questions under this view. For example, suppose a woman’s husband abandons her, leaving no forwarding address. May she presume that he has had sexual relations with another woman, allowing the former wife to remarry, or must she seek proof before remarrying? And how much proof is needed? Indeed, a former husband is often very vindictive, and knowing his wife’s views on remarriage, may go out of his way to deny her the ability to remarry by keeping his sexual conduct secret!
- f. What if under state law a husband who has abandoned his wife is presumed dead? May the wife remarry? What if it later turns out that he is alive and not guilty of fornication? Is she thus a bigamist? Must she divorce her second husband?
- g. And does fornication after the divorce retroactively render the divorce scriptural? Suppose a husband divorces his wife when no fornication has occurred. This is an unscriptural divorce. Suppose the husband remarries. Has he now committed fornication, freeing the first wife to remarry? This would have a certain logic, but it would mean that after an unscriptural divorce, the

first spouse to remarry is a sinner and the second spouse to remarry is not. There is logic here, but no justice – much less mercy.<sup>4</sup>

- h. And what about a post-divorce death? Following an unscriptural divorce, one former spouse dies. Is the surviving spouse now free to remarry? Most would say yes, but Jesus' sayings don't explicitly make this an exception. For those who see the prohibition on second marriage as a penalty for sin, death is no justification, and so some don't see an exception.
- i. Suppose a husband routinely beats his wife. She is as patient and loving as can be, but he is a wife beater. Preachers, elders, counselors, police, and the courts can get him to stop. She moves out to avoid permanent injury or death. May she divorce her husband? And if so, may she remarry? Under the traditional teaching, she may not divorce him and if she does, she may not remarry. However, she may live separately from him and even have the courts grant a legal separation. She may even get a restraining order to compel him to always stay 500 feet away from her. But is this really God's model for marriage? In what sense is she his wife – or should she be? How can she be relieved of her scriptural duty to submit (Eph. 5:21 *ff*) and to make her body available to him (1 Cor. 7:1 *ff*) and not be relieved of the marriage?
- j. Suppose a couple is converted and baptized, based on genuine faith and repentance. Some time later the elders learn that one of the spouses was earlier divorced and remarried. The couple now have three children at home. Do they require them to divorce? To live without sexual relations? Or do they treat the baptism as having cleansed their second marriage?
- k. One of the more sad results of all this is the number of church splits triggered by disagreements on how to deal with remarried couples. Suppose an eldership admits into membership a couple divorced and remarried before baptism. The elders believe that baptism cleansed the relationship (or at least that we shouldn't judge such things), but many members consider them plainly living in adultery. It has been common practice in some parts of the country for such members to feel compelled to leave the church rather than be guilty of "condoning" the adultery by remaining members of the same church as adulterers.

If your head isn't already hurting enough, let me give an example from a couple I knew many years ago. The couple was happily married for several years. The husband at some point suffered a personality change. He became moody and melancholy. He also found himself compelled to sleep with other women. He knew what he was doing was wrong. He regretted it deeply, but he couldn't control himself. He sought counsel from preachers across the Bible belt but could not bring his urges under control.

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<sup>4</sup> *Matt. 12:7*: "If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent."

His wife was patient as only a Christian woman could be. But there came a point where she had to end the marriage. She filed for divorce and had her husband admit in the pleadings guilt of fornication. After all, many an eldership would doubt a woman's word on this, and getting it in writing was the one way to be sure that a second marriage would be accepted. And so they sadly divorced, and some time later she remarried.

Later on, the husband reverted to his former solid, self-controlled self and deeply regretted and repented of his former behavior. It turned out that he had bipolar disorder – he was manic-depressive. There was a chemical imbalance in his brain – easily treatable with medication once diagnosed – that drove his sinful behavior.

Now the challenging question is this. May he remarry? And the more challenging question is: was *her* second marriage scriptural? It all hinges on this. Can he be properly held accountable for sin driven by a diagnosed mental illness? I mean, was he guilty or not? Common decency tells us that he doesn't deserve to be denied marriage for the rest of his life due to an undiagnosed mental condition he couldn't help. And so, anyone with an ounce of mercy in his heart would allow him to remarry. It just wasn't his fault.

But if it wasn't his fault, and he wasn't really guilty, then how could his first wife be permitted to remarry? Remember, under the traditional view, if a divorce is not for fornication, *neither* spouse can remarry. There are no traditional grounds that allow both spouses to remarry. He committed fornication, but was he *guilty* of fornication?

So here we have a real life example where both spouses are innocent! What is the correct answer?

To sum up, under the traditional view, we have sometimes counseled married couples with children to divorce, we have split churches, and we have denied remarriage to perfectly innocently divorced spouses, making their victimization by their former spouses permanent. We have a doctrine that allows for no mercy, that offends notions of common decency, and that drives our members from Christ.

Moreover, we have here a doctrine that is more legalistic than the Law of Moses. Jesus said (repeatedly), "I desire mercy, not sacrifice"<sup>5</sup> Paul taught (repeatedly) that the gospel is based on love not law.<sup>6</sup> And here we have an unmerciful law. The only justification is a legalistic policy argument – that by making divorce horribly painful, we discourage divorce. But this flatly contradicts the rest of the Christian message. And experience shows plainly that it doesn't work.

Christ died to bring forgiveness. Murder, adultery, rape, theft, homosexuality, not to mention lust, greed, and failure to evangelize, are all forgivable and forgiven (1 Cor.

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<sup>5</sup> Matt. 9:13; 12:7, in each case quoting Hosea 6:6.

<sup>6</sup> Rom. 13:8: "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law"; Gal. 5:14: "The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

6:9-11, for example). That's what grace is for. So can it really be true that a marriage, once made, can't be ended except for fornication? Is it truly God's law that he holds couples to their marriage vows until death – even innocent wives who have been abused, beaten, tortured, or abandoned by their husbands?

Now I readily admit that the Bible teaches that breaking the covenant of matrimony is sin. It is. But does that mean that divorce doesn't really happen? If a couple divorces, they may well have sinned in God's eyes, but are they still married in God's eyes? What passage actually says that they are still married?

Doesn't Jesus flatly say in Matthew 19:1, "Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate"? Doesn't this imply that what God has joined together *can* be separated?

Now the last thing you're going to hear from this teacher is that Jesus was wrong, but I do believe that he has been mistranslated and misunderstood. Also, as I'll point out in more detail later, *these are the wrong passages to begin our study*. In the Gospels, Jesus was interpreting the Law of Moses for the benefit of Jews who were at the time under the Law of Moses.

In Matthew 5, when Jesus says, "It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement" (KJV), Jesus is referring to Deuteronomy 24, from the Law of Moses, regulating how Jews were to divorce under the Law of Moses.

In Matthew 19, when the Pharisees ask Jesus, "Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?" (KJV) they are asking Jesus about the same passage in Deuteronomy.

Jesus' teachings matter to Christians, but only in the context of who he was speaking to and what he was speaking about. Wouldn't it make much better sense to start with what the Bible says directly to *Christians* about divorce and remarriage?

After we digress to give some more background, we will very carefully study 1 Corinthians 7, because that chapter was written by Paul to Christians, no longer under the Law of Moses, about divorce and remarriage. That is where we must start, not in the Gospels. After letting the inspired Paul instruct us on what Jesus really said and how Jesus' teachings apply to Christians, we'll return to the Gospels to demonstrate that Paul and Jesus don't contradict one another.

## Chapter 4. Marriage in biblical times

### A. The biblical model for marriage

As we study divorce and remarriage today, our understanding is colored not only by the scriptures that address the issues, but also our own culture and history – religious and civil. It will help if we go back to the beginning.<sup>7</sup>

*Gen. 1:27* So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; **male and female he created them**. God blessed them and said to them, “**Be fruitful and increase in number**; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

When God created the heavens and earth, he created man as both male and female, and specifically intended that they “be fruitful,” that is, have children. The sexual joining of husband and wife was part of God’s plan in Eden – before sin entered the world. More detail is offered in Genesis 2:

*18* The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” *19* Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. *20* So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was found.

Before God made Eve, Adam was alone. Indeed, this is the only part of the new creation that God found “not good” – God had said of all else that he had made, “It is good.” Of course, Adam already had one companion – God himself. God found that Adam had needs that even God could not meet by himself. And so God presented Adam with every animal that God had made, and none of the animals was a suitable helper either.

*21* So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and closed up the place with flesh. *22* Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. *23* The man said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.”

Here we need to make three points:

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<sup>7</sup> The significance of Genesis 1-3 in male-female and husband-wife relationships is considered in much more detail in the author’s unpublished manuscript *Buried Talents*.

First, clearly, the suitable helper that Adam needed could neither be a superior (God) nor an inferior (an animal), but had to be an equal – “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” Indeed, Adam’s declaration of Eve as “flesh of my flesh” clearly demonstrates the oneness and equality of husband and wife that existed before sin entered the world.

Contrast God’s curse in Genesis 3:16, “[Your husband] will rule over you” resulting from sin. Plainly, in sinless Eden, Adam did not rule Eve.

Second, as the Jewish rabbis taught long before Christ (and as preachers today frequently say at weddings), God did not choose to make Eve from a foot, so that her husband should tread on her, or from his head, so that she should rule over him, but rather God made Eve from Adam’s rib, so that she should be at his side.

Third, the phrase “suitable helper,” or “help meet” in the King James Version, has often been misunderstood. In English “helper” often indicates inferiority – a subordinate. But in Hebrew, the word translated “helper” is most often used to refer to God – typically as Israel’s ally against its enemies. It hardly indicates inferiority! It would be better translated as “ally,” “comrade,” or “complement” – one which makes up what is lacking or one who stands alongside to fight together.

The passage continues –

*24* For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

Moses, the inspired author of Genesis, concludes that a husband is to be one with his wife – one flesh. And surely Moses meant more by “united” and “one flesh” than the sex act (hardly the definition of marriage). Paul’s commentary on this passage gives us a deeper understanding –

*Eph. 5:21* Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

*22* Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. *23* For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. *24* Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

*25* Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her *26* to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, *27* and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. *28* In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. *29* After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church – *30* for we are members of his body. *31* “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” *32* This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ

and the church. 33 However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

Paul is teaching Christians by expounding on Genesis 2, and he concludes that the notion of “one flesh” is much broader than sexual relations – it includes mutual submission, love, respect, and sacrifice.<sup>8</sup>

## **B. The history of how to get married**

Now, having an understanding of the essence of marriage in the minds of biblical writers, let’s look at how people married in biblical times.

When we read the Genesis accounts of how Isaac and Jacob were married, we see no ceremony at all. Rather, the man and woman simply chose to be married, with the consent of the bride’s father, as required by ancient custom, and they began to live together as husband and wife.

Much to the surprise of many, the Law of Moses says nothing about how to get married. Indeed, neither does the New Testament. The reason is that during Bible times the government and the church had no involvement in the marriage process. Couples generally became married by private agreement to be married. Local customs varied from time to time and place to place, but generally, if a couple agreed to be presently married, they were. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* comments that among primitive cultures “the formation of the marriage union itself ... was generally devoid of any formality whatever, beyond mere cohabitation.”<sup>9</sup>

While the New Testament speaks highly of marriage, nothing in the New Testament speaks of the church or its ministers having authority to marry a couple. Rather, the church simply recognized as married those who were married under whatever the local practice was.

At some later point, the church (by then, the Roman Catholic Church) claimed the right to marry a couple as one of the seven sacraments.<sup>10</sup> Some Catholic writers went so far as to declare as void a marriage undertaken without the benefit of a priest’s blessing. This view was ultimately affirmed in the Council of Trent, as part of the Counter-Reformation.

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<sup>8</sup> Paul routinely refers to Genesis 1 and 2 when teaching on marriage, sex, or divorce, following Jesus’ example in Matt. 19. For example, 1 Cor. 6:16; 1 Cor. 11:7-9; 1 Tim. 2:13-14. Paul doesn’t arbitrarily legislate rules – rather, he urges us to return to the relationship between husbands and wives that prevailed before sin entered the world.

<sup>9</sup> 9 John A. Ryan, *Catholic Encyclopedia*, “History of Marriage” (1910) <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09693a.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> A “sacrament” in Catholic theology is a practice or symbol whereby the church grants some of God’s grace to people. The seven sacraments are baptism, confirmation, the communion (Eucharist), penance, last rites (extreme unction), marriage, and orders (ordination). 13 D. J. Kennedy, *Catholic Encyclopedia*, “Sacraments” (1912) <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13295a.htm>.

Joseph Martos is the author of a highly regarded work on the sacraments called *Doors to the Sacred, A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church*. In that work, he writes, “During the first three centuries of Christianity, churchmen had no legal say in the matter of marriages, divorces, and remarriages.” Furthermore, he wrote, “There was no liturgical ceremony for marriage as there was for baptism and the Eucharist.” It wasn’t until the year 400 or so, that Christians were bidden to seek an ecclesiastical blessing on their marriages. (It is interesting to note that the only ones obliged to do that were married bishops, married priests and married deacons.) As far as we know, the idea of marriage as a sacrament was first proposed by St. Augustine, the first and only patristic author to write extensively about sex and marriage. Even after Augustine, through the seventh century, “Christians could still get married in a purely secular ceremony.” Marriage was declared a sacrament for the first time by the Synod of Verona in 1184. The Church didn’t deem marriage definitely indissoluble until the Council of Florence in 1439. (Martos, pp. 409-434.) ...

[T]he Council of Trent (1545-1563) ... laid down rules and regulations along lines that would have been unrecognizable to members of the early Church, East or West. Since Trent, the [Catholic] Church has publicly proclaimed the indissolubility of marriage, a large body of law on marriage, and a correspondingly large legal apparatus to deal with it.<sup>11</sup>

The early Reformers, such as John Calvin and Martin Luther, challenged the church’s right to grant marriage, declaring that marriage is honored by the church but not given by the church – being a private agreement between husband and wife.<sup>12</sup>

We Americans are heirs to English law, which reflects both a Catholic and a Protestant view of marriage. Thus, a “common law” marriage is a marriage made by the process recognized by the English courts. Alabama is one of the 15 or so remaining states that still permit marrying under the common law.

In these states, a man and woman may marry merely by agreeing to be presently married (not just to marry in the future) and by giving some clear evidence of that intent – such as signing a credit card application or hotel register as husband and wife. No license, no blood test, no justice of the peace, and no preacher. Just agree to be married,

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<sup>11</sup> *Remarriage in the Church: Pastoral Solutions: A statement by the board members of the Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church*, <http://astro.ocis.temple.edu/~arcc/marriage.htm> (1998, revised 1999).

<sup>12</sup> 9 Aug. Lehmkuhl, *Catholic Encyclopedia*, “Sacrament of Marriage” (1910) <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09707a.htm>.



evidence the agreement, and you're married – just as legally married as if you were married by any other means.<sup>13</sup> This had been true in England for centuries.

Marriage by private agreement was common in England until 1753 and in Scotland for many years thereafter. In continental Europe, such marriages were recognized in the middle ages, but the practice was abolished in Catholic nations by the Council of Trent.<sup>14</sup>

While the ancient practice is marriage by private agreement, the Catholic Church, of course, enforced the exclusive right to grant marriages and divorces. As England moved back and forth between being a Catholic and a Protestant nation (King Henry VIII, “Bloody” Mary, Elizabeth I, etc.), the government took over the ecclesiastical courts – that is, the church’s courts. Somewhere in this process, the government took on the power to grant marriages and divorces, but did not deny the churches the power to marry. After all, many English were not Catholics and some means of formally recognizing marriage was essential.<sup>15</sup>

And so England evolved a multiple system for marriage – marriage by church officials, marriage by government officials (typically judges), and marriage by private agreement (common law marriage). And as the government took over the church (starting with Henry VIII), the church’s power to grant marriages and divorces became regulated by the government.

In the United States, most states follow the common law of England. Thus, in Alabama and every other state the only reason that a preacher has legal power to marry a couple is because the legislature has so decreed. There is nothing in the Bible – even the Law of Moses – that authorizes a preacher to marry a couple – it is purely a matter of local law. And it’s only in the law as a vestige of the Catholic Church’s doctrine that marriage is a sacrament available only through the church.

In fact, in many states, including Alabama, the 19<sup>th</sup> Century marriage statutes speak of ministers and judges “solemnizing” a marriage, that is, making a private agreement to marry more solemn by giving it the ceremonial trappings of a church or judicial wedding.

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<sup>13</sup> Tennessee has never allowed marriages at common law. Louisiana is not a common law state, and so does not recognize common law marriage. In a case well known to law students, a couple from Tennessee had cohabited for less than seven years. While traveling to New Orleans, they spent the night in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, signing the hotel register as husband and wife. The courts found that they were married – having met Alabama’s requirements while in Alabama.

<sup>14</sup> (1545-1563). *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, “common-law marriage”  
<http://www.britannica.com/bcom/eb/article/7/0,5716,25377+1,00.html>.

<sup>15</sup> While common law marriage was honored, the government certainly preferred a formal marriage by a church or government official, as this avoided uncertainty as to inheritance and divorce often occasioned by the difficulty of ascertaining whether a common law marriage had occurred.

As modern governments replaced the role of the Catholic Church in Europe, the government also took on the power to marry couples. But in Bible times the power to marry was in the couple themselves. They needed no permission of the church or the government. Thus, the practice of many preachers of ending a wedding ceremony with “And now by the power vested in me by God and the State of Alabama, I now declare you husband and wife” is a vestige of Catholic sacramentalism. God does not vest preachers with the power to marry couples. God vested that power in the couple. The government gives that power to preachers.

In biblical terms, we should say that marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman. As Malachi says,

*14* You ask, “Why?” It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of **your marriage covenant**.

More precisely, in biblical terms, marriage is a covenant between a man and woman to have the relationship that is described in Genesis 1 and 2.

Now for a discussion question: Suppose a couple lives in a state that doesn’t recognize common law marriage. Suppose further that they’ve lived together for 10 years and have three children. They think of themselves as married but the government does not recognize their marriage. Now suppose that the husband leaves to marry another woman. Has he sinned? He’s been “living in sin” and thus is leaving a sinful relationship to enter into “holy matrimony” for the first time. And yet, everyone I’ve ever asked says he’s sinning – against his covenant with the woman he lives with. And if you say yes, then you understand that the covenant of marriage is based on the commitment of the spouses, not the decrees of the government.

## Chapter 5. Divorce in biblical times

As confused as our understanding of marriage has been, divorce is even more confusing. For example, today, when we say “divorce” we conjure up an image of filing papers in a local court asking a judge to declare a state-granted marriage terminated. But the important question is whether this is what the authors of the Bible thought. Clearly, it is not.<sup>16</sup>

In the Old Testament, the only divorce we encounter before the law of Moses is Abraham’s dismissal of Hagar, mother of Ishmael and Abraham’s second wife (Gen. 16:3).

In this connection, it is interesting that 16:3 states that Hagar was given to Abram as a wife, and in the next episode where she appears, she is called an אמה “slave-girl/wife” (21:10–13). However, on the basis of 32:23(22); 33:1, 2, 6, where Jacob refers to Bilhah and Zilpah as maids (although they are slave-wives who have borne him children), Cohen (Shnaton 5–6 [1978] xxv–1iii) argues that there is no difference in meaning between the terms: אמה “slave-girl” is used in legal contexts, whereas שפחה “maid” is used more colloquially in narrative.

Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (Word Bible Commentary 2; Accordance electronic ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 6.

The marriage ended when Abraham required her to leave his household.

(Gen. 21:14 ESV) 14 So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba.

The commentaries are clear that this, of course, ended the marriage.

“Send her off” (*piel* שלח) is a softer term than “drive out” (cf 18:16; 19:29; 3:23). It is used of divorce (*eg*, Deut 22:19; 24:1, 3) and the release of slaves with a generous provision (Exod 11:1–2; Deut 15:13).

Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (WBC 2; Accordance electronic ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 84.

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<sup>16</sup> The following arguments are heavily based on John L. Edwards, *An In Depth Study of Marriage & Divorce* (hereinafter “Edwards”). I will not cite to Edwards in every place on which I rely on his efforts, because I rely so often and so heavily on this book. Edwards is a much longer, much more thorough discussion than this work, and I highly recommend it.

We next encounter divorce in Deuteronomy 24, Moses writes,

1 If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, 2 and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, 3 and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, 4 then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD. Do not bring sin upon the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.

We'll have occasion to study this passage again. For now, it's enough to note that the process of ending a marriage was simply for the husband to send his wife from his house. There was no intervention of a judge. No court filing. No civil process at all. Thus, when "divorce" is mentioned in the context of the Law of Moses, the speaker is thinking in terms of violating the marriage covenant, particularly by sending the wife out of the house. When God says through Malachi, "I hate divorce" (Mal. 2:16), God was not condemning filing court papers – he was condemning violating the marriage covenant so as to end the marriage.

In Greek and Roman society, the law regarding divorce was not greatly different.<sup>17</sup> In the First Century, Roman marriage was a "free marriage" based on mutual consent. Although in earlier years more formal arrangements were recognized, by New Testament times, these had long been forgotten. Divorce, accordingly, was accomplished by either party's repudiating the marriage. Under Augustus (emperor at the beginning of the First Century), the divorce need only be announced in the presence of seven witnesses. Thus, as was the case with the Jews, a "divorce" was the act of ending the marriage – not filing a suit in court.

In both cases, the law allowed the wife to remarry. Under the Law of Moses, the wife was given a certificate of divorce by her husband, essentially verifying that she'd been divorced so that she could remarry freely. The standard form of certificate explicitly allowed the right to remarry. In fact, the notion of divorce without the right to remarry would have been unthinkable.<sup>18</sup> Of course, husbands were allowed multiple wives, so remarriage was not an issue for them. Under Augustus, witnesses were required, evidently also to allow the wife to prove her eligibility to remarry.

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<sup>17</sup> See Pat E. Harrell, *Divorce & Remarriage in the Early Church* (R. B. Sweet Co., Inc., 1967) (hereinafter "Harrell"); and 5 W. G. Smith, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, "Divorce in Civil Jurisprudence" (1909), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05064a.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> Instone-Brewer, pp. 117 ff.

This is easily confirmed by looking at the words the writers use to describe what some versions translate as “divorce”:

Verse	KJV translation	NIV translation
1 Cor. 7:10	“depart”	“separate”
1 Cor. 7:11 & 12	“put away”	“divorce”
1 Cor. 7:13	“leave”	“divorce”
1 Cor. 7:15	“depart”	“leaves”
1 Cor. 7:27	“be loosed”	“divorce”
Matt. 5:31&32	“put away”	“divorce”

Strong’s *Greek Dictionary of the New Testament* defines *apoluo*, the Greek word translated several places as “put away” (KJV) or “divorce” (NIV), as including the meanings forsake, lay aside, leave, and yield up. Zodhiates in *The Complete Word Study New Testament Dictionary* includes the meanings to send away, to dismiss, to forsake, to leave, and to omit or neglect.

Of the 69 uses in the New Testament, *apoluo* is translated “divorce” 14 times in the NIV. All of these are in the Gospel passages discussed in the main text with one exception. In Matthew 1:19, “Joseph had in mind to put her away privately.” Because Joseph and Mary were not married, but engaged, *apoluo* plainly means to end their covenant to be married – not just to divorce.

Other NIV translations of *apoluo* include depart, dismiss, divorce, forgive, let go, loose, put (send) away, release, set at liberty. For example –

“Depart” (2x): Luke 2:29, Simeon – let me **die** in peace; Acts 23:22, the commander **dismissed** the young man.

“Dismiss” (2x): Acts 15:30, **sent off** to deliver the letter in Antioch; Acts 19:41, city clerk **dismissed** the assembly.

“Forgive” (2x): both in Luke 6:37, **forgive** and you shall be **forgiven** (ironic, isn’t it, that the same word can be translated “divorce” and “forgive”!)

“Let go” (10x): Pilate wanted to **let** Jesus **go**, the Sanhedrin **let** the apostles **go**, etc.

“Loosed” (2x): servant **loosed** from debt, Matthew 18:27; Luke 13:12, woman **loosed** from being bent over.

“Put away” (12x): Matthew 1:19, Joseph had in mind to **put her away** privately. 13 other times in Gospel passages on divorce.

“Send away” (12x): eleven times in Gospels, Jesus **sent away** the multitudes or someone. Acts 13:3, they **sent away** Paul and Barnabas on their mission.

“Release” (17x): all 17 are about Pilate wanting to **release** Jesus.

Of a total 69 uses, only 14 refer to a marriage break up. Plainly, “divorce” is always a translator’s conclusion from context.<sup>19</sup>

In each case, the *context* is clear that the word used means “end a marriage,” but in no case is a court proceeding or any action by the government or church involved. In each case, it is simply one spouse ending the marriage by leaving, departing, separating, loosing the other from the bonds of marriage, or putting the other away. It is *always* purely an action between the spouses themselves. Thus, the sin of divorce is the sin of the spouse who violates the marriage covenant so as to end the marriage, whether by putting away, neglect, abandonment, forsaking, or the like.

For example, imagine a married couple today. The husband abandons the wife, perhaps not even leaving a forwarding address. If we were to think of “divorce” in modern terms, we’d say that they are still married. If the wife were to go to the courthouse and file for a divorce, many would declare her a sinner because God condemns divorce. And yet in the context of what “divorce” meant in the First Century and earlier, we’d clearly see that the sinner is the husband who abandoned his wife. He ended the marriage by severely violating his marriage covenant. When the wife goes to the courthouse to obtain a divorce, she is only asking the court to declare as ended a marriage that is *already* ended. In biblical terms, she has not sought a divorce. Rather, her husband put her away, and now she simply wants the government to recognize that her marriage has already ended.

Another example might help. Suppose a husband emotionally abuses his wife and refuses to repent despite counseling and urging from the elders. The husband is unhappy with his life situation and takes out his frustration by belittling and constantly criticizing his wife. His sadism has eroded the love from the marriage and made his wife’s life a living hell. Having exhausted all avenues of persuading him to be a husband to her, she concludes that she can no longer live with the man. Because she needs his financial support to finish school and become self-supporting, she files for divorce, seeking alimony. He continues his resentful, sadistic ways by resisting her petition, causing her untold expense and heartache.

Under the traditional view, she is a sinner for seeking a divorce and he very properly is resisting her sinful effort to end a God-ordained marriage. In reality, he is the

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<sup>19</sup> Thanks to Buddy Jones for his notes on the use of *apoluo*.

sinner and she is the victim, and in reality the Bible says so. He “put away” his wife long before she went to court to formally end a marriage long ago ended in fact.

Now, I readily admit that drawing lines here is hard. But that suggests that we are truly on the right path. I mean, it’s also hard to draw a line as to when a Christian has fallen away and become lost. It’s hard to know if someone has truly repented. It’s hard to know who is really qualified to be an elder.

The point is that God judges the heart (1 Sam. 16:7), and we have trouble making godly judgments because we aren’t equipped to judge as God judges. And so when I find that drawing a line like this requires knowing someone’s heart, rather than a law book, I figure I’m close to the truth of the matter.

Let’s be quite clear: “divorce” in biblical terms is the ending of marriage, and marriages are ended by husbands and wives, not judges. The sinner is the spouse who breaks the marriage covenant – not necessarily the spouse who goes to court.

## Chapter 6. What is adultery?

Next, we must address the Bible's use of "adultery." Plainly, adultery's basic meaning is sexual sin against the marriage covenant. But by the First Century, "adultery" had taken on a much broader meaning.<sup>20</sup>

In the writings of the prophets, "adultery" often referred to the worship of idols by the children of Israel, speaking of Israel as the bride of God –

*Jer. 3:6* During the reign of King Josiah, the LORD said to me, "Have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up on every high hill and under every spreading tree and has committed **adultery** there. *7* I thought that after she had done all this she would return to me but she did not, and her unfaithful sister Judah saw it. *8* I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her **adulteries**. Yet I saw that her unfaithful sister Judah had no fear; she also went out and committed **adultery**. *9* Because Israel's immorality mattered so little to her, she defiled the land and committed **adultery** with stone and wood. *10* In spite of all this, her unfaithful sister Judah did not return to me with all her heart, but only in pretense," declares the LORD.

*Jer. 5:7* "Why should I forgive you? Your children have forsaken me and sworn by gods that are not gods. I supplied all their needs, yet they committed **adultery** and thronged to the houses of prostitutes.

*Jer. 13:25* This is your lot, the portion I have decreed for you," declares the LORD, "because you have forgotten me and trusted in false gods. *26* I will pull up your skirts over your face that your shame may be seen – *27* your **adulteries** and lustful neighings, your shameless prostitution! I have seen your detestable acts on the hills and in the fields. Woe to you, O Jerusalem! How long will you be unclean?"

*Ezek 6:9* Then in the nations where they have been carried captive, those who escape will remember me – how I have been grieved by their **adulterous** hearts, which have turned away from me, and by their eyes, which have lusted after their idols. They will loathe themselves for the evil they have done and for all their detestable practices.

*Ezek. 23:36* The LORD said to me: "Son of man, will you judge Oholah and Oholibah? Then confront them with their detestable practices, *37* for they have committed **adultery** and blood is on their hands. They committed **adultery** with their idols; they even sacrificed their

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<sup>20</sup> Based on Edwards, although the argument has been made by many authors.



children, whom they bore to me, as food for them. *38* They have also done this to me: At that same time they defiled my sanctuary and desecrated my Sabbaths. *39* On the very day they sacrificed their children to their idols, they entered my sanctuary and desecrated it. That is what they did in my house.

*Hosea 1:1* The word of the LORD that came to Hosea son of Beeri during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and during the reign of Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel: *2* When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him, “Go, take to yourself an **adulterous** wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest **adultery** in departing from the LORD.”

Jesus, as he often does, borrows from the prophets in his choice of words –

*Matt. 12:38* Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, “Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you.” *39* He answered, “A wicked and **adulterous** generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.”

James, the brother of Jesus, uses the same image:

*James 4:4* You **adulterous** people, don’t you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.

Peter similarly refers to those who divide the church as adulterers:

*2 Pet. 2:14* With eyes full of **adultery**, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; they are experts in greed – an accursed brood! *15* They have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam son of Beor, who loved the wages of wickedness.

Jesus, James, and Peter are not speaking of literal, sexual adultery. Rather, following the prophets, they use “adultery” for violating one’s covenant with God – by idolatry, by testing God, by being friends with world, or by dividing the church. Clearly, when the Bible speaks of adultery, we cannot assume that sexual sin is the reference. Rather, “adultery” is a favorite metaphor for any violation of a covenant.

## Chapter 7. The Old Testament's teaching on divorce

Jesus and Paul repeatedly refer to the Old Testament when teaching their students. Indeed, they both assume their readers have a high level of Old Testament knowledge. And yet while we in the Churches of Christ aspire to replicate the Christianity of the First Century, we rarely to replicate the knowledge these early Christians had of the Old Testament. In fact, it's impossible to thoroughly understand Jesus and Paul without knowing the Old Testament background against which they spoke and wrote.

We've already mentioned Jesus' and Paul's use of Genesis 1 and 2 as normative for husband-wife relationships. We've also briefly mentioned Jesus' references to Deuteronomy 24 in his teaching on divorce. The fact is that the Law of Moses allows divorce. Indeed, the right to divorce is assumed in this passage – the question at issue is the right to remarry one's first spouse after being divorced and marrying another. Moses allowed the second marriage but not the third – likely to take away the temptation to engage in wife swapping.<sup>21</sup>

There are other passages in the Law of Moses that relate to the question. For example, Exodus 21:7-11 allows a divorce in the case of abuse or abandonment:

“If a man sells his daughter as a servant, she is not to go free as menservants do. 8 If she does not please the master who has selected her for himself, he must let her be redeemed. He has no right to sell her to foreigners, because he has broken faith with her. 9 If he selects her for his son, he must grant her the rights of a daughter. 10 If he marries another woman, he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and marital rights. 11 If he does not provide her with these three things, she is to go free, without any payment of money.”

This passages was interpreted by the pre-Christian rabbis as referring to the rights of a slave girl. If her master marries her, he must not deprive her of “food, clothing and marital rights.” If the master denies her these right, she may leave the marriage.

The rabbis reasoned that if a slave has such rights, surely a free woman has at least these same rights. Therefore, the rabbis allowed divorce for any failure of a man to provide his wife with food, clothing, or sexual relations. Indeed, the rabbis regulated with great specificity the food, clothing, and frequency of sexual intercourse!<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> E.g., P. C. Craige, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament – The Book of Deuteronomy* (1976), p. 305: “Thus, the intent of the legislation seems to be to apply certain restrictions on the already existing practice of divorce. If divorce became too easy, then it could be abused and it would become a ‘legal’ form of committing adultery.”

<sup>22</sup> Instone-Brewer, pp. 85 ff.

Now, notice that this passage gives the woman the right to divorce her husband, contrary to the frequent assertion that only husbands could divorce their wives. The procedure was for the wife to appeal to the rabbinic authorities who could compel the husband to issue a certificate of divorce (Hebrew: *get*).<sup>23</sup>

Notice the importance of the certificate. The wife needed the certificate so she could remarry, as unmarried women often could not survive in a patriarchal society. Most jobs were denied to women. Moreover, in ancient Israel, a woman's primary role was as a bearer and mother of children. The Old Testament records numerous examples of women who were despondent because of their barrenness. Indeed, God's prophets often speak words of comfort to barren women (*e.g.*, Ps. 113:9; Isa. 54:1).

By Jesus' time, the rabbis had also concluded that if a woman may divorce her husband for lack of "food, clothing and marital rights," surely the husband may put his wife away for the same reasons, reinterpreting "food" as the obligation to prepare meals and "clothing" as the obligation to make clothes.<sup>24</sup>

In addition, all rabbis allowed divorce for sexual sin. Deuteronomy 24:1 refers to a divorce due to "some uncleanness" (KJV) or "something indecent" (NIV). The Hebrew word refers most literally to nakedness or shame, and much debate has ensued (and continues) as to the scope of this word.

It has often been argued that it could not refer to adultery, as the penalty for adultery was death – not divorce (Lev. 20:10). By Jesus' time, the rabbis taught that a married woman found alone with a man not her husband should be presumed an adulteress. Women could also be divorced for indecent behavior, such as showing bare arms, loosening her hair, or talking with a man not her husband.<sup>25</sup> Hence, "adultery" was interpreted broadly indeed!<sup>26</sup>

However, stoning for adultery was very rare in those days. Other than the occasional vigilante action (the woman taken in adultery), it just didn't happen, as the Romans denied the Jews the right to impose the death penalty, and the Romans weren't inclined to allow death for adultery. Hence, divorce was the nearly universal remedy for adultery – or presumed adultery.<sup>27</sup>

Husbands, however, could not be guilty of adultery, as the acceptance of polygamy (at least, in theory) meant that husbands had made no promise of sexual fidelity.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, although the adulterer's wife had no recourse for his

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

infidelity, his infidelity was an offense against his paramour's husband or, if she was unmarried, her father.<sup>29</sup>

Luck has argued that Exodus 21:26 permitted divorce for physical abuse because a slave would be freed if abused by his master.<sup>30</sup> While I think Luck's argument makes sense, I can find no evidence that the First Century rabbis taught such a thing. Of course, our knowledge of their teaching is hardly perfect.

More likely, the rabbis saw no need to reach such a conclusion because of their interpretation of Exodus 21:10-11. "Marital rights" was considered to include more than just sexual relations. The KJV is closer to the meaning when it translates "duty of marriage," and it was easy enough for the rabbis to conclude that physical abuse was a violation of this right. Indeed, the rabbis treated cruelty and humiliation as a violation of Exodus 21:10-11 and so grounds for divorce.<sup>31</sup>

In the centuries between the Old and New Testaments, the Jewish rabbis divided into two schools of thought regarding divorce. Disciples of the rabbi Hillel believed divorce was only permitted on the grounds described in Exodus 21:10-11 or for sexual sin. However, disciples of the rabbi Shammai taught that divorce could be had for any reason. They reasoned that Deuteronomy 24:3 referred to a divorced because the husband "hated" (KJV) or "disliked" (NIV) his wife. Hence, they suggested that he could divorce her for losing her looks or simply burning his toast!<sup>32</sup>

Now, it's important to realize that both schools of thought permitted divorce for the three grounds specified in Exodus 21:10-11. However, the records we have of their rabbinic debates read as though the Shammaites only allowed divorce for adultery. For example, the Shammaites declared, "a man may not divorce his wife unless he finds indecency in her" although they in fact recognized other grounds. This is very typical of the way these debates were recorded, and multiple examples of this style of ignoring other exceptions have been found.<sup>33</sup> It was simply the nature of rabbinic debate regarding Deuteronomy 24 to ignore the other grounds as there was no dispute as to these and the grounds were well known.

Now, the rabbis, consistent with Deuteronomy 24, allowed a divorced woman to freely remarry.<sup>34</sup> A virgin was under the control of her father and could not choose her own husband, but a divorcee could select her own husband.<sup>35</sup> However, priests were

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p. 98.

<sup>30</sup> William Luck, *Divorce & Remarriage* (Harper & Row, 1987).

<sup>31</sup> *Instone-Brewer*, pp. 107-109.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 99 *ff.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 111, 162-163.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 118-119.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* p. 118.

barred from marrying divorced women, and Deuteronomy 24 bars remarriage to a former husband when there's been an intervening marriage.

The rabbis also would not allow the woman to benefit from adultery by marrying the man with whom she committed adultery. However, there's evidence that this rule, not being found in scripture, was not strictly enforced.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, there was no stigma in marrying a divorced woman, unless she was divorced due to adultery.<sup>37</sup>

In short, when Jesus addressed the interpretation of Deuteronomy in the Sermon on the Mount and in Matthew 19, he spoke against this background, as a rabbi, with centuries of pre-existing tradition behind all that he said. When we get to the interpretation of these passages, we'll have to recall these facts, as Jesus' listeners were well aware of existing First Century divorce law, and they would have understood him quite differently from how we often do.

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* p. 121.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* p. 123.

## Chapter 8. 1 Corinthians 7

With these concepts in mind, we now need to take up the New Testament's central passage on marriage and divorce, 1 Corinthians 7. Oddly, most discussions of these doctrines begin with Jesus' statements in Matthew 5 or Matthew 19. I say "oddly" because Jesus in these passages was specifically commenting on Deuteronomy 24 – the Law of Moses. Jesus, of course, was speaking to Jews who at the time were subject to the Law of Moses. Much of what Jesus said is important for Christians – but we make a serious mistake if we try to start with a commentary on the Law of Moses. We'll come back to these (and other passages) after we've considered the one passage that directly addresses divorce of Christians.

*1 Cor. 7:1* Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry.<sup>38</sup>

Now here is the key to understanding this chapter. Paul repeatedly comments in 1 Corinthians 7 on his desire for Christians – virgins, widows, and the divorced – to remain unmarried. Indeed, Paul says that he wishes everyone was single – as was Paul:

*7* I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. *8* Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. *9* But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion. ...

*25* Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. *26* **Because of the present crisis**, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are. *27* Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife. ...

*32* **I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs** – how he can please the Lord. *33* But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world – how he can please his wife – *34* and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world – how she can please her husband. *35* I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.

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<sup>38</sup> Literally, as translated in the KJV, "touch a woman," rather than "marry." The context makes this metaphor refer to marriage – or perhaps to having sexual relationships, which are obviously only proper in marriage – hence much the same thing in Paul's mind.

Throughout chapter 7, Paul urges his readers to remain single. Clearly, he permits marriage – it is not a sin – but Paul would prefer his readers avoid the problems caused by the “present crisis”<sup>39</sup> – possibly local persecution and/or famine – would bring on those committed to a spouse and children; and Paul also wishes that the Corinthians be freed from concerns about a spouse in order to be free to serve Christ. After all, Paul himself had chosen to be single and so was able to continually risk his health and life in spreading the gospel. It’s hardly surprising that he counseled his readers to follow his example.

Now the notion of voluntary celibacy is utterly foreign to modern American readers. We pass it off as a First Century curiosity and then move on to the other verses. But as we’ll see, the other verses must be read in light of this overriding theme.

After stating his preference for remaining single, Paul addresses marriage in Genesis 1 and 2 terms – placing special emphasis on the fact that sex is not only allowed in marriage but also that sex is to be a part of marriage and that denying sexual gratification to one’s spouse is wrong:

*2* But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. *3* The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. *4* The wife’s body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband’s body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. *5* Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. *6* I say this as a concession, not as a command. *7* I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.

Paul explains that one God-given purpose of marriage is sex – indeed, this is certainly much of what Genesis 2 refers to as being “one flesh.” Marriage is much more, but the sexual relationship is important. This is so much so that Paul instructs husbands and wives that it is wrong to deny the other spouse sexual relations – except by mutual consent and then only briefly. Paul’s reasoning is, of course, consistent not only with Genesis 2 but also rabbinic interpretation of Exodus 21:10-11. In fact, given how strictly Paul speaks, he is surely heavily influenced by Exodus 21:10-11.

Notice how carefully Paul treats men and women identically. Contrary to the Jewish and Greek culture of the day, Paul considers women to have the same rights to sexual relations as men.

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<sup>39</sup> “Present distress” in the King James Version.

8 Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. 9 But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.<sup>40</sup>

Once again, we see Paul stating a strong preference for being single, but insisting on making it clear that marriage is not a sin. Many Christians have trouble with this concept, because they see the Bible as black and white – it must either be right or wrong – it can't be good or better. But Paul plainly states that sometimes it's okay to be less than best. It's not sin to marry – celibacy for the sake of the Lord's work is a gift that not everyone has.

### **To the married**

*10* To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. *11* But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.

Now Paul repeats the admonition of Christ found in the Gospels that divorce is sin. "Separate" does not mean a legal separation in the American legal sense. Rather, in First Century practice, when couples separated, they were no longer married at all. This is made entirely clear in verse 11, which states that a separated wife should remain "unmarried." Clearly, Paul sees a separation as ending the marriage.

In American and European law, a married couple can obtain a legal separation, meaning that they are no longer expected to live together but are still married in the eyes of the law. In such a case, the "husband" and "wife" are not united or one flesh as described in Genesis 2, nor are they honoring Paul's command in the first few verses of this chapter to grant one another sexual relations except "for a season." In Bible terms, a legal separation is a divorce.

This legal concept was invented as a device to avoid obtaining a church- or government-granted divorce, often considered sin, while accommodating the reality that it is often unsafe for a wife to live with an abusive husband. Doctrine taught that divorce was wrong, but common sense dictated that the wife couldn't risk being brutalized – or killed, and so a "legal separation" was invented, creating a fictitious marriage for the sake of doctrine while allowing the wife to leave. The Bible does not deal in legal fictions.

Paul recognizes that divorces will occur even though Christ commanded against it. He says in such a case the couple may remarry each other. Amazingly, I've heard preachers advise divorced couples that it would be sin to remarry – presumably on a

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<sup>40</sup> "With passion" is added by the NIV translators. Some take "burn" to refer to burning in hell. But the NIV addition seems consistent with Paul's teaching on grace as well as with the context.



hyperliteral interpretation of Matthew 5:31.<sup>41</sup> Common sense tells you that reconciliation of a divorced couple is highly desirable and certainly not wrong.

This is an illustration of our historical insistence on strictly enforcing our translations of the Gospel passages while utterly ignoring Paul's teaching in this area. Rather than wrestling with all relevant passages, we've chosen to just ignore those passages that are inconsistent with our predetermined, highly legalistic, often brutally harmful conclusions.

Paul says that if a couple is divorced, they should not marry others – they should reconcile or remain unmarried. Here, for the first of several times, we find the NIV translation is less than exact. Paul does not really say “she must remain unmarried.” Rather, he says, as in the KJV, “let her remain unmarried.”

In the Greek, the verb is present imperative middle. Spiros Zodhiates, a premier New Testament Greek scholar, states that an imperative verb “is used to give a command; an exhortation; or an entreaty.” Thus, whether Paul is commanding or merely exhorting must be taken from the context. The KJV is better than the NIV in leaving the ambiguity in the text for the reader to interpret from context rather than forcing the translators' opinion on the readers, as does the NIV. For example, in verse 2, “let every man have his own wife” is also imperative, but Paul is not commanding marriage. He is urging marriage if necessary to avoid fornication. In verse 6 Paul makes it clear that this is “not of commandment” (KJV) but only “by permission” (KJV). Likewise, in verse 12, Paul says that an unbelieving husband should not divorce his wife, and this is also in the imperative mood. Plainly, Paul is entreating – not commanding. He has no authority to command an unbeliever (1 Cor. 5:12). Countless examples could be multiplied.

I've been through every present imperative middle verb in 1 Corinthians and many of Paul's other epistles, and the conclusion is that this tense and voice may be a command or may be a recommendation, and the distinction may only be found in the context.

Now Paul could be urging the divorced to remain unmarried for more than one reason. First, he could be saying that it would be sin for a divorced spouse to marry anyone other than the original spouse. But he could also be urging the readers to remain single for the same reason that he does so in verse 1, verse 7, verse 26, and verse 32 – because he prefers that all Christians who are single for any reason remain single “because of the present crisis” and because “an unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs.” In fact, given Paul's very strong and oft-repeated emphasis on remaining single, we would be surprised to hear him say anything to the divorced other than an entreaty to remain single.

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<sup>41</sup> As typically translated, Matt. 5:31 says that a man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. Thus, it is occasionally argued that remarriage is marrying a divorced woman and hence adultery.

## **But if you do marry**

Which of these possible interpretations is right must be drawn from the immediate context – not the biases of the interpreter. Let’s skip ahead to the verses that I believe provide the answer.

*25* Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy. *26* Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are.

Once again, Paul addresses the importance of remaining single. It’s not a command – just an entreaty.

*27* Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife. *28* But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this.

Verse 27 repeats Paul’s earlier admonition that Christians should not divorce. Literally, “seek a divorce” is “do not seek to be loosed.” “Loosed” means to unbind. If several sticks are tied together and the tie is cut, the twigs have been “loosed.” It is plainly a metaphor for ending the marriage bond. As mentioned earlier, it’s not about who goes to the courthouse – the sinner is the one who breaks the marriage covenant. A better translation would be “do not break the marriage covenant.”

Paul then says, “do not look for a wife.” This is also present imperative middle. But it’s an entreaty, not a command, as you will see.

Verse 28 then completes the thought. Paul says that if the virgin or “unmarried” person does marry, it is not sin (even though such a person would have violated Paul’s imperative entreaty to remain single!) Paul’s entreaty to virgins and the unmarried to remain single is clearly not a command in the sense that a violation would be sin. Paul says it’s not sin – surely he is right!

Now, notice that Paul is addressing virgins and the unmarried. Now if the “unmarried” aren’t virgins, who are they? Plainly, they are the divorced members of the church, and so Paul has plainly said that remarriage by a divorced person is no sin!

Well, you might object, he could be discussing widows, but this is clearly not true, for two reasons. First, in context, Paul has been discussing the divorced, and it’s much more likely that he refers to the divorced as “unmarried” than widows. After all in verse 8 he refers to the “unmarried and widows,” and so Paul does not include widows in the term “unmarried.”

But there is a much stronger argument here. When verse 27 refers to “unmarried” in the NIV, the NIV has badly mistranslated the word. Rather than the word “unmarried,”

Paul really says “have you been loosed from a wife”! This is plainly a reference to the divorced. Not surprisingly, many translations have translated this correctly.

I must admit that many translations also translate this incorrectly, the NIV being a prime example. So how do I know which translations are right? By using Greek resources that give me the precise verb tense, and then noting that many very conservative religious groups have translated this correctly in their own translations – it is very unlikely that the Catholics, Jehovah’s Witnesses, or early Restoration Movement leaders would have translated consistent with my understanding unless compelled to do so by the Greek.

*King James Version.* Art thou bound to a wife? Seek not to be loosed. **Art thou loosed from a wife?** Seek not a wife. But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned.

*New King James Version.* Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be loosed. **Are you loosed from a wife?** Do not seek a wife. But even if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned.

*American Standard.* Art thou bound unto a wife? Seek not to be loosed. **Art thou loosed from a wife?** Seek not a wife. But shouldst thou marry, thou hast not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned.

*New American Standard Bible* Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. **Are you released from a wife?** Do not seek a wife. But if you should marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin should marry, she has not sinned.

*Living Oracles (4<sup>th</sup> edition).* Are you bound to a wife? seek not to be loosed. **Are you loosed from a wife?** seek not a wife. And yet, if you marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she has not sinned.<sup>42</sup>

*Young’s Literal Translation.* Hast thou been bound to a wife? seek not to be loosed; **hast thou been loosed from a wife?** seek not a wife. But and if thou mayest marry, thou didst not sin; and if the virgin may marry, she did not sin.

*Webster’s.* Art thou bound to a wife? seek not to be loosed. **Art thou loosed from a wife?** seek not a wife. But if thou marry, thou hast not sinned: and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> By Alexander Campbell, based on work of George Campbell, James Macknight, and Philip Doddridge (1835). Campbell was, of course, one of the founders of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Restoration Movement, of which the Churches of Christ are a part.

<sup>43</sup> Translation by Noah Webster (1833).

*Barclay.* Are you bound to a wife? Then do not seek any loosening of the marriage bond. **Has your marriage been dissolved?** Then do not seek a wife. But, if you do marry you have committed no sin; and, if a virgin marries, she has committed no sin.<sup>44</sup>

*New English Bible.* Are you bound in marriage? Do not seek a dissolution. **Has your marriage been dissolved?** Do not seek a wife. If, however, you do marry, there is nothing wrong in it; and if a virgin marries, she has done no wrong.<sup>45</sup>

*Revised Challoner-Rheims Version (Catholic).* Art thou bound to a wife? Do not seek to be freed. **Art thou freed from a wife?** Do not seek a wife. But if thou takest a wife, thou hast not sinned. And if a virgin marries, she has not sinned.<sup>46</sup>

*Rheims (1582)* Art thou bound to a wife? seek not to be loosed. **Art thou loosed from a wife?** seek not a wife. But if thou take a wife, thou hast not sinned. And if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned.<sup>47</sup>

The following translations are from interlinear Greek Bibles. These are Greek Bibles with the translation of each Greek word appearing next to the word. The word order is confusing, because these follow the Greek word order precisely:

*Diaglott Greek interlinear (Jehovah's Witnesses).* Art thou having been bound to a wife, not seek thou a release; **has thou been loosed from a wife,** not seek thou a wife. If but even thou shouldst have married, not thou didst sin; and if should have married the virgin, not she sinned.

*Alfred Marshall Greek interlinear.* Hast thou been bound to a woman? Do not seek release; **hast thou been released from a woman?** Do not seek a woman. If But indeed thou marriest, thou sinnedst not, and if marries the virgin, she sinned not.

Greek scholar Zodhiates indicates that “loosed” is perfect indicative passive, usually translated with “have” or “has” – hence, “have you been loosed.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> A translation by the author of the popular Daily Study Bible series.

<sup>45</sup> A translation by the Church of England.

<sup>46</sup> A mid-20<sup>th</sup> century translation by the Catholic Church – which is very conservative on the divorce and remarriage question.

<sup>47</sup> A Catholic translation older than the KJV.

<sup>48</sup> Spiros Zodhiates is a premier Greek scholar and has published a number of important Greek reference books. He is theologically conservative. As his name suggests, he has the advantage of having been born Greek.

Perfect tense describes an action, or more correctly a process, that took place in the past, the results of which have continued to the present. It has no exact equivalent in English, but is usually translated by using the auxiliary verbs “has” or “have”: ... “Daughter, thy faith hath made thee whole.”<sup>49</sup>

Finally, notice that the word “loose” appears twice in verse 27. When Paul says “do not seek to be loosed,” the translations are quite uniform in translating “loosed” as divorced. The same word is used in the very next clause with obvious parallel intent. It means “divorce” there, too.

The only plausible objection to this plain statement of Paul is that Jesus said something different in the Gospels. Indeed, some actually argue that Jesus’ words somehow overrule Paul’s, on the premise, I suppose, that Jesus is a greater authority than Paul. But I don’t believe the Bible contradicts itself.

We will see later that there really is no contradiction, Jesus’ words having been mistranslated. But even if Jesus and Paul were to say different things, they wouldn’t contradict one another. Jesus was plainly interpreting the Law of Moses in such passages as Matthew 5 and 19 and was addressing a Jewish audience before the Law of Moses was abrogated by the cross.

I mean – Jesus told the lepers he healed to show themselves to the priests to be declared clean (Luke 17:14). Similarly, Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount regarding leaving gifts at the altar do not apply today as literally stated (Matt. 5:23-24). We no longer leave literal gifts at literal altars, which is literally what Jesus was speaking about – to a Jewish audience who were at the time commanded to do so. No one argues that modern lepers who are cured should do the same – Jesus was simply honoring the Law of Moses as it existed at that time.

And (now this is important!), the Bible doesn’t contradict itself. And conservative Christians shouldn’t defend their views by questioning the inspiration of Paul! Paul was obviously aware of Jesus’ teaching (1 Cor. 7:10), and yet Paul quite plainly said that the divorced and virgins should not marry – but if they do, it is not sin. The Bible says it. I believe it.

The discussion could really end at this point, and the point would be fully proved. But because we have so often based our doctrine on Jesus’ commentaries on Deuteronomy 24, we will study his words in some detail later. But the case is already made.

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<sup>49</sup> *The Complete Word Study New Testament* (AMG 1991). References herein to conclusions drawn by Zodhiates are from this reference work or, occasionally, from the software version of this work by the same name.

## The Pauline Exception

Now before we go on to Jesus' teachings, we need to consider other portions of 1 Corinthians 7:

*12* To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. *13* And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. *14* For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. *15* But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. *16* How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

This passage is sometimes referred to as the Pauline Exception. It is argued that this creates a second exception to the prohibition on divorce – the first exception being fornication, as declared by Jesus, and the second being an unbelieving spouse.

Interestingly, Paul never mentions fornication nor does he speak of remarried spouses being guilty of adultery. While Paul is obviously aware of Jesus' teaching on divorce, he doesn't remotely speak in those terms. Paul's teaching is simple. It's wrong to violate the marriage covenant. And it's always better to be single to better serve the Lord. But neither marriage nor remarriage is a sin.

Paul is not creating an exception to the command to not divorce. He is simply giving the practical advice that if an unbelieving spouse divorces the believing spouse, the believer is not a sinner and is not bound to pretend to be married to someone with whom he or she is no longer united. On the other hand, Paul plainly says that a believer must honor the marriage covenant so long as the unbeliever permits that marriage to last.

Paul is not authorizing a divorce. He is simply pointing out that a Christian is only bound to his or her unbelieving spouse so long as the unbelieving spouse is willing to remain married. The phrase "God has called us to peace" is of rabbinic origin. It's what the rabbis said when reaching a pragmatic conclusion not necessarily dictated by the Law of Moses.<sup>50</sup>

Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 7:15 is better translated "you are no longer enslaved" (the Greek is quite clear). It's a bit shocking for us to hear Paul referring to marriage as slavery, and so many modern translations (such as the NIV) soften the words.

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<sup>50</sup> Instone-Brewer, p. 203. For example, an imbecile could not be prosecuted for theft but nonetheless the stolen goods were confiscated and return to their right owner "for the sake of peace" in rabbinic teaching.

However, the Jewish certificate of divorce and certificate of freedom for a slave were virtually identical documents, and much of rabbinic divorce law came from Exodus 21:10-11, which speaks of marrying a slave girl. Therefore, the metaphor is a clear allusion to a standard Jewish certificate of divorce, which *always* allowed remarriage. In fact, the very purpose of the certificate was to allow remarriage.

May the Christian spouse remarry in such a case? Of course. As explained above, verses 27-28 say so.

In *Divorce, Repentance, and the Gospel of Christ* (Gospel Enterprises, 1981) (hereafter, “Hicks”), Olan Hicks quotes Alexander Campbell, one of the founders of the Restoration Movement, who responded to a question about a woman who had been abandoned by her husband and then sought a formal divorce, as follows:

If in that matter she had actually erred, she is not now to be repudiated for that error any more than one who formerly was a slanderer or a persecutor, and has been brought to repentance and reformation, is now to be rejected for crimes committed before his conversion. And if the divorce was obtained after she became a disciple, in order to conform to the statutes of the state, with express reference to her marriage, it seems not to materially alter the case.

Campbell noted that Walter Scott concurred in his judgment. Scott, another Restoration leader, invented such notable slogans as the “five finger exercise” of “hear, believe, repent, confess, and be baptized” and introduced the use of the gospel invitation after each sermon.

### **Pre-conversion remarriage**

We return to 1 Corinthians 7 –

17 Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. 18 Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. 19 Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God’s commands is what counts. 20 Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him. 21 Were you a slave when you were called? Don’t let it trouble you – although if you can gain your freedom, do so. 22 For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord’s freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ’s slave. 23 You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. 24 Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to.

Why is Paul addressing circumcision and slavery in this discussion on marriage, divorce, and remarriage? Notice that he immediately returns to his original subject in verse 25. The only logical explanation is that Paul is still addressing marriage here. He is

teaching us about marriage by analogy to other more obvious principles. His point is that if we remain a slave after becoming a Christian, or remain circumcised or uncircumcised after becoming a Christian, then we remain married after becoming Christian – so far as it is within our power to do so.

Now this is not an absolute rule, as the analogies themselves make clear. Paul certainly would not argue that a slave should refuse to accept his freedom if it became available, as he makes clear in verse 21. Therefore, while Christianity does not require a change in life situation, neither does it prevent a change when the change can be accomplished without sin.

Paul's argument is broad. Take for example a married couple where each spouse is on his or her second marriage. Suppose that couple is converted to the Lord and wish to be baptized. Some have argued that they must be divorced as a condition to being saved, because their marriage is wrong – indeed, adulterous – arguing from Matthew 5:31-32.

But Paul plainly teaches that Christians who are married when converted are to stay married. Indeed, divorce is a sin. How can we urge couples to divorce – that is, to sin – as a condition to being saved? I thought we taught repentance – not sin! – as a step toward salvation!<sup>51</sup> How does one repent of vow breaking by breaking another vow?<sup>52</sup>

Foy E. Wallace, Jr. writes,

It is in this connection that the apostle added in verse 20, 'Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called,' and it should serve as a check to some marriage counselling preachers who are so readily disposed to break up marriage relationships that are not in conformity with their own immature opinions.

The only possible argument that we should require divorced and remarried couples to divorce to be saved is to contend that the couple is not married at all because the spouses are still married to their first spouses in the eyes of God, their divorces being wrongful. But, as will be explained in more detail later, this is not possible. After all, Jesus himself said, "What God has put together, man should not separate" ("put asunder" in KJV). How can we contend that a marriage can't be wrongly ended when Jesus said that man *can* (but shouldn't) separate the marriage?

More fundamentally, Paul plainly says in verse 28 that it is not a sin to remarry after a divorce. It is the *divorce* that is a sin – not the *remarriage*. Marriage is good, blessed, and ordained of God. Divorce – more precisely, breaking the marriage covenant

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<sup>51</sup> Acts 2:38.

<sup>52</sup> *Sermon on the Mount and the Civil State* (1967), p. 45, quoted by Hicks, p. 24. Wallace was editor of the *Gospel Advocate* for many years during the midst of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. By today's standards, Wallace would be considered very conservative and, indeed, legalistic.



– is hated by God. Why? Because God loves his people and violating a marriage hurts his people.

The husband and wife who have remarried are just as bound to their new covenant as they were to their first covenant. And their children will be just as hurt by a divorce of their parents as they would be if their parents were on their first marriage.

We'll address this situation further later.

### **On being free from concerns**

We skip verses 25–28a, having covered them earlier.

*28b* But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this. *29* What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; *30* those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; *31* those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.

Paul now explains in more detail why he prefers that the Corinthians not marry. It's not because it's wrong to marry – or to remarry. It's because marriage can be a burden when Christians face persecution. While Paul doesn't explicitly refer to persecution, he sees “troubles” coming. Some have wrongly argued that Paul is referring to the Second Coming, expecting Jesus to return very soon. But Paul is referring not to future glory but to “many troubles.”

*32* I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs – how he can please the Lord. *33* But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world – how he can please his wife – *34* and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world – how she can please her husband. *35* I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.

Now notice also that Paul sees the world very differently from the way we do. Serving the Lord is most important – personal happiness or self-actualization is secondary, at best. Not marriage, not sex – nothing is more important than serving the Lord.

### **Virgins**

*36* If anyone thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if she is getting along in years and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should

get married. *37* But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin – this man also does the right thing. *38* So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does even better.

This is a famously difficult to translate passage. Paul is either discussing giving a daughter in marriage or marrying one's fiancé. Either way, Paul makes the same point – marriage is not sin, but remaining single is better.

## **Widows**

*39* A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. *40* In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is – and I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

Paul, having addressed virgins and the divorced in turn, discusses widows. Once again, it is better for widows to remain single, but marriage is not a sin.

In 1 Timothy 5:14, Paul says, “I counsel younger widows to marry.” Thus, we now see beyond reasonable doubt that Paul's strong preference for singleness is dictated at least in part by circumstances. Nonetheless, I have to believe that Paul's ultimate preference is shown by his own life – it's better to remain single to serve the Lord with unrestricted dedication.

## **Marriage only to other Christians**

Paul is quite explicit that Christians should only marry other Christians. After all, Christ's church is the continuation of Israel, with Gentiles who believe in Jesus grafted into Israel (Rom. 11). Israelites could only marry other Israelites, and the rule continues.

## **As long as he lives**

Now some argue that “as long as he lives” means that a woman cannot become unmarried until her husband dies, so that an “unscriptural divorce” is no divorce at all. But this can't be true. First, those who contend for this interpretation conveniently ignore the fact that Paul makes no exception for fornication – and so the rule stated by Paul must admit of unstated exceptions (as it very clearly does).

Well, what exceptions might be unstated? Certainly, Paul having already said that a woman is not bound when her unbelieving husband departs, he doesn't need to say it again for it to still be true. And just as surely Paul would assure us that having said that divorced spouses may remarry without sin, he doesn't have to mention that exception again here.

Paul is speaking in generalities. We can't invent a doctrine by ripping a generality out of context and ignoring the exceptions stated in the very same passage.

## Summary

Now that we've wrestled with all of chapter 7, we need to summarize:

1. Marriage is not a legal relationship. It is a relationship that derives from Eden – a time before sin, before government, and before churches and preachers. Marriage is a covenant to be united and to be one flesh. This includes consenting to sexual relations – except “for a season” and even then “only by consent.”
2. A modern legal separation violates the marriage covenant and, indeed, ends the marriage. It is an utter fiction to suppose that one can stay married (in the biblical sense) and not live with and be united with one's spouse. Of course, a trial separation may be considered a separation “for a season” permitted by Paul.
3. The word translated “divorce” in chapter 7 does not have a legalistic meaning. It means to violate the marriage covenant so as to end the bond of unity. Exactly when or how this happens is sometimes beyond human wisdom. It will bother many for me not to lay down nice and easy rules, but human relationships don't lend themselves to nice and easy rules. After all, do I have the wisdom to divine whether someone has really repented? Or can I say whether someone else has so rejected Jesus as Lord as to have fallen away (Hebrews 10:26)? Or to be beyond repentance (Hebrews 6:4-6)? Some of the most central questions – who's saved? who's lost? – don't lend themselves to easy answers when applied to particular people, because they are fundamentally questions of the heart. God knows the heart – I don't. Just so, whether someone has so violated the marriage covenant that the spouses are no longer united is sometimes not easy for an outsider to judge.
4. Christians are commended to remain single in order to better serve the Lord. This is true of virgins, the divorced, and widows. But Paul is always clear that remarrying is not sin.
5. Married couples who are converted to Christ don't need to be divorced to become Christians, even if the present marriage followed a divorce.
6. There is no sin in a second marriage following a divorce, even if the person marrying for the second time was guilty of fornication or no fornication was involved. (As we'll cover later, however, making the second marriage is sin if the divorce was obtained in order to make the second marriage.)

## Chapter 9. Grace

Grace applies to all Christian issues. 1 Corinthians 7:17-24 teaches that a pre-conversion divorce and remarriage is not held against the converts by God. In Hebrews 8:12, speaking of Christians, God says that he “will remember their sins no more.” Baptism forgives all that has gone before. Utterly. Completely.<sup>53</sup>

As obvious as this point should be, we get off track when we think of Christian divorces. What if a Christian couple divorces? We reason, surely they should have known better, and so surely God can fairly remember their sin and require them to remain single until death. And yet, Christians are in grace, too. Aren't they? Are there some sins that are covered by baptism but can't be covered later? What does the Bible say?

Fortunately, the Bible answers this question very plainly:

*Rom. 5:6* You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. *7*Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. *8*But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Paul's first point is to show how amazing it is that God would have given his Son for us while we were not yet saved. Jesus died for the ungodly – we were enemies of God (v. 10)! And yet we correctly believe that baptism washes away each and every sin. We are thoroughly and utterly cleansed in baptism.

Now this is true, but Paul's point is that God does this for us *before* we become his children, indeed, while we are his enemies.

*9* Since we have now been justified by his blood, how **much more** shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! *10* For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how **much more**, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

Now Paul drives his point home. If God would forgive his ungodly enemies utterly and thoroughly, how utterly and thoroughly will he forgive his *children*?! Paul answers the question by twice saying “much more.” We are much more forgiven now that we are God's friends than we were forgiven when we were his enemies. It only makes sense.

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<sup>53</sup> More on this under the topics “The repentance argument,” “The historical argument,” and “The earthly consequences argument.”

Now, if baptism forgives a divorce that occurred pre-baptism, God's good grace, given freely to his children, will *much more* forgive a divorce that occurs after baptism.<sup>54</sup>

But some argue that Christians should know better (and indeed they should). But the conclusion that Christians receive less generous forgiveness due to their better understanding of God's will does not follow. Christians have grace – and grace is of no value if it doesn't work on sin!

(Rom. 5:20-6:1 ESV) <sup>20</sup> Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, <sup>21</sup> so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

When God gave the Torah (books of the Law) to the Israelites, they became accountable for greater obedience because of their greater knowledge. God's response? Grace abounded all the more.

We misunderstand what the Bible says about divorce because we greatly misunderstand the character of God.

Notice that we've traditionally argued this point in terms of whether Christ's laws are binding on non-Christians. Some have contended that because the law of divorce and remarriage doesn't apply to non-Christians, a pre-conversion divorce and remarriage is overlooked at conversion, but that a post-baptism divorce is outside of grace. Others have very hotly contested this view. Of course, the correct approach to Christian doctrine is to speak in terms of the gospel and grace, and not "laws." The question thus becomes: just how extensive is grace? Unless it is contended that divorce is the unforgivable sin, then for those in grace, grace covers the sin.

I have to tell one bit of history to make the point clear. There was a time in early church history when it was taught that forgiveness could not be had after baptism. The "liberals" of the day taught that forgiveness could be had, but only once! This was prevailing doctrine in the Fourth Century and is the probable reason that Emperor Constantine, although converted early in life was not baptized until he was on his death bed.

The notion that forgiveness is harder to come by *after* baptism than *by* baptism is heresy. It is an error borrowed from Roman Catholicism, which teaches that grace is mediated by the church and is often denied to its members. This is utterly foreign to the gospel. It was rejected by the Protestant Reformation and by the early Restorers, such as the Campbells and Stone.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> We will address the question of whether repentance is required to be forgiven of sin, and what repentance entails, later.

<sup>55</sup> The Churches of Christ in America are products of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Restoration Movement, resulting from a merger of the movement founded by Barton W. Stone in Kentucky, Illinois, and Ohio and  
[continued following page]

But I digress.<sup>56</sup>

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the movement begun by Thomas Campbell and his son, Alexander, in western Pennsylvania and present-day West Virginia.

<sup>56</sup> Here would be a good place to pause to discuss grace in much more detail. The author's views are laid out in considerable detail in *The Holy Spirit and Revolutionary Grace*. These views are somewhat expanded on in *Do We Teach Another Gospel?* It would take too many pages to answer all the questions here, but those two books are pretty thorough.

## Chapter 10. Matthew 5

As promised some pages ago, we now need to interpret the words of Christ in light of what we've learned from Paul. We need to avoid the temptation to treat Paul as less worthy of respect than Christ. Rather, the Bible does not contradict itself, and 1 Corinthians 7 teaches what it teaches. We can't ignore its words to force a presumed conclusion on it.

And so, we turn to the Sermon on the Mount.

*Matt. 5:27* "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.'  
*28* But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. *29* If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. *30* And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

*31* "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.'  
*32* But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

*33* "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.'  
*34* But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; *35* or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. *36* And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. *37* Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

*38* "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'  
*39* But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. *40* And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. *41* If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. *42* Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

*43* "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'  
*44* But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, *45* that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. *46* If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors

doing that? *47* And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? *48* Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

This quotation is perhaps too long, but it's for a point. In this part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is addressing Jews who are under the Law of Moses. And Jesus goes through several familiar teachings in the Law of Moses and shows how the Law had been misinterpreted in then current society.

Moses never taught "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." Rather, Moses taught "Love your neighbor" (Lev. 19:18). But this plain teaching had been distorted and perverted in the First Century. Jesus called his listeners back to the original meaning of the command.

In each case, Jesus was neither adding to nor taking away from the Law. He was rather showing how Moses' teachings should have been understood. Ultimately, Jesus' point was to show how people in the coming Kingdom of Heaven were being called to live – to a standard anticipated by the Law and the Prophets but not fully realized until the coming of the Christ (Matt. 5:17-20).

The key point here is that Jesus is not legislating new laws in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus did not come to do that. Rather, Jesus came to free us from law.<sup>57</sup>

So let's now focus on Jesus' instruction on divorce –

*31* "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' *32* But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."

Plainly, Jesus' point is something like this: Moses taught you not to commit adultery – but you divorce your wives and think that this avoids violating the marriage covenant. But I tell you that the divorce itself violates the marriage covenant as much as adultery does – because after you put your wife away, neither you nor she can keep the covenant that you made!

Recall that Jesus is interpreting Deuteronomy 24, which states:

*Deut. 24:1* If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, *2* and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of

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<sup>57</sup> *Eph. 2:8-9* "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast."; *Rom. 3:27-28* "Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law."



another man, 3 and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, 4 then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD. Do not bring sin upon the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.

The Jewish rabbis disputed over the meaning of this passage, and the disagreement was well known in Jesus' day. First, notice that the primary point of the passage is to deny a husband the right to remarry his wife after he has put her away and she has married another man.

Almost incidentally, Moses refers to the first divorce as being based on "something indecent" about the wife. The second divorce is because the husband "dislikes her." The rabbis debated whether divorce was permitted only due to some indecency or due to merely disliking the wife. The meaning of "something indecent" is much debated, even today.

Jesus clearly takes the more conservative position, saying the standard is fornication, very likely Jesus' interpretation of "something indecent."<sup>58</sup> He is not making new law.

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<sup>58</sup> "Fornication" includes any sexual immorality, such as incest, prostitution, adultery, or homosexuality. The exact meaning of "fornication" in this context has been hotly disputed. Another intriguing possibility is that it refers to marriages that would be illegal or terminable under the Law of Moses, such as incestuous marriages or marriage by an Israelite to a foreigner contrary to the Law of Moses. Thus, the exception would refer primarily to what we'd call grounds for annulment, where the marriage not only should never have taken place but also should not be continued. This would accord with Ezra 10:10-11, where Ezra required the Jews to divorce their foreign wives, married contrary to the Law. The New Jerusalem Bible translates: "But I say to you, Everyone who divorces his wife, except for the case of an illicit marriage, makes her an adulteress ..." See Gary D. Collier, RM-Bible discussion group, [ftp://moses.acu.edu/RM-Bible](http://moses.acu.edu/RM-Bible) (April 15, 1996).

In *The Complete New Testament Word Study Dictionary*, Zodhiates states that the Greek word (*porneia*) translated fornication "may also refer to marriages within the degrees prohibited by the Law of Moses and generally to all such intercourse as prohibited in that Law." This interpretation has the advantage of reconciling Ezra with Jesus, explaining why Jesus makes "fornication" a special exception when any termination of the marriage covenant can end a marriage, and why Paul didn't refer to fornication as an exception in 1 Cor. 7.

Finally, this interpretation means that Jesus is not choosing between rabbinical schools of thought but is rather declaring all marriages properly entered into sacred and not to be broken for any reason – such that breaking a proper marriage is sin, the moral equivalent of adultery. This places Jesus very much in line with Paul.

Unfortunately, while the meaning is possible, it seems unlikely that Jesus' audience would have understood "fornication" in exclusively these terms. They would have instead thought in terms of sexual sin, which was the usual meaning of the term and entirely consistent with the context where Jesus was discussing Deuteronomy 24. Hence, this argument is clever but almost certainly wrong.

But as shown by the context, Jesus is also addressing the Ten Commandments, and concludes that Moses was indirectly addressing “Thou shalt not commit adultery” in this passage.

If a man divorces his wife to marry another woman, then he’s committed adultery with the other woman in his heart long before he puts his first wife away. He is, therefore, an adulterer. Moreover, if a man “puts away” his wife by breaking his marriage vows, he is a covenant breaker, and hence an adulterer.

As God hates divorces and wants his disciples to honor their covenants, he expects divorced couples to reconcile whenever possible, just as Paul declared in 1 Corinthians 7:11. Although a couple is divorced, they are still bound by their covenant and should honor it if possible by reconciliation and repenting of the sin that led to the divorce.

However, if the wife remarries, she makes reconciliation impossible. Moreover, so does her new husband. Both have made it impossible for the couple to reconcile. In fact, once the second marriage occurs, reconciliation can never happen without violating Deuteronomy 24. Hence, the second marriage makes the first covenant impossible of performance. And covenant breaking is adultery.

This, I think, is at least the heart of Jesus’ point. Remarriage is not sin (Paul said so), but remarriage that prevents a possible reconciliation is. Of course, not all marriages have any hope of reconciliation, but many do. Therefore, it is very unwise, even wrong, to quickly remarry after a divorce. Marriages “on the rebound” are notoriously unlikely to work, and they often occur before any serious effort can be made to work through the problems that led to the first divorce.

After all, divorces happen for reasons, and sometimes the reason is that the divorcing spouse has ungodly attitudes or other issues that will cause the second marriage to fail as well. From a pastoral standpoint, the parties to a divorce should be honest and vulnerable enough to do some self-discovery before entering into another marriage. They may well find that once they learn the causes of the first divorce, they can reconcile. Or even if reconciliation is unrealistic, they’ll make a much better second marriage.

I should also add that Jesus should by no means be read as denying the Exodus 21:10-11 grounds for divorce. They were not controversial in his day, and when rabbis declared that divorce may be had only for adultery, their listeners understood that the Exodus 21:10-11 grounds for divorce were also allowed. It’s how rabbis spoke.

Hence, if a husband fails to provide his wife with material support or emotionally neglects her, she has grounds for divorce. Abandonment, abuse, and such are clearly grounds for divorce. Jesus by no means contradicts this doctrine. Rather, when a husband or wife neglects his or her spouse, he or she is violates the marriage covenant.

Moreover, as the right of remarriage was the assumed result of a divorce, Jesus’ listeners would not have assumed Jesus denied such a right. They should have understood

that remarriage was in some sense wrong, but they wouldn't have concluded that remarriage was impossible.

Therefore, Jesus' words are much more consistent with the rest of the Sermon on the Mount and 1 Corinthians 7 than we often assume. He is speaking as a rabbi and making the point that literal compliance with the Law of Moses is woefully insufficient to truly fulfill God's will. He is not legislating and not really changing anything. He's just explaining what's always been true. Husbands and wives are to love each other and keep their covenants to each other. When they don't, they're covenant breakers and they cause others to become covenant breakers.

The fact that "adultery" is a metaphor for covenant breaking can be seen from verse 32, as well. Jesus says, "But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery." The wife is called an adulterous *even if she doesn't remarry*.

How can a woman who hasn't remarried be guilty of adultery? Some commentators assume that, being single, she must remarry or else become a prostitute, but that's just not true. For example, D. A. Carson says,<sup>59</sup>

This arises out of the fact that the divorced woman will in most circumstances remarry (esp. in first-century Palestine, where this would probably be her means of support).

Carson is a brilliant commentator, but the Gospels are filled with adult, single women who show no sign of needing a husband to make a living – or of prostituting themselves. It is very unlikely Jesus was thinking along these lines given how many of his circle were women meeting precisely this description.

Instone-Brewer provides ample evidence that many divorced women did not remarry and had sufficient resources to live well as single women.<sup>60</sup> In fact, the Gospels support this view. Mary Magdalene, for example, was an unmarried, chaste woman. The same is true of Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was not divorced, but was evidently a widow who had no need to remarry. Therefore, we have to accept that Jesus didn't assume all divorced women would remarry and so is including unmarried, chaste women in what he says. And that means "adultery" is a metaphor for covenant breaking. Otherwise, it would make no sense at all to say that you make a woman an adulteress by divorcing her.

Now, I should add one more argument. Edwards quotes Carroll Osburn, one of the Churches of Christ's premier Greek scholars:

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<sup>59</sup> *Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew chapters 1 -12* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publ. House, 1995), at 152.

<sup>60</sup> Instone-Brewer, pp. 124-125.

Thus it cannot be said that the present indicative in Matt. 19:9, or any other Greek text, “cannot mean other than continuous action,” for any such argument blatantly disregards the several idiomatic uses of the present indicative in which continuity is not explicit. Greek syntax requires that each occurrence of the present indicative be understood in terms of its context to determine whether continuity is involved.<sup>61</sup>

Now review the context. Take Matthew 5:32, for example:

But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery

In this passage, “divorces” clearly occurs at a single point in time. “Marries” is clearly a point-in-time verb. The context for “commits adultery” strongly argues for point-in-time action. And if the action is point in time, then the “adultery” must occur at the time of the divorce. That is, “adultery” is the breaking of the covenant of marriage.

We will consider these verb tenses further when we get to the present-tense argument.

Therefore, we already see several reasons for taking “commit adultery” as a metaphor for covenant breaking –

- This sense makes the passage consistent with Paul’s interpretation in 1 Corinthians 7.
- Only this interpretation is consistent with grace.
- The passage is in the midst of numerous metaphors and other figures of speech. Jesus plainly has a predilection for such language in the Sermon on the Mount. He no more means literal adultery than he means literal eye gouging.
- “Adultery” is frequently used as a metaphor for covenant breaking in both Testaments, even by Jesus.
- The woman can only be caused to commit adultery if adultery is covenant breaking. Her former husband does not *make* her have sex with anyone.
- The verb tenses strongly suggest that the adultery occurs when she is put away and, if she takes a new husband, when he marries her. Nothing is

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<sup>61</sup> Carroll Osburn, “The Present Indicative in Matt. 19:9,” 24 *The Restoration Quarterly* no. 4, (Restoration Quarterly Corporation, Abilene, TX 1981), p. 193.

said about either continuing in sin. (This is true in English, too, if you read the passage without the Council of Trent's interpretation in mind.)

- This meaning is consistent with the parallel portions of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus consistently looks beyond the words of the Law to the heart of the Law. The traditional interpretation makes us worse legalists than the Pharisees. The true interpretation calls us to avoid using the Law as a pretext for sin, which precisely parallel with the surrounding teachings.

We next turn to Matthew 19 to see if the same result holds true.

## Chapter 11. Matthew 19

As mentioned earlier, the other frequently cited divorce passage in the Gospels is Matthew 19:1-12:

1 When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan. 2 Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. 3 Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"

The Pharisees are specifically asking Jesus to comment on Deuteronomy 24, and in particular, are asking Jesus to choose between the two prevailing interpretations of the passage – divorce is permitted only for indecency – essentially the same as fornication or adultery – or divorce is allowed for any reason.

Deuteronomy 24 is indeed ambiguous on this point, and so rather than simply expressing an opinion, Jesus calls his listeners to consider the fundamental principles behind marriage, found in Genesis 1 and 2:

4 "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' 5 and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? 6 So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

Jesus concludes that marriage is a divine institution, which God blesses, having invented it in Eden before sin entered the world. Jesus declares that God joins a married couple together. He doesn't state, however, that God's work *can't* be undone. Rather, he plainly states that people *can* undo a marriage, but to do so is sin.

The fact that God joins the couple together hardly leads to the conclusion that man *cannot* un-join them, only that man *should not* un-join them. Salvation is a work of God that can be undone by man (Heb. 10:26). Just so, God gives life, but murderers can take it away.

God is a party to all our covenants. If I make a contract to deliver goods for a price, and if a break that covenant, I have offended both my customer and God. However, once the contract is broken, my customer doesn't have to pay for the goods and I don't have to deliver the goods if he declares the contract terminated. It's impossible for me to be bound to a covenant that the other party isn't also bound to. However, a sufficiently severe breach allows the other party to terminate the covenant – even though God is, in a very real sense, a party to it.

7 "Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"

This is an entirely sensible question. If divorce is wrong, why does the Law of Moses make provision for it? However, Moses certainly did not command that husbands divorce their wives. It's important to realize that the rabbis taught that adultery *requires* a divorce.

8 Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning."

Jesus says that divorce is not part of God's plan. God intends that marriage be for life. However, God (who is really the author of the Law of Moses – not Moses) recognized that some people would fail to make their marriages work, and so divorce was anticipated. Not approved, but regulated.

Moreover, Jesus denies that divorce is ever mandatory. It's simply permitted.

It is entirely fair to ask whether modern men still have hard hearts, or did God expect divorce to no longer occur under the new covenant (other than for fornication)? Jesus was not saying that hard-heartedness was over and that allowance for it was no longer needed. He was merely saying that it is sin to terminate a marriage covenant.

It is important to know that the NIV is inaccurate in translating "because your hearts *were* hard," implying that hardness of hearts was a thing of the past. The KJV is more accurate in translating "because of the hardness of your hearts," which plainly presumes that hearts were still hard when Jesus was speaking and leaves no implication regarding the future hardness of hearts.

Hard-heartedness is very much still with us – even in the church. It would be absurd beyond words to assert otherwise.

God's regulation of divorce is seen in Deuteronomy 24, which requires that a husband divorce his wife by giving her a certificate of divorce. This wasn't to encourage or approve divorce, but to give the wife a method of remarrying. Without a certificate, she would have trouble proving that she is no longer married and free to remarry. Plainly, while God did not want men and women to violate their marital commitments, he made merciful allowance to allow divorced spouses to remarry. (Husbands didn't need certificates of divorce, because polygamy was allowed at the time of the Law of Moses.)

9 "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."

The KJV extends this verse by adding "and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery." The phrase has since been omitted by nearly all later translations. The reason is that the very oldest manuscripts we have of Matthew entirely omit the phrase.

This is important because there is no reference to the husband causing the wife's sin in this passage, whereas Matthew 5:31-32 plainly says her adultery is caused by the husband who put her away. This erroneous translation is surely one reason so many

preachers have argued that there never is an innocent party so that the one wrongfully put away may not remarry.

The key point in Matthew 19 is that “adultery” does not necessarily refer to sexual relations. As we discussed in an earlier chapter, “adultery” is very frequently used in both testaments as a metaphor for any covenant breaking. Thus, a likely translation would be “I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman *violates the marriage covenant.*” In other words, while God’s children have the power in them to terminate a marriage, doing so makes one a covenant breaker – the moral equivalent of an adulterer or of the children of Israel when they forsook God as described by the prophets.

This brings us to the question of why Jesus addresses remarriage if all he is really saying is that divorce (terminating a marriage) is wrong. The answer is found in re-reading Deuteronomy 24, which is all about remarriage. Jesus is simply commenting on the question posed. More precisely, as noted by Lenski, in Deuteronomy 24 the reason for the divorce was to remarry.

Jesus’ point is that you can’t avoid the proscription of the commandment to refrain from adultery simply by getting a divorce before having sex with another woman. The sexual relations with the second wife may not be sin, but putting away the first wife to get a second wife is – and is the moral equivalent of adultery. You’ve still violated the marriage covenant and have tainted yourself with your sin. (This, however, does not put you entirely outside of grace – a subject not at issue in Jesus’ commentary on the Law of Moses.)

Reading this passage together with Matthew 5:31-32, we see that violating the marriage covenant by wrongfully ending the marriage imposes the consequences of sin on the guilty spouse, the innocent spouse, and any second spouse of either. Thus, although getting a divorce before having sexual relations with a new spouse would seem to avoid the sin of adultery, Jesus is saying that sin is judged on weightier things than such technicalities.

I’d add that a woman who induces a man to divorce in order to marry her is, in Jesus’ teaching, as much an adulterer as a woman who has sex with a married man. Either way, the marriage covenant is violated and the pain given clearly shows the sinfulness of the conduct. (Of course, it works the same way for a man inducing a woman to get a divorce. But that wasn’t an issue under the Law of Moses when Jesus was speaking.)

There is nothing honorable or right about waiting to get the divorce before having sex with the new lover. Rather, so long as the man is married, he is obligated not to allow himself to be overly attracted to anyone else.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Recall Matt. 5:27-28: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”



I think it is Ann Landers who points out that most of us will meet three or four people in our lives that we could fall in love with and marry. As God says through Malachi 2:15b, “So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth.”

Therefore, while breaking the marriage covenant is wrong in any instance, there is a difference between divorcing your wife and divorcing your wife to marry another woman. In the second instance, the other woman is party to the sin and the second marriage is truly a sin against the first wife.

Leon Morris makes the point that the verb tense of “has been loosed” in 1 Corinthians 7:27-28 indicates that Paul only permits the remarriage where the divorce is a settled state.<sup>63</sup> That is, a second marriage is not a sin – unless the desire for the second marriage was the reason for the divorce, in which case the second marriage (the marrying – not the having sex in marriage) is adultery.

Jesus and Paul thus say the same thing. The second marriage that is the reason for the divorce is wrong, and yet it is a marriage, and sex between married spouses is not sin. Breaking up a marriage *is*, however.

Finally, it’s worth mentioning that Jesus here is assuming a non-polygamous marriage. He makes a point of saying the “two become one,” which is taken from the Septuagint’s translation of Genesis 2. The original Hebrew omits “two” and does not contradict polygamy. Jesus picked his text for a reason.

Paul seems to have picked up on the point, as 1 Corinthians 7 seems to only permit a monogamous marriage. 1 Corinthians 7:2, for example, states that “each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband.”

And so, should elders attempt to compel a divorce by a husband and wife who have wrongfully broken up a marriage to get married? I don’t think so. Two wrongs don’t make a right. The marriage having been made, it would be the rarest of cases where the first marriage could be put back together (real people just don’t act that way) and a violation of Deuteronomy 24. The need is not for a second divorce, but for a better second marriage and for godly regret and repentance of the sin – not only the sin of breaking a marriage, but also of the sins that led to breaking the marriage (perhaps lust, selfishness, or being inconsiderate, for example).

It is therefore urgent that we do a better job of teaching on marriage and counseling our troubled couples. It’s not enough to threaten men and women who have problem marriages with a denial of the right to remarry. Threats aren’t the solution.

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<sup>63</sup> Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.1958).

I'm no marriage counselor, but even a casual observer can see that we aren't coping with this problem well. Divorce is far too frequent – even in the church. We need to teach our members to be less self-indulgent, more giving, less demanding, and just plain better people.

I'm afraid that part of our problem is our failure to pastor members as individuals. Often times, our members' closest contact with the ministers and elders is through the pulpit. We've got to find a way to have a more hands-on ministry – especially to the weaker Christians. It's easy to hang around strong Christians – they aren't as high maintenance as weak Christians. But it's the weak Christians that we often pastor the most poorly. Just a thought ...

Some would argue that allowing the remarried couple to “profit” from their sin by remaining married condones the sin of the divorce – indeed, it appears that the couple will have gotten away with their sin with no real consequences! And isn't it awfully easy to claim to have repented after the second marriage?

Such a view fails to understand the nature of grace. The first mistake is not realizing that *only* God may exact penalties for sin.<sup>64</sup> It is not the role of an eldership to exact punishment for sin.<sup>65</sup> And, of course, we can't refuse to extend grace to those who've repented just because some will falsely claim to have repented. The problem of knowing who has truly repented comes up with every baptism and every restoration. We really have no choice but to offer outwardly repentant remarried couples the benefit of the doubt, or else we risk becoming a very cynical, judgmental group of people – surely not what God wants of us.<sup>66</sup>

Moreover, suggesting that allowing the couple to continue in the second marriage allows the couple to avoid the consequences of the divorce greatly misapprehends the severe earthly consequences of a divorce. Generally speaking, even the spouse that initiates the legal divorce suffers mightily from all the problems that a divorce brings on both spouses – not to mention their children.

I should add that whatever I've said regarding a wrongful remarriage is also true regarding a murder. How does the Bible say that we should deal with a Christian who is guilty of murder? Plainly, a Christian guilty of murder may be accepted as a forgiven

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<sup>64</sup> *Rom 12:19* “Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord.”

<sup>65</sup> This does not contradict the doctrine of disfellowshipping. The goal of disfellowshipping a Christian is to bring the Christian to repentance, *2 Thess. 3:14-15*, not to punish sin.

<sup>66</sup> Now *1 Corinthians 5:12-13* does enjoin us to judge those within the church, meaning that we should use godly judgment to judge whether our brother is living such an immoral life as to jeopardize his salvation. This concept applies, of course, to unrepentant sin, where the Christian must change his conduct to retain his relationship with God. Thus, a spouse who continues in the same wicked behaviors that destroyed the first marriage may well be appropriately disfellowshipped by the church in an effort to rescue the second marriage. This is not punishment, but sound pastoring. See further on this subject in *The Holy Spirit & Revolutionary Grace*.

Christian, no longer accountable to God for his sin, if he is truly penitent. This is so even though he can't bring his victim back to life and can't undo the pain he's caused the victim's family. Allowing a murderer to be forgiven by the mere expedient of repentance hardly condones the murder – rather, it is the very definition of grace. And there is no imaginable reason that grace should be denied a penitent divorcee but granted a penitent murderer.

Thus, breaking a marriage is certainly not okay. But the cure is not to be found in having the church take on the role of avenger of sins. Rather, the cure is in doing a better job of pastoring the married to keep them married. If the marriage nonetheless breaks, we should recognize that the church has failed as well as the spouses. We will discuss this further later.

*10* The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry."

*11* Jesus replied, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. *12* For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it."

The disciples evidently got Jesus' point. Marriage is not for the faint of heart. It's a lifetime commitment. And Jesus makes it clear that marriage is not for everyone. At the time, the Pharisees taught that a man was not fully godly unless he was married. Jesus says that you don't have to marry to please him. Indeed, some may need to renounce getting married for the sake of God.

Recall Matthew 5:29-30 –

*29* If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. *30* And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

Jesus said this just before speaking on divorce in the Sermon on the Mount and just after warning about lust of the eye. Some people have personal issues that prevent them from making the commitment of marriage. They shouldn't marry. And the church shouldn't treat them as second class citizens. Rather, we should respect their decision, as it may well involve considerable discipline and personal sacrifice.

Now we need to review a critical point here. Many have contended that in the absence of fornication a couple *cannot* be divorced in the eyes of God. But note carefully the words of the Savior:

*6* "So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate. ... *9* I tell you that anyone who

divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

First, Jesus plainly teaches that it is *wrong* to separate a husband from a wife, but he doesn't say that it is *impossible*. Now the usual argument is that because divorce is impossible, the second marriage is no marriage at all in God's eyes, but adultery – meaning a sexual violation of the still-existing first marriage.

And yet Jesus says in verse 9 that the man who wrongly divorces his wife next “marries another woman.” Jesus didn't say that he “wants to marry,” “tries to marry,” or “fictitiously marries” the second woman – our Savior said that the guilty man “marries” his second wife. And if Jesus says they are married, they are married. And if they are married, then it would be sin to separate them – even though the second marriage was entered into sinfully.

Some have argued that the apostles' astonishment at Jesus' statements proves that Jesus taught something much more difficult to accept than the interpretation I make. But the Scriptures don't say the apostles were astonished, only that they thought it just might be better to remain single.

While my interpretation is much less harsh than the traditional interpretation, you have to compare it to what the rabbis taught to see why the apostles felt marriage to be a less attractive option because of what Jesus had said.

The rabbis taught that divorce was perfectly acceptable. Many taught that divorce could be had for any reason at all. All taught that there was no stigma associated with divorce or marrying a divorcee, unless she was divorced for adultery.

The rabbis also taught that a husband owed no sexual allegiance to his wife. A man could sleep around to his heart's content, and his wife would have no grounds to complain.

The rabbis approved polygamy.

Jesus taught that marriage is supposed to be a lifetime commitment, and it's a sin to put your wife away. Moreover, he especially criticized putting your wife away to marry another woman.

Jesus taught that adultery is a sin, even if committed by the man.

Jesus taught that the “two” become one, implicitly rejecting polygamy, which also means that men owe sexual fidelity to their wives.

The apostles grew up in a culture of disposable wives, with the freedom to look around for a second or third – imagine being allowed to date other women while married, and all of society condoning it! And if your wife grows a bit fat or sullen, you sign a document, toss her out the door, feel no remorse, and go looking for another.

Obviously, any man who'd grown up in First Century Palestine would be less than pleased to learn that God meant for him to be bound to his marriage covenant for life, and to just one woman, and to be true to her and only her. Many of our members struggle to make this commitment even today. It's no surprise the apostles struggled to accept the lesson 2,000 years ago.

Now, let's turn to the two other Gospel passages.

## Chapter 12. Mark 10

Mark 10 includes another version of the events recorded in Matthew 19.

*1* Jesus then left that place and went into the region of Judea and across the Jordan. Again crowds of people came to him, and as was his custom, he taught them. *2* Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

*3* “What did Moses command you?” he replied.

*4* They said, “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.”

*5* “It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,” Jesus replied.

*6* “But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’ *7* ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, *8* and the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one. *9* Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”

*10* When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. *11* He answered, “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. *12* And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.”

One significant distinction between this passage and Matthew 19 is the failure of Mark to include the exception for fornication. Some have concluded that the safe course is to take the more conservative rule – and so not even permit an exception for fornication. But this approach to scripture makes Matthew into an inaccurate reporter. None of the Gospel writers wrote everything that Jesus said – some editing was necessary for obvious reasons.

The reason there’s no exception for fornication in Mark’s account is that fornication wouldn’t even be appropriate as Mark quotes Jesus. In verses 11 and 12 of Mark’s account, Jesus simply declares it to be a sin to divorce in order to remarry. As we’ll explain later, the Greek implies that the divorce and remarriage are concurrent. Fornication is in fact not an exception to this rule.

In verse 9, Jesus simply declares that it’s wrong to break the marriage covenant. And, of course, fornication is not an exception to this rule – it’s an example of this rule.

Mark’s account is entirely in accord with the interpretation being offered in this book.

Now, it's not surprising that two different authors writing for different audiences chose to edit Jesus' words differently.

Matthew was written for Jewish readers,<sup>67</sup> while Mark was written for Gentiles.<sup>68</sup> The exception for fornication is mainly of interest to Jewish readers, because it's an interpretation of "indecent" in Deuteronomy 24, a point of little interest to Gentiles.

Once we understand Mark's account, we see why Paul didn't mention fornication in 1 Corinthians 7. Both Jesus and Paul agree that it is wrong for a spouse to violate the marriage covenant so as to end the marriage. Fornication is just one of many ways that could happen.

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<sup>67</sup> There is considerable but not conclusive evidence that Matthew was originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic and that we have a Greek translation. In any event, the internal evidence of Matthew certainly supports the view that it was intended primarily for a Jewish audience.

<sup>68</sup> Mark is generally considered to be based on the teachings of Peter as written down by John Mark, very late in Peter's ministry, when he was preaching largely to Gentiles.

## Chapter 13. Luke 16

The final Gospel passage regarding divorce is Luke 16:18 –

“Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

Edwards points out that the original Greek in this passage requires that the actions translated as “divorces” and “marries” must occur simultaneously with the verb “adultery” – eliminating any possibility that Jesus is suggesting that the adultery occurs after marriage – it occurs at the same time as the divorce and remarriage – not later.<sup>69</sup>

Why is the remarriage “adultery”? Because in this case the divorce was in order to remarry – the temptation to be with another woman led to the break up of the first marriage, making the second marriage a direct product of the sin that triggered the divorce. Hence, this passage is entirely consistent with our view of Matthew 19.

Thus, Jesus’ point is that it’s sin to divorce in order to marry someone else, as you are to be entirely loyal to your spouse as long as you’re married. You may not fall in love with someone while married to someone else. If you do, you may not divorce in order to be with your love.

Christianity is about serving other people. Getting your way at the cost of harming others is not in the cards. Repentance means submission to God and to others. God doesn’t promise you heaven on earth – or even a soul mate. Heaven comes later.

There are many New Testament passages where spouses are urged to make sacrifices for the sake of the Kingdom (*e.g.*, 1 Cor. 7:12-13; 1 Pet. 3:1), and one sacrifice is to love your spouse and not go looking for a better one. Of course, there are exceptions, but the exceptions aren’t about anything remotely selfish.

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<sup>69</sup> Edwards, pp. 150-151.



## Chapter 14. The historical argument

Given the difficulty of interpreting the New Testament's passages on divorce and remarriage, it would be useful to consider the views of the early church on this matter. Many Christians don't realize that we have many letters written by early Christian leaders, beginning in the late First Century, that express the views of the early church on a great many issues.

These uninspired materials are very useful, but must be studied with great caution. It would be very easy to assume that we are commanded to do or not do something because the early church so taught. But the early church's views on many issues changed from the New Testament views over the years, and some errors developed quite early. We should only take our doctrine from inspired writings, realizing that early Christians were just as capable as modern Christians of messing up.

Pat Harrell wrote the definitive work on this subject in *Divorce and Remarriage in the Early Church*.<sup>70</sup> The following quotations summarize some of his conclusions:

Under Roman law, as has been previously indicated, marriage was viewed as a private contract, and like other contracts, could be dissolved. ... Even when Roman law came under the control of Christian influence, as in the time of Constantine, no sweeping revisions were made in the matter of divorce.<sup>71</sup>

There is considerable evidence that many of the Ante-Nicene<sup>72</sup> Church considered divorce, regardless of grounds, as unacceptable for a Christian.

[According to the Synod of Elvira] if a woman who has been divorced by a catechumen has been married to another husband, she may nevertheless be admitted to baptism.<sup>73</sup>

[N]on-Christians were not held responsible for the Christian doctrine of marriage and divorce.<sup>74</sup>

The Ante-Nicene Church did not sit in judgment on the pre-Christian morals of the catechumens. ... There is nothing to indicate in the literature of the period that a divorced and remarried catechumen

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<sup>70</sup> (R. B. Sweet Co., Inc., 1967).

<sup>71</sup> p. 173.

<sup>72</sup> "Ante-Nicene" refers to Christians before the Council of Nicea, which took place during the reign of Constantine in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194. Early 4<sup>th</sup> century. "Catechumen" is a candidate for baptism.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 225.

was required to make any change in his marital status before being accepted for baptism. The silence on this matter in the Church Fathers is all the more significant since the church for a portion of this period was so influenced by rigorist tendencies that adultery, which consecutive marriage would amount to by the contemporary Christian standards, was so severely judged that it was deemed beyond the prerogative of the church to forgive.<sup>75</sup>

The one important point to note is that the early church, to the extent we have literature, did not allow a second marriage after divorce. This would certainly seem to support the traditional view. However, the same early Christian writers often also denied the right to remarry after a *death* of a spouse – plainly contrary to a number of passages of scripture. Additionally, for a considerable time the early church denied that *any* forgiveness of sin was possible after baptism. The “liberals” allowed one forgiveness after baptism. This is also flatly contrary to scripture. Moreover, many in the early church considered marriage wrong – the very attitude that led to celibacy in the Roman Catholic Church.

Therefore, the narrow attitude of the early church toward remarriage reflects not so much their interpretation of scripture as a cultural attitude opposing marriage in general and denying any forgiveness of sin. These views of the early church fathers cannot hold much sway.

But the fact that the church fathers allowed divorced and remarried couples to be baptized without having to put away their spouses or live in sexless marriages shows very strongly that – contrary to a very strict, unforgiving culture – the early church felt compelled not to impose its standards on those outside the church.

Is this the final answer? No. Does it help us see how unsupportable it is to deny baptism to the divorced and remarried? Unquestionably.

And I remind you, that if baptism cleanses a second marriage, those already in grace will be cleansed “much more” (Rom. 5:9-10).

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

## Chapter 15. The present tense argument

A common counter-argument to the foregoing interpretation of the Mark and Matthew passages is this. The phrases typically translated “commit adultery” are in fact in the present tense in Greek.<sup>76</sup> As many Bible students know, Greek has more verb tenses than English. In particular, in addition to the present tense, Greek has an “aorist” tense.

Generally speaking, the Greek present tense indicates continuous action while the aorist tense indicates action that occurs just one time at a particular point in time. Greek scholars refer to this as “punctiliar” action.

Now the argument is this. If “commit adultery” is in present tense (and it is), then surely Jesus was referring to the divorced person as “living in adultery.” A continuous verb tense indicates that the sin condemned by Jesus is not just the divorce or even the remarriage, it is also the continuing in the marriage. And if continuing in the marriage is sin, then we must insist that the marriage not be continued.

This argument overlooks a subtlety of the Greek language. The present-tense verbs are in the indicative mood. The indicative mood asserts a fact. However, in the indicative mood, present tense does not necessarily indicate continuous action. This is called the “Gnomic present.”

Edwards accumulates a number of authorities that leave this point beyond doubt.

The Greek [present indicative] covers both ideas in the indicative ... it is not wise therefore to define the present indicative as denoting “action in progress” ... .

On April 25, 1978, Harding Graduate School of Religion conducted a preachers’ forum on the subject of “Divorce and Remarriage.” In a question and answer session, the question was asked whether “commiteth adultery” in Matt. 19:9 is a continuous act or a one time sin. Raymond Kelcy, who teaches at Oklahoma Christian College, answered first, saying: “... But there is nothing in the verb, the present tense verb, to give anybody any consolation on either side of that question. If it gives anybody any support it would be the punctiliar. ... When asked to comment on the same question, and Kelcy’s handling of it, Floyd said: “I would agree with brother Kelcy’s

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<sup>76</sup> Present indicative passive or middle, to be precise. “Present” is the tense, as in English. “Indicative” is the mood. English doesn’t have much in the way of moods, except the subjunctive, which is nearly forgotten. “Passive,” “active,” and “middle” are the voice. Greek verbs thus have a tense, mood, and voice. English verbs have a tense and voice, and occasionally a mood.

handling of it, Floyd said: "I would agree with brother Kelcy. I think that is right."<sup>77</sup>

Dr. Floyd served and taught for many years at Lipscomb University as a professor of biblical languages and has long been recognized as among the Church of Christ's greatest scholars in New Testament Greek.

Hicks actually went to the trouble of counting the use of the present indicative in each of 719 occurrences in Matthew. Where a clear distinction could be made, 62.3% of the verbs indicated point time, not continuous time.<sup>78</sup>

Finally, as previously noted in our discussion of Matthew 5:31-32, the correct rule is that whether the verb is point in time or continuous must be taken from the context, especially the surrounding verbs. "Divorces" and "marries" are inevitably point in time verbs. They are, in fact, in the aorist tense, which does indicate point-in-time action. Therefore, "commits adultery" is also a point-in-time verb.

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<sup>77</sup> Clinton Hicks, *The Abuse of The Present Indicative*, a guide research paper presented to professor Richard Oster, Harding Graduate School of Religion, Memphis, TN, Harding School of Religion Library, p. 18, quoted by Edwards, p. 68.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

## Chapter 16. The earthly consequences argument

The next rebuttal argument correctly makes the point that sin has both heavenly and earthly consequences. If I kill a man, I may well repent and be forgiven by God. Nonetheless, I can confidently expect a prosecution and probable jail time if not the electric chair. Moreover, I can expect people to revile and fear me, and surely I will suffer a crippling sense of guilt and remorse. Thus, it is true that God's grace does not prevent the earthly consequences of my sin.

The example is often given of David, who repented and was forgiven of his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband, Uriah. Even though God forgave David, God punished David by taking the life of the child born of their adulterous union and by causing the death of David's three oldest sons (2 Sam. 11 *ff*).

Thus, it is argued, God can certainly forgive the sin of divorce, but the earthly consequences remain. In the case of divorce, it is argued, the earthly consequences include the penalty of being unable to remarry.

The problem with this reasoning is that it misapprehends the very true point about earthly consequences. When a man divorces his wife, there are indeed earthly consequences. Anyone who has ever been through a divorce knows that the burdens and difficulties last for the rest of your life – especially if children are involved. The earthly consequences are very real indeed.

But in no case does the presence of earthly consequences justify the church in acting like a court of law. Contrary to Catholic doctrine,<sup>79</sup> the church does not have authority to impose penalties on its members to punish sin. The church neither forgives nor punishes. Rather, we follow God's lead. If God forgives, we forgive. Simple enough.

Earthly consequences flow naturally from the evil of sin. These are not consequences that are imposed by laws. I mean, if we are to punish the divorced by denying them remarriage, what other sin are we to also punish? Why does the universal rule of earthly consequences only require the church to punish the divorced? Why aren't we required to punish the greedy, the lustful, the lazy, the un-evangelistic, the materialistic, etc.?

(Rom 12:19) Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.

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<sup>79</sup> Many of the traditional arguments, although made by Protestants, have a heavy Catholic flavor. This is not surprising when you realize that the traditional view of divorce and remarriage derives from medieval Catholicism. The doctrine was formalized in the Council of Trent (1545-63), but was accepted by much of the Catholic world for centuries earlier. It is ironic that we seize so tightly a doctrine that was added to the Catholic creed as part of the Counter-Reformation, by the same council that instituted the Inquisition.

## Chapter 17. The repentance argument

I've taught this material several times now, and one of the most frequent objections is what I call the repentance argument. It goes like this: to be forgiven, one must repent. To repent, one must give up the fruits of sin. At this point, reference is made to several examples in scriptures of sinners who had been thieves and upon being converted, gave back what they had stolen. From these examples, it is concluded that forgiveness cannot be had without giving up the fruits of sin. Therefore, one cannot be saved when in a wrongful marriage: that marriage must first be given up. That is, the wife or husband wrongly gained must be divorced. Logical?<sup>80</sup>

Now here are the problems with that argument:

1. Nowhere does scripture teach that one must give up the fruits of sin to be converted. We have several examples of those who gave up what they stole, but no such "law" is ever stated. And it's a good thing. What about the indigent person who stole and wishes to find conversion. What if he doesn't have any money to pay back? Does he have to earn back what he stole before being baptized?
2. There is a much more fundamental point here. The argument equates people with things. I really can give back what I stole, provided I still have it. But I can't give someone back his wife. I can divorce her, but I can't make her love or remarry her former husband. She is a person with free will, not a thing to be "stolen" or "returned." Most of us got over that kind of thinking during high school.
3. This people/thing distinction is evident from other examples. Suppose that I commit fornication with a woman and she becomes pregnant. How do I get forgiveness? By undoing the pregnancy, that is, inducing her to get an abortion? Surely we can agree that two wrongs don't make a right. I can't hurt other people to gain my salvation. And why is it that divorce is wrong? Because it hurts other people!

When you are willing to tell me to have an abortion to be forgiven of fornication, then you may tell me to be divorced to be forgiven of a wrongful earlier divorce.

Finally, recall the story of David and Bathsheba. God forgave David's sin and even made their second son, Solomon, king, clearly acknowledging Solomon's birth as legitimate. Indeed, Matthew emphasizes this point in giving Jesus' genealogy:

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<sup>80</sup> This argument is nearly foundational for those who insist on denying baptism to those divorced and remarried. See, for example, *Behold the Pattern* by Goebel Music.

David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife.<sup>81</sup>

Why didn't David have to give up Bathsheba as his wife if forgiveness requires giving up what was gained by sin?

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<sup>81</sup> Matthew 1:6.

## Chapter 18. Grace, Part II

Well, I decided I wasn't digressing. It's imperative that we give more thought to the relationship of grace to our teaching on divorce and remarriage. The two doctrines must fit together tightly.

Sometimes we unconsciously teach two different doctrines of grace. There's the generous version of grace and the not-so-generous version of grace. Let's call them big-grace and small-grace.

When we're sensitized to the evil of a particular sin, we tend to impose certain small-grace doctrines. We say that the sin can't be forgiven until it's been repented of. And repentance requires that the sin no longer be committed. We have to have eliminated the sin from our life. In fact, we have to even undo all the harm our sin caused, if we can. Hence, we're lost until repentance is utterly complete.

This small-grace allows us to treat those guilty of these sins as lost until they've changed. The sin at issue may be a marriage we believe to be adulterous or a divorce that was caused by sin or it may be holding to a doctrine we consider false, such as teaching error on divorce and remarriage. Until the false teacher stops spreading his error, he's not only wrong and sinning, he's lost. Until the adulterous marriage is ended or the couple stops having sexual relations or the original spouses reconcile and remarry, repentance hasn't occurred and they are lost in their sins.

On the other hand, when we consider other sins, we teach big-grace. I may not be as materialistic as many, but I'm certainly more materialistic than Jesus was. I'm not the evangelist that Jesus was. I'm not the Bible student that Jesus was. I don't love as Jesus loved. I don't live up to the standard of perfection and am therefore a sinner.

Fortunately, grace – big-grace – covers those sins. I've repented, in the sense of trying to do better, but I still haven't fully repented. I've not yet achieved the level of perfection that Jesus achieved, but I've made him Lord of my life and I'm keeping working at improving.

You see, the sins I'm guilty of are covered by big-grace but the sins you're guilty of – the ones that don't even tempt me – aren't forgiven until you've completely rid yourself of them. *You're* under small-grace.

But of course the true standard must be the same for all of us. The Bible tells us which grace is the true grace.

*Rom. 8:1* Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus ...

Many teach that there are lost Christians and saved Christians. Paul says that you cannot be in Christ Jesus and be condemned. All Christians are saved Christians. Grace must be pretty big.



Of course, it's possible to fall away and lose your salvation, but when that happens, you are no longer a Christian at all. You are no longer in Christ.

*Rom. 8:3-4* For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, *4* in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

Paul explains that we are incapable of fully repenting, that is, eliminating all sin from our lives. If we could, the Law would have been powerful enough to save us. But due to our sinful nature, we cannot completely stop sinning. Rather, the solution is for the “righteous requirements of the law” to be “fully met in us,” not because we are actually perfect, but because of the sacrifice of Jesus.

To qualify for this big-grace, we must live “according to the Spirit.” What does this mean?

*Rom. 8:13-14* For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, *14* because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

We either live “according to the sinful nature,” meaning rebel against the Lordship of Jesus, or we “put to death the misdeeds of the body.” In other words, we grow in our obedience. We never totally eliminate all misdeeds, but with God's help through the Spirit, we become more and more like Jesus.

The line is not between perfection and damnation or between doctrinal perfection and damnation. Rather, the line is between those who make Jesus Lord and so grow in their obedience and those who rebel against Jesus' Lordship.

Therefore, big-grace is the only grace there is – even, or *especially*, when we're talking about divorce. Obviously, if we divorce in rebellion against the will of God, counting on grace to cover our sins, we are in very real danger of losing our souls entirely. Rebellion is a very dangerous place to be (Heb. 10:26 *ff*).

But big-grace recognizes that we are imperfect people trying to do better – imperfectly. When people divorce, they do so because they're imperfect. The divorce may be caused by sin, or the divorce itself may be sin. But sin is forgivable, indeed, forgiven, for those who make Jesus Lord, even divorced people. Even people who sinned when they divorced. Grace still works. It's that big.

One of the remarkable things about discovering God's grace is that it changes who you are. It teaches you to extend grace to others in your personal relationships – especially at church. This is, after all, the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. It's just that the divorced seem to be last ones that we've allowed to receive God's grace.

## Chapter 19. Questions & answers

*Q. Doesn't your teaching encourage divorce? Wouldn't we better off with the traditional view?*

A. The same question may be phrased this way: Isn't it dangerous to teach grace? Wouldn't we be better off telling our members they'll go to hell if they sin? Doesn't grace encourage sin?

In short, the wisdom of God is that grace, combined with the influence of the indwelling Spirit, will do more to prevent sin than all the condemnation we can possibly visit on our members. Grace frees but grace also strengthens and encourages and helps us obey. I don't really understand it, but I've tried it both ways, and on the whole, the grace-filled Christians live far holier lives than their legalistic brothers.

*Q. Okay, but won't couples be less likely to divorce if they are taught the sinfulness of divorce?*

A. Absolutely. And in my own teaching I repeatedly make the point that violating the covenant of marriage is sin – and a very serious sin indeed.

I've known a few very shallow people who divorced casually, like cancelling a book club membership, but these people are uncommon, very self-centered, and very far removed from a Christian worldview. The overwhelming majority of people who undergo a divorce are not happy about it, tried to prevent it, and deeply regret that it ever happened. Of course, some married very, very poorly and celebrate their divorce! But most agree with God in hating divorce.

We can't manipulate people into staying married. Rather, we have to carefully balance the need to remove some people from marriages that are highly destructive – even life threatening – with the need encourage people to make every effort to make the marriage work. And when we find ourselves balancing such a thing, we always do best to speak in gracious, reconciling terms, not absolutist, authoritarian terms.

*Q. Just when has a husband or wife so violated the marriage covenant that the other spouse is "put away"?*

A. A marriage may be ended when a spouse "puts away" the other spouse, when the marriage vows are so violated as to constitute the moral equivalent of adultery, or fornication. Sometimes, the facts cause the marriage to be ended. Other times, they only justify ending the marriage.

For example, if a husband abandons his wife, leaving no forwarding address, the marriage has ended. However, if the husband cheats on his wife and wishes to repent, the wife may certainly choose to keep the marriage in effect or she may end it.

I would not presume to make an all-encompassing list of events that so violate the marriage covenant as to permit a divorce. The Bible does not speak in particulars, and so neither should I. However, the failure of a spouse to provide material support (food and clothing) or emotional support and sexual relations (marital rights) would certainly seem good grounds – if they are sufficiently severe.

Unlike the Pharisees of old who provided rules as to how often a husband and wife must have sex, depending on the man's occupation, I will not go that far. But 1 Corinthians 7, Genesis 2, and Exodus 21:10-11 all emphasize the importance of sexual relations in a marriage. Similarly, what constitutes adequate support is less than certain.

“Fornication” refers to more than adultery. If a wife attempts to seduce a man not her husband, she's guilty of “indecent” in the Deuteronomy 24 sense of the word, and Jesus would surely accuse her of adultery. Just so, any sexual relationship with someone other than a spouse is clearly included within the word.

Recall also that intentional shaming of a spouse was held by the rabbis to violate Exodus 21:10-11, and cruelty is as antithetical to marriage as anything could be. It's very opposite of the relationship commanded in Ephesians 5:22 *ff*. No one has to achieve the ideal marriage, but persistent efforts to hurt your spouse, emotionally or physically, is rebellion against both the marriage covenant and the Lordship of Jesus.

The point, you see, is not to seek the line at all. Rather, if the couple struggles with such issues, except in extreme cases, they don't have grounds for divorce immediately. They are obligated by love and their commitment to Jesus to seek outside help (think of Matthew 18:15 *ff* for the spirit of the rule) and to try to work through these problems. We are to be reconciling people. And most couples innately understand this and don't need to be told.

If a spouse is looking for a way out on a technicality, that spouse is in the same spiritual condition as those Jesus condemned in Matthew 5:31-32. You can't use God's rules to break God's heart.

Finally, we are never obligated to be stupid. We never tell a woman to return to a wife beater. We never subject children to the risk of sexual abuse or other harm. And we take steps to protect the helpless against the violence as quickly as we can. It is our business, and we don't agonize over the moral consequences of these things. There is never a reason to allow brutality that we can prevent.

*Q. What about a couple who don't violate the marriage covenant but who find they can't stand each other? Sometimes couples grow apart. How does this answer their needs?*

A. I'm no marriage counselor, but I have run into people who clearly made a mistake in marrying each other. Sometimes they love each other but can't stand to be around each other.

I think most couples who consider themselves incompatible are wrong. In fact, they're usually too lazy to work through their problems – but they could. Or they may just not realize that it's possible to mature and change to make things work. It really is true that many marriages fail purely from lack of motivation to make the sacrifice marriage requires.

But I'd hesitate to say that this is always right. There are people who just don't have the personality or skills or motivation to be successfully married. On the other hand, this is much less likely to be true among Christians. Christians have renounced the selfishness and self-indulgence that non-Christians may enjoy. Over time, Christians grow to be more and like Jesus and so more and more alike.

Nonetheless, even among mature Christians, there are people who should never be married, and some married before becoming Christians or while so young that their personalities were not yet fully developed.

I honestly don't know what to say to such a couple, other than to refer them for the best Christian counseling I can and to pray for them. If they divorce, they sin. If they live apart, they sin. Either sin is forgivable, but it's certainly wrong to recommend sin – especially as serious a sin as divorce – to a Christian. I don't think I could bear to have that on my conscience. And how would this couple repent of a sin that they undertook intentionally and gladly?

I'm open to suggestions. Perhaps the best way to look at it is this in light of these two observations:

First, Exodus 21:10-11 requires both material and emotional support by each spouse for the other, and allows divorce to resolve a failure to do so. It's hard to imagine a marriage between two Christians, where both have genuinely tried to make it work, with the support of their congregation, where they can't make a success of it. I've read books by counselors who claim astoundingly high success rates so long as both spouses are devout Christians and motivated to try. Therefore, in those marriages that remain miserable, there's just got to be a violation of Exodus 21:10-11.

Second, no one is entitled to the happiest possible marriage or to be married to the most compatible person they've ever met. We can set the bar too high, expecting to live "happily ever after" despite the sad reality that life's not perfect, and neither is your husband or wife. Contrary to the popular romantic myth, God has not promised each of us a "soul mate."

In fact, Paul and Peter both insist that Christians live with their non-Christian spouses. We fail to fully realize the significance of this as we live in a culture where Christianity is accepted, even applauded (sometimes). In First Century Rome, becoming a Christian was often a death sentence and certainly grounds for social ostracism. A mixed marriage is hard today. It would have been vastly more difficult then. And yet the apostles teach us to tough it out for the sake of our spouses. If a divorce is to happen, it must be initiated by the non-Christian. Christians are not allowed – even to be happy.

There are exceptions, but we must not let the exception swallow the rule. Sloppy thinking regarding this essential principle has caused many a preacher not to bother teaching God's will on divorce. It's easier to leave that to the state judges or the couple, and so we've often willfully ignored God's holy instructions on this subject. We've sometimes been so thrilled to escape the cruel legalism of the past that, as Alexander Campbell once said, in our anxiety to get "post haste out of Babylon," we've "run past Jerusalem"<sup>82</sup> – and all the way to Rome.

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<sup>82</sup> "To the Christian Messenger," *The Christian Baptist* (Oct. 1, 1827), written to Barton W. Stone: "I do not think it strange that, in running post haste out of Babylon, you should have, in some angles of your course, run past Jerusalem."

## Chapter 20. Conclusion

While we are left with some interesting unanswered questions, we are also able to reach some very firm conclusions.

1. God blesses marriages, so much so that Jesus says that God unifies the husband and wife.
2. Marriages are covenants, promises made by spouses to one another, promises that God holds the couple to. The covenant calls spouses to the mutual submission and love described in Ephesians 5, of which Christ is the perfect example.<sup>83</sup>
3. Breaking the covenant of marriage is a sin. This is so whether the covenant is being violated by a spouse or by someone else who tempts a spouse to violate the marriage.
4. The sin is fundamental – violating God’s plan for men and women established in Eden, before sin entered the world.
5. Going to court to file papers to have a marriage terminated is not necessarily sin. Rather, if the marriage has already been broken by the other spouse, there is no sin in having the government recognize as ended a marriage that has already ended.
6. There are many ways to violate a marriage covenant. Examples would include abandonment, abuse – physical or emotional, and sexual infidelity – either having sexual relations with another or refusing to have sexual relations with one’s spouse.
7. Obviously, these principles must be applied to one another just as we expect God to apply his law to us – with grace, mercy, and sensitivity to the state of one’s heart.
8. If one violates his marriage covenant in order to marry another, making the second marriage is sin.
9. However, continuing in a marriage is not adultery. Terminated marriages are really terminated, and there is no such thing as an adulterous marriage. It is not sin to have sexual relations with your spouse, even if the marriage was made in sin.
10. Because terminating a marriage is sin, terminating a second marriage is sin, even if entered into in sin.
11. However, terminating a marriage is not sin if the marriage is inherently sinful, that is, where not only the making of the marriage is sin, but so is the continuation in the

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<sup>83</sup> The author’s *Buried Talents* has a couple of discussions on the nature of the husband-wife relationship as described in the New Testament – pay particular attention to the chapter on Ephesians 5.

marriage – as in the case of incest<sup>84</sup> (or under the Law of Moses, an Israelite marrying a foreign wife).<sup>85</sup>

12. A second marriage by a divorced spouse is not sin, regardless of who was guilty of causing the failure of the first marriage, except as described in paragraph 8.
13. Therefore, there is no reason to require a divorced and remarried couple to separate as a condition to baptism.
14. Therefore, except as noted in paragraph 8, there is no reason to treat a divorced and remarried couple as second-class Christians or as necessarily in need of repentance.<sup>86</sup>
15. General principles of repentance, forgiveness, and grace apply to divorce as well as to any other subject. Thus, it may well be appropriate to counsel, rebuke, or even disfellowship a Christian who persists in a sin against his or her marriage.
16. This raises a practical problem, inherent in Christ's grace-based system, that some Christians may take advantage of available forgiveness and use it as a license to sin. We may wrongly consider some Christians forgiven when they really are not, but God will ultimately judge us all. Sinning in deliberate reliance on grace is a sure road to hellfire.<sup>87</sup>
17. A legal separation is as much a "putting away" as is a divorce. Both end the unity of the marriage.
18. Wives and husbands owe a duty dating back to the Creation to provide sexual gratification to the other. Violation of this duty is sin.
19. Marriage is an honored state, but remaining single (whether as a virgin, after a divorce, or as a widow or widower) in order to better serve the Lord is also honorable. Marriage is not for everyone. But it is wrong to require someone to remain single.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> 1 Cor. 5.

<sup>85</sup> Following the Catholic Church, we have traditionally called ending such a wrongful marriage an annulment.

<sup>86</sup> This is universally true. Being divorced and remarried does not disqualify one from being an elder or deacon. The phrase "husband of one wife" is best translated "one-woman man" and is satisfied unless the elder or deacon has been unfaithful to his wife. Even then, allowance must be made for repentance.

<sup>87</sup> Heb. 10:26 *ff.* Compare Heb. 12:15 with Deut. 29:18-21. This doctrine is discussed in detail in *The Holy Spirit and Revolutionary Grace*.

<sup>88</sup> *1 Tim. 4:1-3*: "The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. ... They forbid people to marry ..."

## Chapter 21. Examples

Even after all this discussion, I don't think I have all the answers. But let's review a few examples to see how this approach to the scriptures provides far more consistent, sensible, loving, and gracious results than the traditional view.

Suppose that a husband abandons his wife, leaving no forwarding address, through not fault of the wife. Under the traditional view, unless the wife can prove the husband guilty of fornication, the wife cannot file for divorce and, if she does, she may not remarry. However, under the view presented here, the sinner is the husband who violated the marriage covenant. He put away his wife when he left her. The wife is a victim, not a sinner. If she files for divorce, she is not sinning, because the marriage is already ended. She may remarry, and it's not sin.

Suppose two people meet and fall in love, marry, and have children. Suppose further that they are later converted to Christ. Finally, suppose that they had each been married and divorced before this marriage. Under the traditional view, the second marriage is adulterous and the couple should divorce as a condition to being saved. Under the view presented here, the first divorce may or may not have been sin, depending on other facts, but the second marriage should not be ended by divorce, for to do so would be sin. Two wrongs don't make a right. However, the converted couple must repent to be saved, and repentance would include putting behind them whatever sin led to their earlier divorces.

Suppose a wife, contrary to the teaching of 1 Corinthians 7, refuses to have sexual relations with her husband, and her husband, after trying all options to change her mind, files papers with the courts and obtains a divorce. Under the traditional view, the husband sins by obtaining a divorce and neither spouse may remarry. Under the view presented here, the wife has substantially violated her marriage covenant, she has put away her husband, and she is the one who is the sinner. The filing of the divorce petition by the husband does not end the marriage – the wife's refusal to honor her marriage vows already did. He may remarry. She may also remarry, but the church should call her to repentance so that she does not repeat the sin that led to the termination of the first marriage.

Suppose a husband routinely beats his wife. She has attempted to remedy the problem by seeking therapy, but he refuses to participate. The elders, the preacher, and their friends have all tried and failed to change his behavior. To preserve her health, if not her life, she files for divorce and the divorce is granted. Under the traditional view, she has sinned by obtaining a divorce on grounds other than fornication and may not remarry. However, the traditionalist would allow her to obtain a legal decree of separation. Under the view urged here, he ended the marriage by his outrageous violations of the marriage covenant. He has sinned in so doing. However, the wife did not sin in obtaining a legal decree of divorce, and she may remarry. He may remarry as well, but his violent behavior is sinful and should be rebuked. The church may properly disfellowship him for his abusive conduct.



Suppose a wife and husband are in a healthy marriage. The wife grows bored with her domestic life and so files for a legal decree of separation. Her religious beliefs prohibit her from seeking a divorce, but she wishes to obtain alimony while living apart from her husband. Under the traditional view, no divorce has occurred and the husband has no grounds for a divorce so long as she has no adulterous sexual relations. Under the view urged here, she has violated the marriage covenant, not only 1 Corinthians 7's teachings on sexual fulfillment in marriage but also Paul's teachings on submission, Moses' teachings on being united, and Exodus 21:10-11. The legal separation has effectively put her husband away, and the husband would not sin by asking a court to decree the marriage ended. He may remarry. She should be called on to repent of her un-submissive, selfish behavior, but may remarry.

Suppose a married couple divorces by mutual agreement, neither being guilty of fornication. One spouse later remarries. Under the traditional view, the remarried spouse has entered into an adulterous marriage and must either divorce the second spouse or else live in a sexless "marriage." Because the remarried spouse has now committed fornication in violation of the first marriage, the other spouse is free to treat the first marriage as ended in God's eyes, and thus may remarry. Under the view urged here, it is likely that both spouses sinned in ending their first marriage (but these things are very hard to judge – who really knows what went on in that first marriage?) However, under Paul's clear teaching on the subject, either spouse may remarry. On the other hand, either or both spouses likely bring to a second marriage much of the same immaturity or sin that caused the first marriage to fail, and so it is urgent that the church intervenes to counsel the new couple on how to build a Christian marriage that will last.

Suppose that a married man and an unmarried woman decide that they wish to marry. To accomplish this, of course, the married man must divorce his wife, who has been a faithful and entirely innocent wife. The husband and the unmarried woman have no sexual relations. Under the traditional view, the divorce is not scriptural (that is, not for fornication), and so neither the husband nor the wife may remarry. If the husband nonetheless remarries, his marriage is adulterous. Some (but not all) would agree that upon the second marriage, the first wife is free to remarry, the husband having now become guilty of fornication. The second marriage is not recognized by God, and so the couple should be compelled either to divorce or to live together in a sexless relationship. Under the view urged here, the divorce is, of course, sin. Indeed, it is adultery. Clearly, the first wife is free to remarry. However, not only is the husband guilty of a wrongful divorce, so is his new wife. Both have committed adultery against the first wife, as well as the children, if any. If the husband, after the divorce and before the second wedding, intends to remarry, it would be appropriate for the church to use every effort to compel the husband not to remarry but to return to his first wife. If the church fails, and the husband marries, he and his new wife should be treated as any other members of the church who sin and refuse to repent.<sup>89</sup> However, the first marriage is broken, and the

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<sup>89</sup> 2 Tim. 4:2b comes to mind: "Correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction." So do the passages on disfellowshipping, primarily 1 Cor. 5 and 2 Thess. 3:1-15. I also note the very real danger of a willful sinner becoming so hard-hearted that he can no longer repent. See, for [continued following page]

husband and his new wife should not be compelled to sin again by breaking another marriage.

So what would repentance look like in this case? Breaking new vows would hardly be repentance from vow breaking. But recognizing the wrongfulness of their prior conduct and genuinely regretting their prior conduct would be a very good start. Apologizing to the divorced spouse would be a step. Even further down the road would be putting to death the bad attitudes and misconduct that led to the first divorce. Another step would be working very hard to make the second marriage work. I would also add that a penitent heart would be evidenced by not using the divorce as a means for retaliation against the first spouse, fully honoring child support and alimony obligations, and working to be a good parent to the children of the first marriage. Now none of this is a cure for the divorce, but repentance doesn't require a cure, only doing the best you can with the mess you've made of your life – and other people's lives. And I'd add that going through the motions of doing these things without a true change of heart is not repentance.

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example, 1 Tim. 4:2 (referring to those whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron) and Heb. 6:4-6 (warning that for some it will be impossible to repent). See more on the doctrine of repentance in the author's *The Holy Spirit and Revolutionary Grace*. However, while it is possible that the couple cannot be brought to repentance, we cannot assume that to be the case and dismiss the couple as beyond salvation.

This conclusion ultimately derives from Luke 17:3-5: "So watch yourselves. 'If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, "I repent," forgive him.' The apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith!'"

## Chapter 22. Appendix 1 – Covenant marriage laws

Given the unbelievably high rate of divorce in today's society, it's hardly surprising that many Christians seek to deal with the problem legislatively. After all, divorce can be devastating to children and places a huge burden on society. The courts are overwhelmed with "domestic relations" cases.

Louisiana, Arizona, and Arkansas have responded to this very real crisis with new covenant marriage laws under which a couple may opt for a marriage in which divorce is more difficult to obtain. The Louisiana statute requires a couple to undergo pre-marital counseling before tying the knot and then significantly limits their ability to divorce. Divorce must be due to fault: adultery, conviction of a felony, abandonment for a year, physical or sexual abuse, living separately for two years, or living separately for one year after a court-declared legal separation (18 months if there are children).

Interestingly, couples who are already married may "upgrade" their marriage to a covenant marriage by a simple process. Most states allow a couple to marry or "upgrade" under their state law without being residents, so that anyone may travel to any of these states and obtain, or upgrade to, a covenant marriage. On the other hand, divorce is generally governed by the law of residence, so that a couple who moves from a covenant-marriage state may well find themselves subject to no-fault divorce laws.

It's also less than clear what happens when a covenant-marriage couple moves from one covenant-marriage state to another. Does Louisiana treat an Arkansas covenant marriage as a Louisiana covenant marriage? Or do the courts enforce Arkansas law? Or does the couple find themselves subject to the "default" no-fault divorce rules?

Surprisingly enough, the Alabama legislature has made no serious effort to re-write Alabama's no-fault divorce laws. Indeed, although laws have been introduced in many states, none has adopted a covenant-marriage law since 2003.

My own view is that such laws are of questionable value and should be very, very thoughtfully written – if at all. After all, there's considerable reason to be very worried about these laws.

A legal separation forces a family to maintain two households, to pay two rents and two utilities. This is hard for even those in the middle class. It can be devastating for the poor.

If a woman is forced to live apart from a violent man but denied remarriage for from one to two years, the state will have imposed severe poverty on her – and tempted her to live with a man without the benefit of marriage. The fact is that laws written by the middle class and wealthy often fail to anticipate the needs of those of different economic or ethnic circumstances.

Now, the obvious objection is that covenant marriage is voluntary. But in a state with a covenant marriage option, many a preacher will insist his congregants sign up for a covenant marriage, believing this to be God's will – or at least closer to his will than a standard marriage that allows a no-fault divorce. Moreover, young couples rarely understand the cost of a long legal separation as a condition to a divorce.

However, my major concern with covenant marriage is simply this: Christians *already* have covenant marriages. They are already bound by God's law and, for a Christian, that should be quite enough to honor God's will. In other words, Christians are called to seek and save the lost and to do works of love and compassion for those in need. We aren't called to gain worldly power and compel the lost (or other Christians) to obey God's will contrary to their own wishes. Rather, we are bring people to Jesus to be converted and regenerated, so they will willingly obey the will of God.

Christians are already subject to God's will regarding marriage. If we obey God out of fear of the state rather than fear of God, God is not honored.

Moreover, Christians are not called to compel non-Christians to obey God's will – except through conversion. And we have no business telling non-Christians how to live (1 Corinthians 5:12-13 is quite plain). In fact, it would be horribly unfair for Christians to demand that the lost, who don't have the advantage of biblical instruction or the strengthening of the Holy Spirit or the support of the community of believers, to make the same good marriages we expect of Christians. To use the legislature to impose standards of behavior on the lost that even Christians struggle to meet is far outside of our calling and purpose on earth.

The solution to divorce won't be found in the state capitol. It will be found in the church being the church God called it to be and in Christians living as Christians are called to live. There are no shortcuts.

## Chapter 23. Appendix 2 – Pastoral implications

If the state legislature can't solve our divorce problem, what can? Plainly, Jesus is the answer, and regarding divorce, I believe Jesus works foremost through his church. The church has to see divorce as a church problem and not merely a private problem for couples to wrestle with, perhaps with the help of counselors. Rather, we must share one another's burdens and work together to build a community where marriages are strong and resist divorce.

### A. Divorce prevention

#### i. Preaching

The first goal has to be divorce prevention. How do we build strong marriages – so strong that they last a lifetime? I suppose I'm a little old-fashioned, but I think it all starts with preaching.

We cannot and should not try to “guilt” people into staying in bad marriages. However, we need our members to know that God really does hate divorce and really does condemn violations of the marriage covenant. Excellent, positive, biblical preaching on sex and marriage can help create an atmosphere that makes divorce less likely.

#### a) Premarital sex

I suppose we have to begin with premarital sex. As Buddy Bell teaches, Satan will do everything in his power to get a couple to have sex *before* marriage and to keep a couple from having sex *after* marriage.<sup>90</sup> Husbands and wives are more likely to be faithful to their spouses if they are abstinent before marriage. If we don't have the discipline to control our sexual impulses when single, we just may have trouble changing our ways once we're married.

Unfortunately, many of our preachers and churches have unconsciously bought into the popular culture's notion that premarital sex is inevitable, and so there's just no benefit in making young people feel guilty about premarital sex. Our efforts, we feel, are better spent working with the married.

However, fidelity in marriage is part of a larger Christian perspective in which we see sex as proper only within a marriage. If we don't condemn premarital sex, we unintentionally remove some of the stigma of extramarital sex. After all, if men and women can't be expected to control themselves when single, how can we expect them to control themselves when married? It's really all the same.

As C. S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*,

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<sup>90</sup> Sermon delivered to the University Church of Christ, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, June 2006.

We may, indeed, be sure that perfect chastity – like perfect charity – will not be attained by any merely human efforts. You must ask for God’s help. Even when you have done so, it may seem to you for a long time that no help, or less help than you need, is being given. Never mind. After each failure, ask forgiveness, pick yourself up, and try again. Very often what God first helps us towards is not the virtue itself but just this power of always trying again. For however important chastity (or courage, or truthfulness, or any other virtue) may be, this process trains us in habits of the soul which are more important still. It cures our illusions about ourselves and teaches us to depend on God.

Spouses sometimes find themselves forced to control their sexual urges because their spouse is unavailable due to travel, long work shifts, pregnancy, disease, small children, and such. Sometimes the husband and wife could find more time for each other than they do, but sometimes they just need to control themselves. It helps if they’ve had practice. The myth that we can’t control our sexual selves can’t be allowed in the church, and dismissing this lie means teaching abstinence to our single members.

Now, this is not about what the public schools should teach. It’s about what the church and parents should teach. Our children should learn their morality from their parents and their church home. If our parents and churches will do their jobs, then we’ll be much less concerned about what our children learn at school.

I should add that we must also take on the modern practice of couples living together without the benefit of marriage. This is no longer condemned by society, and the church seems awfully out of step in even speaking on the subject, but premarital sex is wrong, and merely living together does not solve the problem.

In addition to Lewis’s sublime *Mere Christianity*, I would commend to our preachers the excellent *The Case for Marriage*<sup>91</sup> as a resource in preaching on marriage, living together, and such.

## **b) Emotional affairs**

We need our husbands and wives to know how affairs begin and how to avoid them. For example, nowadays most affairs begin at the workplace when a man and woman become too emotionally attached. The term is “emotional affair,” which doesn’t mean passionate sex. Rather, it refers to a male-female relationship that is emotional rather than sexual. However, these affairs often become sexual.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Linda J. Waite & Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially* (New York: Broadway Books, 2000).

<sup>92</sup> The leading work might be Shirley P. Glass, *Not “Just Friends”: Rebuilding Trust & Recovering Your Sanity After Infidelity* (New York: Free Press, 2003). Chapters 1 and 2 lay out the emotional pathway along which emotional affairs begin and turn into sexual affairs.

Jesus too says that the sin begins long before the sex. Rather, when a man or woman seeks emotional support and emotional intimacy with someone other than his or her spouse, the journey to a sexual affair has begun. As dangerous as emotional affairs are to Christian marriage, we never preach on the subject, as biblical as it would be. Our traditional teaching on divorce has been so centered on the sex act that our members can easily rationalize that any relationship short of sex must be okay.

### **c) Pornography**

Just so, pornography is a sin against a marriage. It's not just because it involves lust. Rather, pornography moves a man's urge for sexual gratification away from his wife, and so is a lack of fidelity. We need to teach against pornography, but then we also need to teach wives how to be satisfying lovers for their husbands. While we can fairly ask our men not to be unreasonably demanding, the fact is that we live in a highly sexualized age where men are constantly being told they are entitled to incredible sex lives. Their wives need to honor Moses' and Paul's teaching and lovingly fulfill their husband's sexual needs.

And all this needs to come from the pulpit. Send the kids to children's church or whatever it takes – but in a sexualized age, the preacher has to address these issues regularly. In a typical Church of Christ, 30% of the membership never attends class. Moreover, we have a sermon-centered culture, and nothing is *really* important to us unless it's important enough to be preached.

Some congregations may be shocked to hear sexual themes resound from the pulpit, but most members will wonder why it's taken the preacher so long, and many spouses, fathers, and mothers will be very, very thankful for righteous teaching on marital fidelity.

### **ii. Modesty**

Which leads me to bring up modesty. If it's a sin for a man to lust, it's a sin for a woman to tempt the man to lust. We have to teach our women and girls to sacrifice fashion for the sake of God and protecting marriages.

Women see clothing as “cute” and dress to please one another. Men see clothes as indicating sexual availability. When a girl wears a camisole as a blouse, she thinks she's being fashionable. Her mother thinks she's darling. A man thinks she's wearing bedroom clothing to advertise her sexuality. Men don't read fashion magazines, but they know lingerie when they see it – and they know where lingerie is supposed to be worn.

Just so, when a woman reveals her breasts with a low-cut blouse, or wears low-riding jeans or skin tight pants, men see her as trying to be sexy. Some women in fact dress this way seeking to attract men. Others are just naïve. Either way, such clothing choices are inappropriate – even sinful – for Christians and their daughters.

Some women complain that it's the "man's problem," and they shouldn't be denied the right to wear cute clothes because men have dirty minds. It *is* the man's problem. And Jesus told him to gouge his eyes if he has to, to avoid lust. But God also commands our women to be modest – to protect our men from lust – and so they don't have to blind themselves!

(1 Tim. 2:9-10) I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.

Now, notice this carefully: the requirement to dress modestly is not about church buildings. It's 24/7. It applies *especially* in the workplace, because this is where most affairs begin.

Girls should wear the same swimwear at Bible camp that they wear at the club or backyard pool or the beach. They are Christians in all those places, and they reveal their love or disrespect for their Lord by what they wear wherever they are.

This is the rule: If your husband says the clothes are immodest, then your daughter is immodest, even if the wife disagrees. She can't think like a man.

(Just so, I tell men that if their sisters or mothers say their girlfriend is no good, she really is no good, no matter what you or your dad thinks. Women understand women as no man possibly could. And men understand men as no woman possibly could.)

Men refer to an attractive woman as a "pretty young thing" or as having a "great rack." This sort of terminology de-personalizes the woman, making her into something to be used rather than a daughter of God, made in his image. Why are we raising our daughters to encourage this kind of thinking?

In the 1960's, one element of feminism was for women to escape being thought of as merely "sex objects." Women are now so liberated that they can be more of a sex object than we ever imagined possible 40 years ago – and celebrate the "right"! Things have turned around 180 degrees. We really need to return to the notion that women don't want to be judged by their bodies. I don't mean that women need to be purposefully unattractive. Not 20 years out of fashion. They just need to be modest.

Now, I'm well aware of how important clothes to the self-esteem of young women. And I know how severely girls judge other girls based on such superficialities. But we are called to be different – and radically so. We need to consciously teach our daughters to refuse to judge others based on their clothing – and even to defend those who are so judged. And we need to teach all our members what it really means to be a Christian –

*1 Pet. 3:14* But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened."



Peter teaches that we are to live as aliens and strangers in the world – not like everyone else – and to expect criticism for doing good. When a Christian girl dresses modestly when all the other girls dress immodestly, she'll be criticized, and when she defends her decision, she'll be scorned. Doing right when others are doing wrong makes them feel guilty.

*1 Pet. 4:16* However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.

*Matt. 5:11-12* "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. *12* Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Jesus and Peter assume that we'll be persecuted simply for being Jesus' followers. We cannot completely shield our children from this and still raise them as Christians. No one wishes for persecution, but given a choice between dressing immodestly or being laughed at, we have no choice but to suffer from the laughter.

*1 Pet. 2:11-12* Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. *12* Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

But as Peter says, even when people speak ill of us, the result is to bring glory to God – better yet, to even convert some of those who see our courage and good deeds.

Now, women can be tempting to men even if they're quite modest. Men are quite capable of thinking sexually without lewd or revealing clothing. But that really is the man's problem. It becomes the woman's problem when she signals that his sexual interest just might be reciprocated.

There's just so much wrong with sending your daughter out of the house signaling every man she meets that she's sexually available ... Mothers – just ponder that thought for a while. Is that really how you want your daughter thought of? We need to get over the notion that it's "cute" to be sexy or prematurely sexualized. It's bad for our children – boys and girls. It's bad for society. And it's against God's will.

One more point: I recall hearing a woman talking about urging her private school to have a dance for 5<sup>th</sup> grade boys and girls. Her friend said they were too young (and their school had agreed). She replied, "But they're just *so cute!*" Why do we want to sexualize our children at younger and younger ages? What price justifies doing this to our children?

Our children already have to cope with far too many years between puberty and getting married. When we accelerate their sexual awakening, we only lengthen the time that they have to be abstinent. They'll learn about the opposite sex plenty too soon. We

need to avoid the temptation to have our middle school children date and go to dances. There will be plenty of time for that later.

### **iii. Premarital counseling**

In my hometown, many congregations of many denominations have gotten together and agreed to refuse to do a “church” wedding unless the couple agrees to premarital counseling. Excellent! The churches have agreed on a standard six-lesson course, and we’ve been very pleased with the instruction and results.

In my congregation, our ministers have occasionally persuaded couples not to marry, telling them they too immature or incompatible. Excellent! There’s no better time to end a bad marriage than before it happens. It’s not very romantic, and some preachers don’t have the courage to do this, but it can be the most compassionate possible thing to do.

Obviously, couples can easily avoid the counseling by going to the courthouse and having a civil ceremony or by going out of town, but the vast majority of couples elect to do the counseling, and it’s a very good thing. Moreover, as more and more communities adopt this policy, couples begin to expect to be counseled. It’s been an easy transition for our young people.

Also, the extensive counseling helps to tie couples to the church, building relationships with the preacher, elders, or older couples who do the teaching. Many people want to use the building because it’s pretty. Now some discover the beauty of Jesus while they’re in the building.

### **iv. Marriage training**

But a six-week counseling course is not nearly enough. Engaged couples have this golden glow that often keeps them from seeing the hard work and commitment a good marriage requires. A congregation must teach classes on marriage over and over again.

There are now excellent video series as well as countless books that provide very scriptural, wise counsel on how to maintain and strengthen a marriage. Young couples especially need to hear this teaching repeatedly. The classes should be taught by older couples whose lives evidence the success of the instruction.

We often ask a few older couples to sit in on classes for newlyweds to serve as “resource couples” to help the teacher bring the lessons home. Often, the most valuable teaching takes place in the hallway or on the phone after class when a struggling couple talks through concerns with an older couple.

There’s just no substitute for older men and women coaching younger men and women. The Tuesday ladies class, small groups, a men’s ministry, and many other settings should all be “safe places” where a young wife or husband can ask for help on building a marriage, in confidence and without fear of embarrassment.

Today's society has left many if not most young men and women to grow up in broken homes and in dysfunctional families. At least half those growing up today have never experienced a nuclear family first hand. Our young couples can be astonishingly clueless about how to live as husband and wife. There is no lesson too basic or too obvious to teach.

**v. Parenting training**

Closely related to marriage training is parenting training. Children can be hard on a marriage, and this is especially so when the parents disagree about how to raise the children – or are just inept at it. Many a marriage has failed because of strains caused by pregnancy and child rearing. Some of us forget (repress, really) the incredibly physical and emotional strain of having a baby in the house.

Again, half or more of our families grew up in broken homes, and many have never seen excellent parenting first hand. What was obvious to my parents' generation has been entirely forgotten by many of those recently married.

We need for our young couples to learn how to parent from older couples as well as books and videos. And the lessons have to be frequently repeated.

**vi. Financial training**

Another major strain on marriages is money. It is the biggest problem many of our couples face. Again, with so many people coming up in broken homes, they just haven't been taught how to handle money, especially how to do so as a couple. Moreover, society constantly bombards us all with enticements to borrow and spend.

Our congregation is blessed in that a number of our members who are accountants have put together a counseling service whereby couples may, for no cost, have an expert work with them one on one to budget and responsibly handle money. And the elders have had to make many referrals to these godly advisers.

One of these accountants taught a Wednesday night course on financial management. His class outgrew our largest classroom and has had to move to a 300-seat auditorium – and all this is by word of mouth!

The fact is that many young people coming out of college today have grown up without parents – or woefully insufficient parenting. And it's become the church's job to bear one another's burdens by teaching lessons that were once passed down from generation to generation in the home. It's a burden but also an opportunity. If the churches take on this task, they'll be richly rewarded by the lifelong loyalty of grateful couples.

**vii. Support structures**

The healthy congregation must have instruction intertwined with mechanisms that facilitate the forming of relationships with, well, surrogate parents. Young couples have

to feel free to ask for help on the most basic and most intimate matters. This means they need to know older couples well enough to feel free to ask questions, and older couples have to make themselves available to be known and asked.

Some churches have trained couples as marriage coaches and made their names available to the congregation. Excellent! We need marriage, parenting, and financial coaches. What greater gift to give than a strong and lasting marriage?

#### **viii. Permission giving**

In part, this requires that the ministers and elders create a culture within the congregation where this can happen. The church needs to be told that the older members are glad to be called at home or invited to lunch or visited to offer loving counsel. We older members have to give *express permission* to ask for help. After all, we live in a world where people are supposed to mind their own business.

But we need to teach our young couples to give permission, too. They should be willing to be corrected, lovingly, by an older couple when they are acting badly. If a husband speaks rudely about his wife in front of others, an older member should feel free to pull him aside and explain how very wrong that is. If a mother refuses to discipline her children, she should be glad to have an older woman gently instruct her better.

It's entirely contrary to our culture to invade someone else's "space" and tell them how to raise their kids or treat their spouses. But in the Kingdom of Heaven, things are different. We are family – more so than our physical families, and our older members should be privileged to pass along lessons to our younger brothers and sisters.

Of course, some of our older members will give perfectly awful advice, and some will be too nosy. This has always been true, and always will be. We nonetheless need to ask our young members for permission to teach them, and apologize in advance for those times when we judge too quickly or speak on incomplete information. If we love each other, we'll work through all that.

#### **B. Divorce recovery**

If we do all these things, we'll have happier marriages, better children, and fewer divorces. But so long as we're evangelizing the world, we'll always have men and women struggling with divorce.

For too long, we've figured that since divorce is wrong, our teaching stops with "don't divorce." Why teach about how to deal with divorce when no one is supposed to be divorced? Well, that attitude is now pretty naïve, but old habits are hard to break. After all, even if the church were filled with perfect people, our new converts would bring with them the pain and struggles that divorce brings.

### **i. How to treat your ex**

Let's start with some basics. We have to teach our ex-husbands and ex-wives how to treat their exes. All too often, Christians seek vengeance against their former spouses. We often struggle to forgive a former spouse who has sinned against us. We carry grudges and resentments, and all this makes us miserable. Worse yet, we play games with the children, using them to punish our former spouses.

I've never heard a sermon against former-spouse abuse, but such behavior should be condemned in the strongest terms. As painful and agonizing as divorce can be, we still have to be Christians and live the Sermon on the Mount. It's hard to turn the other cheek and forgive our enemies, but it's the hard cases that prove whether we've really repented.

And, yes, this is a proper subject for sermons and classes. Every one of our members has been touched by divorce directly or indirectly. The discipline it takes to deal lovingly with a former spouse can't be taught in a day. Rather, we need to preach on this one so much that it becomes a mark of Christianity – it's the Christians who settle their divorce cases and work out their differences and never, ever have to invoke the civil courts to make them behave like, well, Christians.

I would go so far as to say that we err when we take our domestic disputes to the courts. As Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 6, we should be able to work those things out outside of court. Now, the only way to be divorced is through the civil courts, but the property settlement, alimony, and child custody should be handled by the former spouses, and if they can't work it out, by Christian mediators within the church. Two Christians should never have to try the question of custody or property settlement. If they can't agree, a system of Christian mediators and arbitrators should be available to resolve these things consistent with Christian values.

Imagine the testimony of the power of Jesus to change hearts if we could act like Christians even when going through a divorce! Imagine what the world would think if Christians could work out their differences outside the court system?

Now, of course, some church attenders aren't very good Christians, and sometimes a Christian will have to get a restraining order or compel the payment of child support through the courts. But when this happens, the church should feel shame that one of its members will only do what's right when ordered to do so by the government. I mean, why isn't God's command enough incentive?

Well, one reason God's command isn't enough is that we've never really taught that God cares about such things. Divorce is so wrong that we haven't formed a morality of divorce. We need one.

### **ii. Divorce recovery**

None of this is to belittle the extraordinary emotional toll that divorce can bring. Divorce can be as emotionally devastating as the death of a spouse – even worse. After all, dead spouses don't try to take away your visitation rights and bankrupt you with

unreasonable demands for alimony! Christians need to be there to support and encourage those who are going through this ordeal.

Sadly, we are often too quick to judge and condemn (it's just *so* much easier!), when the real need is for sympathy and love. Of course, sometimes condemnation is very appropriate, but typically this will not be the case. Most people don't put themselves through a divorce lightly.

Some congregations have excellent divorce recovery programs where couples provide emotional support for those going through the ordeal. These are great and very necessary. We need more.

### **iii. Reconciliation**

Paul urges the newly divorced to seek reconciliation. This isn't always possible or even desirable, of course. Some men, for example, are too violent or too selfish to be married. When a woman divorces an abusive husband, we'd be very foolish to insist that she return to a situation that threatens her life.

On the other hand, optimally, following a divorce the couple should receive support, encouragement, and also counseling. Why did the first marriage fail? How can we do a better job next time? How do I avoid marrying a brutal, cruel man again?

Done right, sometimes a couple works through enough of their issues after divorce that they can happily reconcile. After all, if they wish to remarry successfully, they likely need to work through some relationship problems, and having done so, may well be able to make the old marriage work.

Getting over the divorce takes time. Men especially often marry on the rebound, as many men cannot bear to be without a wife. As a result, many men have leapt into perfect awful marriages shortly after a divorce (or a death). Here's the rule: if your female friends or sisters say she not right for you, she's not right for you. Get a second opinion if you want, but never ignore a woman's advice about another woman.

The time following a divorce can be a time of profitable introspection and perhaps personal improvement. It's a terrible time to go looking for a new spouse.

### **iv. Remarriage**

Now, as we've discussed at great length, remarriage after a divorce is not normally a sin. It may be very unwise, if undertaken too quickly. But if a divorcee wants to remarry, the church should be willing to bless the marriage. However, we don't need to be naïve. The couple should go through premarital counseling. And the counseling should honestly confront the reasons for the previous divorces and try to make certain those causes won't recur.

Of course, many spouses are entirely innocent and had nothing to do with causing the divorce. We can't blame the victim. But we can certainly be sure we've asked and

encouraged an honest appraisal of how this marriage is going to go better than the first one.

When the spouse in fact did contribute to the first divorce, we need to talk about repentance and God's will for marriage. Mainly, we need to ask for repentance from covenant breaking and ask that spouse to confess the sin and pledge to turn away from it. The other spouse needs to be aware of the sin that led to the first divorce. Good relationships are built on honesty.

With honest, heartfelt confession and repentance, the church should honor and accept the new marriage as God-approved. There should be no hesitation to grant a "church" wedding and to honor the couple as any other. We should celebrate the power of God's grace to forgive, cleanse the former sin, and give a fresh start.

Instone-Brewer goes so far as to recommend a ceremony whereby the divorcee formally confesses and repents, pledging to honor the new marriage covenant.<sup>93</sup> I imagine that in some congregations, where ritual plays a larger role than in the Churches of Christ, this would be an excellent proposal. But the Churches of Christ are so low-church that we really wouldn't know how to respond to such a ritual. And, of course, not all divorcees are guilty of anything, and so not all need to be called on to repent. Therefore, this strikes me as something better handled in premarital counseling.

Of course, this means the congregation won't get to see the divorcee confess sin, nor do they need to. Rather, we should have enough confidence in our leadership to know that if the church has approved the marriage, the divorcee has satisfied the leadership of his or her repentance, if needed.

### **C. Conclusion**

Divorce is a very, very serious matter. Broken marriages injure not only the spouses but also the children, the congregation, and the community. The church therefore is morally compelled to work diligently to prevent divorce, or better yet, the problems that lead to divorce.

Older church members grew up in an age when divorce was rare and most parents had a pretty good sense of how to parent and most spouses knew how to be good spouses. We sometimes fail to realize how very much has been lost in the last two or three generations, as children have grown up in broken homes and never learned skills that were once commonplace.

Fortunately, God has a solution, and the solution is a church that is the church as God has called it to be. The church must be a community that lives by God's values in contrast to the world's. We have to fearlessly encourage one another to live better while tirelessly supporting one another as we struggle to make this happen.

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<sup>93</sup> p. 300 *ff.*

When our fellow Christians slip and fall, we need to bend over and lift them up, dust them off, heal their wounds, and walk with them as they regain their balance and confidence. We need to teach our members to avoid relationships that lead to affairs, and we have to raise our children to have the courage to be Christian even when Christianity isn't cool (or cute).

This all presupposes a church where relationships are real, intimate, and intense – a church where members actually care about each other. Of course, the church's leadership has to care deeply about such things. After all, to help people resist the popular culture and successfully live as Jesus has called us to do requires a group effort. These principles have to be reinforced from the pulpit and in the classroom. Congregational resources – money, volunteers, and such – must be directed at this problem. Of course, there are many other problems and needs that confront the church. But I think this is among the most important.

Churches are made up of families (including single adults as families, of course) who are bound by God into a greater, larger family. We are nothing but families. And when our families break, the church breaks. We can never do or be all that we are called to do and to be without strong, healthy, healed families. And therefore we must become a hospital for broken families as well as an academy for family-building.



## Chapter 24. Appendix 3 – The passive voice argument

Edwards makes an elaborate argument based on the grammar of the sayings of Jesus. These arguments have been accepted by many, but rejected by at least some experts. I find the arguments fascinating, but I’m just that kind of guy.

I’m no expert on the subtleties of Greek. I present both sides for your consideration.

### A. Edwards’ argument re Matthew

Edwards’ argument notes that the translation of Matthew 5:31-32 has obvious problems, demonstrated by the fact that, as translated, Jesus says that the innocent wife who is put away by her husband is *made* an adulteress – whether or not she remarries. This really doesn’t make good sense.<sup>94</sup>

The problem here is that “commit adultery” is mistranslated. In the Greek, the verb is a transitive verb in the passive voice.<sup>95</sup> A transitive verb takes an object.<sup>96</sup>

In “I hit the ball,” “hit” is an active, transitive verb. The object is “ball.”

In “The ball was hit,” “hit” is a passive, transitive verb. The sentence doesn’t really have a subject – “the ball” is the object of “hit” and the true subject – the person doing the hitting – is unstated.

Thus, when Jesus is translated as saying, “But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery,” the wife and her second husband are not the ones committing adultery, they are the objects of the adultery – the ones against whom adultery is committed!

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<sup>94</sup> As noted in Lenski’s commentary on this passage. Of course, I’ve argued before that her adultery is in being forced to break the marriage covenant as well as the duty to seek reconciliation.

<sup>95</sup> None of the major translations take this meaning. This is not surprising since English doesn’t have a passive form for “commit adultery.” Nonetheless, two of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century’s foremost Greek scholars have reached this conclusion. Lenski, in his commentary on Matthew, argues the case from the Greek in some detail, pointing out that “commit adultery” is in active voice in verses 27 and 28, and it should be obvious that the voice is different in verse 32. Zodhiates makes the argument in much more detail and reaches the same conclusion. Most other commentators don’t even address the issue, although Lenski’s commentary is a standard work available since 1943 and is often cited by other commentators on other issues. Note that Gary D. Collier vigorously contests the translation of this verb as passive, although he admits the form is passive. This argument is discussed later in “Gary Collier’s rebuttal.”

<sup>96</sup> Some English verbs are intransitive and so can’t be passive. For example, “sigh.” I can sigh. I can’t be sighed.

Now the problem is that “commit adultery” in English does not have a transitive form and thus does not have a passive form. We are at a loss to make a sound translation. I suggest a couple of approximations to consider.

First, in informal English, “cheat on” can mean to commit adultery against someone, and it is conveniently transitive.<sup>97</sup> Thus, we can better translate Jesus as saying:

But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her **to be cheated on**, and anyone who marries the divorced woman **is cheated on**.

This makes sense! At last, we see that the sin is the divorce, not the marrying after the divorce. And the sinner is the one who wrongly puts away his wife, not the wife who is put away innocently. Indeed, why should the unfortunate wife who is sinned against not be allowed to remarry? Nothing in this passage would deny her a second marriage.

Thus what Jesus says is that “Thou shalt not commit adultery” includes not only the sexual sin, but any violation of the marriage covenant. The command is much broader than just sexual fidelity. It also deals with honoring the marriage covenant, and so failing to do so is sin.

Thus, another translation that is true to the Greek and that makes sense would be to replace “commit adultery” with “violate”:

But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her **to be violated**, and anyone who marries the divorced woman **is violated**.

Recall that we concluded earlier from the Bible’s use of “adultery” that adultery frequently refers to violation of a covenant, and so this translation makes sense. Jesus is saying the adultery is much more than wrongful sex. Wrongfully putting away your wife hurts her in violation of the unity you pledged to her – indeed, violates her and anyone she should marry – and so violates the Ten Commandments.

One might fairly ask why the second husband is violated or cheated on. A number of suggestions have been offered. For example, Jesus’ thought might be that the second husband will suffer the reputation of having perhaps broken up the first marriage, or perhaps he will suffer from the assumption that many will make that his wife was divorced for reason of fornication (that is, in First Century terms, that he is married to a sinner).<sup>98</sup> I’m sure that those who have married a divorced man or woman can explain how their marriage is frequently burdened with problems related to the first marriage –

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<sup>97</sup> Lenski translates the word “ruin marriage.” This is surely an excellent translation of the thought, but is unfortunately intransitive and thus can’t be phrased in the passive voice.

<sup>98</sup> Zodhiates proposes the translation “and whosoever marries a dismissed wife, stigmatizes himself and her as adulterous.” Lenski reaches the same conclusion. Many commentators, including Instone-Brewer, disagree.

whether its struggling with raising children of the first marriage, dealing with alimony, or dealing with the emotional scars from the first marriage. Plainly, the burden of a divorce affects not only the divorced couple, but also their future spouses.

Recall that Jesus is explaining that the Jews have misunderstood Deuteronomy 24, assuming that Moses' provision of a certificate of divorce gave permission to divorce. Jesus says that, just as is true for lust, divorce violates the spirit of the command not to commit adultery, because it violates the marriage covenant and because it hurts people, not only the spouse put away, but also her future husband.

In Matthew 19, “commits adultery” is, once again, not active, but either passive or in the middle voice. Because the same Greek word is used for the passive or middle voice, the distinction must be found in the context.

English doesn't have a middle voice. The Greek middle voice is used where the subject and object are the same. Sometimes the middle voice is best translated with a stated object – “he hit himself,” for example. Other times, the best English translation is with an intransitive verb, that is, a verb with no object – “he hit.”

Clearly, the verb is not passive, as there is no candidate in context to be the object of the verb other than the husband. This makes the verb middle – so that the verb “commits adultery” refers to the husband.<sup>99</sup>

And so the question becomes whether we best translate into English with an intransitive construction: “commits adultery,” as in the NIV and KJV, or with an active English verb, “commits adultery against himself” or “violates himself” or “cheats on himself.” None of the active constructions is very appealing, while the traditional translation – as an intransitive verb – makes perfect sense.<sup>100</sup>

Zodhiates gives 1 Corinthians 13:12 as an example of how to translate the middle voice: “now I know in part; but then *shall I know* even as also I am known.” “Shall I

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<sup>99</sup> Zodhiates concludes that the verb is present indicative middle.

<sup>100</sup> The present indicative middle occurs in Matthew about 91 times, according to Zodhiates. Of these, 72 are translated by the KJV as intransitive verbs. Most of the rest are translated into English with passive constructions.

It would be entirely fair to ask why the same verb is translated “commits adultery” in chapter 19 but must be taken as passive in chapter 5. The answer is the context. To make the distinction, we note in chapter 5 that the person acting is clearly the husband who is putting away his wife. Moreover, Jesus has deliberately changed from the active form of the verb in verses 27 and 28, and the change in voice must have a meaning. Meanwhile, in chapter 19, the verb must refer to the husband, as no one else is mentioned.

The great difficulty here derives from the absence of the middle voice in English as well as the lack of a true transitive equivalent of “commit adultery.”

Finally, the conclusion is well justified by the fact that Paul has reached the same conclusion that we reach. Otherwise, 1 Cor. 7 would have to have addressed the exception for fornication and should have dealt with the question of adultery, and 7:28 could not have been written by Paul.

know” is in the middle voice, and yet is translated with an intransitive (no object) English phrase. Zodhiates also gives Luke 8:13 as an example of the present indicative middle: “and in time of temptation *fall away*.” “Fall away” is present indicative middle and is translated as an intransitive verb. Examples could be multiplied.

In Luke 16:18, “commits adultery” is in the active voice, so that the foregoing arguments cannot be applied here.<sup>101</sup> The key distinction here is found in the context –

*16:13* “No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”

*14* The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. *15* He said to them, “You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God’s sight.

*16* “The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it. *17* It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law.

*18* “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

Jesus then concludes with the familiar parable of Lazarus in heaven.

As concluded by Lenski,

This is not an exposition on marriage and divorce; this is a charge which Jesus hurls at the Pharisees who are before him. That is why that statement is brief and summary. They were making mean remarks about Jesus (15:2) for having anything to do with open sinners like harlots. Were these Pharisees any better than harlots? No; they lived in the same open violation of the Sixth Commandment. Jesus now confronts them with that fact. What he tells them is this: You Pharisees also disregard and violate God’s law of marriage by changing from one wife to another at pleasure, by marrying a discarded wife as if her having been discarded in such a way meant nothing whatever to God’s law. Jesus is not expounding what is commonly called divorce but is scoring [condemning] the dissolution of marriage; APOLUEIN, “to release,” “to dismiss,” and thus to dissolve the marriage, this being the standard term.

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<sup>101</sup> Zodhiates says present indicative active.

## B. Gary Collier's rebuttal

Gary D. Collier, of the University of Denver's Iliff School of Theology and author of *The Forgotten Treasure*,<sup>102</sup> on hermeneutics,<sup>103</sup> has published an article criticizing John Edwards' interpretation of Mark 5:31-32 –

The form MOIXEUTHENAI (forces her into adultery) is an aorist passive infinitive (only here in the NT). ... Unfortunately, Zodhiates gives grossly inaccurate information about the occurrences of the passive forms of MOICHEUO in the NT, and Lenski's charge is at least outdated (i.e., perhaps he based his study on lexicons that did not list extra-biblical sources). BAGD, 526, notes numerous instances in which the passive form is common in reference to the adulteress, the one "with whom" adultery is committed. Among other examples see Sirach 23:23; Philo, Decalogue 124; and Josephus, Antiquities 7:131. In addition to these, see Lev. 20:10 and Jn. 8:4.<sup>104</sup> As to the last reference, how would one understand the phrase, "this woman has been caught in the very act of being adulterated"? Surely, the problem has been stated correctly by Davies/Allison, Matthew, 5:28-29: "The unstated assumption is that the woman will remarry." This point is very important, inasmuch as (1) the husband is blamed for putting his wife in that situation; (2) a life of "remaining single" after divorce was not under consideration – at least not in this text; and (3) the point is not "divorce is allowed but remarriage is adultery"; the point is that divorce in the first place results in adultery.<sup>105</sup>

This article was preceded by a series of e-mail exchanges from 1994 to 1995 between Collier and Edwards on the RM-Bible discussion group hosted by Abilene Christian University.<sup>106</sup> In this exchange Collier challenged some of Edwards' Greek word studies, emphasizing his disagreement with Edwards' conclusion that "commits adultery" in Mark 5:31-32 should be translated in the passive voice.

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<sup>102</sup> Howard Publishing Co., Inc. (1993).

<sup>103</sup> The principles of how to interpret the Bible.

<sup>104</sup> Zodhiates deals with John 8:4, part of the account of the woman taken in adultery, by interpreting the passive voice both here and in Matt. 5 as "being considered an adulteress." He notes with regard to Matt. 5:32, "She must bear upon herself the presumed and assumed guilt of an adulteress because of the action of her husband."

<sup>105</sup> "Rethinking Jesus on Divorce," 37 *Restoration Quarterly* No. 2 (1999), [http://www.rq.acu.edu/Volume\\_037/rq03702collier.htm](http://www.rq.acu.edu/Volume_037/rq03702collier.htm).

<sup>106</sup> These e-mails are available at <ftp://moses.acu.edu/RM-Bible>. Downloading these e-mails requires Netscape or, better yet, a dedicated ftp client (Internet Explorer won't work) – and a lot of patience. These are very long and the server is very slow.

### C. Comparing the two views

It is really difficult for most people – myself included – to resolve disagreements among Greek scholars regarding the meaning of a Greek verb which appears in this particular form only in Matthew 5. However, Collier mounts a significant body of evidence that the verb should not be translated in the passive. And certainly Collier has nearly all the translations on his side.

On the other hand, as Edwards points out, Jesus uses the active form of the verb in Matthew 5:27-28. Why would Jesus change to the passive form in verses 31-32 unless he intended a different meaning? When Jesus quotes the Ten Commandments, “commit adultery” is invariably in the active voice.

More subtle is the fact that there are two different lemmas (root) words involved, *moichaō* and *moicheuō*, both meaning something like “commit adultery.” In Matt. 5:32, “makes her commit adultery” uses *moicheuō*, which is plainly passive in intent, as the Greek is “makes her ...” The language, even in the English, places the blame for this result on the first husband. We might disagree as to whether this is due to forcing her to remarry, stigmatizing her, or forcing her to break covenant, but the sin is plainly the first husband’s.

The “commits adultery” with respect to the second husband is *moichaō*, found only in the passive in the New Testament. Hence, BDAG (3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 2000, issued after Collier’s comments) translates “cause to commit adultery,” which appears to be an effort to give some meaning to the passive in the English – which, as we’ve previously considered, is not easily done given that “commit adultery” is intransitive and so cannot take a passive form in English. But clearly the latest edition of the lexicon is attempting to give meaning to the passive, contrary to Collier’s arguments.

Edwards’ interpretation is supported by David Moore, who commented in the discussion group –

There is a possibility for the interpretation of POIEI AUTHN MOICEUQHNAI [makes her commit adultery] that I have not seen mentioned in the literature available to me. It depends on assuming that Jesus’ teaching (and possibly the original written form of this pericope) was in Aramaic. Since Jesus’ having taught in Aramaic is just about universally accepted, it seems safe to assume Aramaic grammatical forms at some point behind the Greek text here.

If POIEI AUTHN MOICEUQHNAI is an example of the Semitic hiphil (i.e. causative-active) form of the verb in question, the meaning of the phrase should be, “causes her to commit adultery.” The active part of the causative-active verb form would be expressed in the active sense of the Greek POIEI; and MOICEUQHNAI would be in the passive case to indicate that the woman, in such an instance, would be forced into an adulterous relationship (assuming she would remarry) of which she would not be the active cause. Understanding

the clause in this way focuses on the person who has caused the divorce as the one really guilty as the cause of the adultery.<sup>107</sup>

Now I know even less about Aramaic<sup>108</sup> than about Greek. But I do know that many scholars believe that Matthew was originally written in Aramaic, and there is significant historical evidence in support of that view. Thus, this is a strong argument in favor of the passive voice translation.

But even without reading through the Greek into the supposed Aramaic, it's plain that in Matt. 5:32, Jesus is placing the blame on the first husband, not the wife who has been divorced and not on the second husband.

#### **D. Edwards' argument re Luke**

Edwards argues that Luke 16:18 should be retranslated so that “divorces” is in the middle voice. This possibility was suggested by Oliver Howard at the Pepperdine Lectureships in 1986.<sup>109</sup> Recall that “divorces” translates a word with a much broader meaning, more precisely translated in the King James Version as “put away.” It can be translated either in the passive voice or in the middle voice, depending on context. The NIV paraphrases “divorce” as in the active. But in the middle voice, the translation becomes –

Everyone dismissing his wife and marrying another commits adultery (active) and the woman dismissing herself (middle) from her husband and marries another man commits adultery (active).

Notice how the subject in the second clause changes from “the man” to “the woman” when the voice changes. The reason for this is that “the man” isn't in the Greek and must be implied from the verb form. If it's middle, the object (the woman) is also the subject, and under this translation, the verse makes perfect sense.

#### **E. Collier's rebuttal**

This interpretation has been challenged by Gary D. Collier, of the University of Denver's Iliff School of Theology<sup>110</sup> –

And the problem is NOT the middle or passive voice of *a)polelume/nhn*. Even if you grant the middle force of this participle, you still can't make the woman the subject of the participle

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<sup>107</sup> David Moore at <http://www.ibiblio.org/bgreek/archives/greek-3/msg00439.html> (Oct. 19, 1994).

<sup>108</sup> The native language of Jews living in Palestine during the First Century. There is also evidence that Jesus spoke, at least some of the time, in Greek, which was the international language of the day. For example, some of Jesus' quotations from the Old Testament follow the Septuagint (Greek) translation of the Old Testament rather than the Hebrew original.

<sup>109</sup> Quoted by Edwards, pp. 152-154.

<sup>110</sup> See the RM-Bible discussion group archives, <ftp://moses.acu.edu/RM-Bible> (Dec. 25, 1994).

“marrying.” In every textual reading offered by NA27, “the woman” is accusative feminine singular (thus, the object of the action of the participle), and “the one who marries” is nominative singular masculine. So, you could translate either of the following ways: “...and the man who marries a woman who has been divorced from her husband is guilty of adultery” “...and the man who marries a woman who has divorced herself from her husband is guilty of adultery.” In either case, it is the man who is said to be guilty of adultery. The Greek sentence cannot be correctly read if the woman is the subject.

Rob McRay responds, however,<sup>111</sup>

If the participle *apolelumenhn* is read as middle it allows for the text to be read in such a way that Jesus is commenting specifically on the use of divorce to “get around” the adultery prohibition. If man wants a woman other than his wife, he cannot avoid adultery by divorcing her and marrying the other: “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery.” Neither can he avoid adultery with another man’s wife if she will just secure a divorce from her husband first: “And one who marries a woman who has divorced herself from her husband commits adultery.”

I believe Oliver’s point is that Jesus is not necessarily commenting on all divorce or on all remarriage, but specifically on the manipulation of the law (re: divorce) in order to get around the law (re: adultery). Oliver is not trying to justify divorce in other circumstances; I think he also agrees with you that Jesus does not really approve of ANY divorce. He is (as I recall) saying that Jesus is not condemning all remarriage.

## F. Conclusion

So how do we deal with this? Do we have to have post-doctoral knowledge of Greek and Aramaic to understand the Bible’s teachings on divorce and remarriage? Woe to us if that were true! No, while I find Edwards’ position very sensible and appealing, especially as to Matt. 5:32 – the ultimate conclusions we draw don’t depend on whether “commits adultery” is best translated as passive or active, for these reasons:

1. 1 Corinthians 7:27-28 still says what it says. In the Christian dispensation, Paul, plainly aware of Jesus’ teachings (1 Cor. 7:10), teaches that it is not sin for a divorced person to remarry. This makes the interpretation of Matthew 5:31-32 a very interesting question but not the key to knowing what the rule is today.

2. In Matthew 5:32, Jesus specifically declares that the husband “causes” his wife to commit adultery. This very plainly puts the blame on the husband, not the wife.

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*



Part of the difficulty historically has been the fact that the KJV wrongly adds at the end of Matthew 19:9 “and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery,” borrowed by some later scribe from Matthew 5:31-32. In Matthew 5, however, the force of this is greatly reduced by the “causeth” clause, which plainly places the blame on the husband. But as wrongly translated by the KJV, Matthew 19 suggests that the put-away wife is at fault, thus giving many a reader the wrong impression.

Not surprisingly, for these very reasons, Edwards and Collier ultimately reach the identical conclusions about how the Church is to interpret these passages, although by different paths. Indeed, Collier concludes –

Jesus is not saying the divorced woman did anything wrong, she is simply thrown into the whole mess of adultery – which in Matt 5 and 19 is a breaking of God’s “creation covenant” for man and woman. I have tried to be consistent (can’t guarantee that I have been!) in translating *moixeuthenai* as “guilty of adultery” rather than “committed adultery”, since the latter indicates an “action”. A person thrown into a mud-hole may be guilty of being muddy without being guilty of jumping in the mud.<sup>112</sup>

The moment we wish to require perfection in adherence to Matt 5:31-32 is the moment we should begin to see gouged-out eyes and severed limbs among those requiring it. Those who are willing to cut out the hearts of others by casuistic [rule-based] approaches to the Gospel divorce texts, should be willing to cut off their own hands by the same approaches. Otherwise, we should learn the way of Jesus. Matt 18:28, 35: *But that same servant, as he went out, met one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred days wages. So, he grabbed him by the throat and said, “Pay me what you owe me!” . . . This is how my Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.*<sup>113</sup>

Collier agrees with Edwards and myself (i) that “adultery” in the Mark and Matthews passages is used in the prophetic sense of covenant breaking, (ii) that the sin being addressed is the divorce and, where the divorce was made in order to remarry, the remarriage,<sup>114</sup> (iii) that men and women can end a marriage even when to do so is wrong, and (iv) that 1 Corinthians 7:27-28 plainly permits a divorced person to remarry, and that doing so is not sin.<sup>115</sup> Moreover, Collier agrees that the consequences of a wrongful

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<sup>112</sup> <http://www.ibiblio.org/bgreek/archives/greek-3/msg00439.html>.

<sup>113</sup> Collier, footnote 44 (italics in original).

<sup>114</sup> Collier points out that Jesus assumes that any divorce made is to remarry. Jesus does not address the question of divorce without remarriage because he is commenting on Deut. 24, which deals only with divorce to remarry.

<sup>115</sup> <ftp://moses.acu.edu/RM-Bible> (December 22, 1994).

divorce are to be found elsewhere. Thus, despite this disagreement over Greek verb tenses, the result is much the same. Collier concludes –

We do, of course, want some practical answers about those who do not live up to the ideal. What do we do in real-life situations? Two answers. First, none of these Gospel accounts on divorce deals with that question. This is a *very* important point because we have traditionally approached these texts as if they gave instructions on what to do when people sin. They do not. Second, if we want to know how to deal with people who do not live up to the ideal – who sin, in other words – we should turn to the multitude of other places in Scripture which teach us how to deal with sinners, keeping in mind the difference between sin and sinners. We must preach perfection, as Jesus did, but we cannot require it any more than he did. ...

In the final analysis, the issue for Jesus was not whether it was divorce or remarriage that caused adultery, nor even whether authorizations could be found for divorce; it was, rather, what creation reveals about God's desires and intentions for us as males and females. It is here that we will be able to offer hopeful solutions to the plethora of problems that divorce still presents.

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