

6.21

**DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE**

Contents

|      |  |    |
|------|--|----|
| I.   | Synopsis .....   | 2  |
| II.  | Divorce and Remarriage Situations with Biblical Responses.....             | 4  |
| 1.   | Marriage Defined .....   | 4  |
| 2.   | Issues of Divorce.....   | 7  |
| a.   | Does God allow for divorce? .....  | 7  |
| b.   | What is immorality?.....   | 8  |
| c.   | Is “adultery in the heart” grounds for divorce?.....                       | 8  |
| d.   | Immorality and then repentance.....  | 8  |
| e.   | Offending spouse initiating divorce.....                                   | 9  |
| f.   | Professing believer abandons marriage .....                                | 10 |
| g.   | Christian seeking divorce from unbelieving mate with no immorality .....   | 11 |
| 3.   | Issues of Separation .....   | 11 |
| a.   | Remaining separate after a non-biblical divorce .....                      | 11 |
| b.   | Marriage Separations .....   | 13 |
| c.   | Violence and Physical Abuse.....   | 15 |
| 4.   | Issues of Remarriage.....  | 17 |
| a.   | Remarriage following divorce .....   | 17 |
| b.   | Not marrying before former spouse marries or dies .....                    | 18 |
| c.   | Offending spouse in an immorality-based divorce .....                      | 19 |
| d.   | Divorced as a non-Christian.....   | 19 |
| e.   | Another marriage has already occurred following an unbiblical divorce..... | 20 |
| III. | Primary Scriptural Passages Pertaining to Divorce and Remarriage.....      | 21 |
| 1.   | Deuteronomy 21:1-4 .....   | 21 |
| 2.   | Ezra 9-10.....   | 24 |
| 3.   | Malachi 2:16 .....   | 27 |
| 4.   | Matthew 5:31-32.....   | 32 |
| 5.   | Matthew 19:1-12 And Mark 10:1-12.....                                      | 39 |
| 6.   | Luke 16:18 .....   | 45 |
| 7.   | I Corinthians 7:10-16.....   | 47 |
| 8.   | I Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6.....  | 54 |

## I. Synopsis

God is the creator of the marriage relationship; it is His design and intent that the relationship remains unbroken by anything other than death itself (Matthew 19:4-6, Romans 7:2-3, Genesis 2:24). Therefore, we fervently desire to do all we can as a church to strengthen and enrich existing marriages within our fellowship, and to prepare our people for life-long marriage relationships.

With this premise as our basic consideration, we nonetheless face the question of “exceptions”: Does God allow in Scripture for any circumstances under which divorce would not be sin? And if so, would remarriage of such a divorced person be allowed?

### Scriptural Principles

1. Divorce of a spouse who has been guilty of “immorality” is allowed by Scripture (Matthew 5:32; 19:9), and remarriage in such a case is an option.

“Immorality” is defined as being any sexual activity outside of the marriage relationship, e.g. adultery, incest, homosexuality, and bestiality.

Anyone who divorces his/her spouse on grounds other than such immorality is guilty of sin. This sin is compounded by the sin of adultery if either spouse marries another. (For the exception see point 2.)

While immorality-based divorce action is not to be regarded as sin, it is not necessarily to be encouraged. When “immortality” conditions exist confrontations should take place following the steps of Matthew 18:15-17, and the continuation of the marriage should be the preferred pattern.

Anyone who has divorced a spouse on immorality grounds is free to marry without offense. The offending spouse is also free to marry without further offense.

2. A believer who has divorced by an unbelieving spouse is no longer bound to the marriage, and may marry without offense (I Corinthians 7:15).
3. A believer married to an unbeliever is to remain in that relationship and may anticipate God’s blessings to accrue to that home and to the unbelieving spouse (I Corinthians 7:12-14).
4. A believer who divorces on grounds other than immortality is not to marry another; God’s preference would be to seek reconciliation with the former partner (I Corinthians 7:10-11). The only exceptions allowing marriage to another would be when remarriage or immortality on the part of the former partner has taken place or when the former partner is an unbeliever and refuses to be reconciled, or after the former partner’s death.

5. A Christian, who was divorced while still an unbeliever, is free to remarry if immorality was a cause of the divorce or it is a cause not to reconcile (Matt. 5:32, 19:9), if the unbeliever refuses to be reconciled (I Corinthians 7:15), if the former spouse has remarried (Deuteronomy 24:1-4), or if the spouse has died (Romans 7:1-2).
6. When a divorced person marries and the second marriage ends through death or divorce of the second spouse, remarriage to the first partner would be sin (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).
7. A Christian who is divorced based upon a biblical basis is not barred by divorce from exercising office or ministry within the church. This includes the offices of deacon, deaconesses, or elder (relates to I Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6). A Christian who was divorced and/or remarried under circumstances deemed as unjustified by Scripture, but who has repented of the sin and has undertaken to live as the husband of one wife in relation to the new spouse, should not be barred from service once the new pattern of godly living has been firmly established.

## II. Divorce and Remarriage Situations with Biblical Responses

The following examples of situations are designed to answer the majority of questions, which are often asked in the area of divorce and remarriage. This section will provide guidance as to which scriptural passages generally apply to a given situation. The detailed analysis of the key scriptural passages is contained in Part III.

### 1. Marriage Defined

What constitutes a marriage? Can a marriage occur without a recognized “wedding” ceremony or process?

We must define when a marriage has occurred in order to adequately respond to certain questions such as: 1) “I’ve become a Christian and been living with my boy/girlfriend; must/should we get married?” 2) “I’ve had sexual relations with several people; does God consider one of them to be my spouse?” 3) “I’ve married the wrong person; he/she couldn’t be the one that God intended for me, and since this marriage is flawed in God’s sight and not a real marriage, I think a divorce is proper, don’t you?” Each of these questions is difficult to answer if we do not have a clear definition of marriage from God’s Word.

We must first attempt to determine when a marriage occurs. What are the minimum ceremonial and relational events that must occur before we can say that a marriage has been legitimately established?

Scripture does not prescribe a specific set of actions or a particular process for entering into marriage. It begins in Genesis by identifying marriage in its most rudimentary form, “...male and female He created them. And God blessed them; and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it...’ (1:27-28).” One man and one woman are created for each other, with the purpose of having offspring who would fill the earth. The passage is paralleled by Genesis 2:23-24 where it says, “This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man. For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.” Here marriage is extended to include the change in relationship with the parents and the physical attachment to the spouse. Toward the parents, the marriage demonstrates a new independence and the establishing of a new family unit. Toward the spouse, the marriage demonstrates a uniting of the two fleshs into one new body.

From the above passages, one might be tempted to conclude that if one leaves home and establishes a sexual relationship with another, then one has met the requirements for being married. Indeed, the initial portions of Genesis would seem to bear that idea out. Adam and Eve had no minister to marry them. Cain leaves his parents and establishes a marriage without any hint of a social process that we would consider a marriage ceremony. This woman is clearly defined as Cain’s wife (Genesis 4:17). In Genesis 4:19, polygamy is introduced. Without

comment, Scripture describes each woman as Lamech's wife. Each woman is accepted as his wife, for each bears accepted sons to Lamech. Genesis 6:1-3 gives the account of the sons of God taking wives from the daughters of man. These women are called "wives." They become wives by being "taken to wife" by the one who "chose" whomever he wished.

In the pre-flood society, marriage seems to have been the process of joining yourself with a partner and raising children. No formality is described.

In the lack of any formality, does entering into a sexual relationship constitute a definition of marriage? The *New Bible Dictionary* makes this statement, "Marriage is the state in which men and women can live together in sexual relationship with the approval of their social group. Adultery and fornication are sexual relationships that society does not recognize as constituting marriage." Scripture records without comment the various "marriage" practices of the post-flood society. Polygamy, concubiny, and children by the wife's maids are all practices which the patriarchs had with resultant children. These sexual relationships did not automatically result in a marriage occurring. A maid remained a maid, even if she bore legitimate offspring. A concubine typically remained less than a wife even though she bore accepted children to the husband.

For the post-flood society, the Scriptures track the growing formality of entering into marriage, but it does not pass any judgment upon the modes or forms until the Mosaic Law is established. It is interesting to note that according to the Mosaic standard established in Leviticus 18, the marriage of Abraham and Sarah (brother to half-sister) and Jacob to Leah and Rachel (two sisters as simultaneous wives) became forbidden acts. It appears that when God established the Law and made Israel unique socially, religiously, and morally, that He made some practices relating to marriage "illegal," whereas previously there were no laws regulating the practice. This also occurs in the transition into the New Testament church where God makes marriage more explicitly monogamous (I Timothy 3:2-5:9 -- qualifications for an elder, or a woman of the church roll) whereas the Law permitted polygamy and even regulated it (Leviticus 18).

This seems so indefinite! Doesn't Scripture give us more definition about becoming married?

In the entire length of Scripture, the mechanism for entering into marriage is never legislated. As noted in the above definition from the *New Bible Dictionary*, marriages are established by whatever socially acceptable means are at hand. Mutual agreements between the man and the woman, agreements between the future husband and the parents of the woman, and agreements between the parents of both the woman and the man all serve as means for establishing marriages. No formality is commanded, nor is any forbidden. Whatever is socially acceptable, is acceptable. This is tempered in Scripture by God's revelation of what is moral and immoral.

In having said this, it is important to note that whatever is not socially or biblically acceptable is taken as morally offensive. Many examples occur of sexual behavior that is not acceptable. This behavior does not establish a marriage when it occurs. Examples would be Lot's sexual relations with his daughters who bore him children, although they are not considered his wives.

Abraham's relationship with Hagar, who bears him Ishmael, is not considered a marriage. The rape of Dinah by Shechem (Genesis 34:2) does not constitute marriage. The harlotry of Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38:15-26), though resulting in children, does not form a marriage. The rape of Tamar by Amnon (II Samuel 13:11-21) does not form a marriage. Jay Adams (*Marriage, Divorce & Remarriage in the Bible*, Baker Book House, 1980, page 6-7) says,

“If marriage and sexual union were one and the same, the Bible could not speak about illicit sexual intercourse; instead (in referring to fornication) it would talk about informal marriage. Adultery would no longer be adultery, but informal bigamy (or polygamy) . . . Sexual relations *per se* do not make a marriage and do not break a marriage . . . Marriage is bigger than and distinct from (though inclusion of the obligation of) sexual union. It is neither constituted nor dissolved by sexual relations.”

If a sexual relationship is not enough (biblically) to establish a marriage, does the Scripture state the minimum requirements? The answer would seem to be, “Not explicitly!” The examples of marriage in Scripture do *seem*, however, to establish some minimum requirements. First, marriages were considered permanent relationship. Even when the marriage was not desired, it had some permanence (Jacob and Leah, Genesis 29:25-28; David and Michal, II Samuel 6:23). Second, the permanence was based on an agreement (covenant, Proverbs 2:17; Malachi 2:14). And, third, it was in a form recognized by the society around it. If the behavior was not socially accepted, then a marriage was not considered to have taken place (thereby excluding rapes, harlotry, adultery, etc.).

It is important to expand upon the second point regarding the issue of marriage being a covenant. Jay Adams refers to this as a “Covenant of Companionship.” He asserts that marriage is for the purpose of companionship as established in Genesis 2:18, “It is not good for man to be alone. I will make him a helper who approximates (or corresponds to) him,” (Jay Adams, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage*, page 8) In defining companionship, Adams says, “The core meaning has to with a close, intimate relationship of a husband and wife to one another” (*MD&R*, page 11). He continues, “For both then, entrance into marriage should mean the desire to meet each other's need for companionship. Love, in marriage, focuses upon giving one's spouse the companionship he/she needs to eliminate loneliness,” (page 12). Additionally, Adams points out that marriage is a *covenant* relationship. There is an agreement between two persons to become each other's companions. It is worth noting Matthew 19:6, that once a union into marriage has occurred (even though the Jews did not consider it a permanent relationship), God considers the marriage to be life-long: “What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.” Jesus based this conclusion upon Genesis 2:24 where the “cleaving” pair are said to now be “one flesh.”

In conclusion, then, it can be asserted that a biblical marriage occurs when a man and a woman join themselves together in a “one flesh” relationship in which each “cleaves” to his/her spouse in a manner accepted by their society and not prohibited by God.

In our society, marriages are a “social contract” in which two parties have joined together by their agreement, or the agreement of those with authority over them. Our law has permitted this joining to be entered very informally, but it treats the resultant union as being permanent and legal.

At what point, if any, does “living together,” an immoral act, become a socially acceptable “marriage”? We can perhaps identify that point as being the time when a genuine “Covenant of Companionship” has been entered into which publicly declares that two have come together in a union in which they share each other’s lives and futures. This would not necessitate the presence of a minister or justice of the peace, but it would certainly be done before, and according to, the formal requirements of those having authority over the couple (whether parents, guardians, or civil authorities). Anything of lesser commitment, or in violation of the established requirements of the society, would be entering into a state of fornication. Additionally, any marriage entered into which conforms to social law, and is valid within God’s patterns and commands, is a valid marriage.

## **2. Issues of Divorce**

### **a. Does God allow for divorce?**

Jesus made it very clear that God does not desire divorce: “What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate (Mark 10:9).” God’s expectation is that repentance and forgiveness would be the resolution to marital problems. In specific circumstances, however, God does allow for divorce. There are two situations that Scripture identifies as providing specific grounds for divorce:

- a. Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 identify that immorality (marital unfaithfulness – sexual activity outside of the marriage) on the part of a spouse can provide the basis for a legal and scriptural divorce on the part of the non-offending spouse.
- b. Additionally, I Corinthians 7:15 specifies grounds for when an unbelieving spouse (a non-Christian) chooses of his own accord to leave the marriage, “let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases.”

Apart from these two circumstances divorce is not to occur. I Corinthians 7:10-13 indicates:

“To the married [refers to a marriage involving two Christians] I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband . . . and that the husband should not send his wife away. But to the rest [refers to marriages involving Christian and a non-Christian] I say, not the Lord [the Lord had given no specific instruction here as He had in the previous case], that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, let him not send her away. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, let her not send her husband away.” (Parenthesized statement added for clarification.)

Divorce which occurs for reasons other than immorality or abandonment by an unbeliever constitutes a sin and opens the way for future adultery should marriage to another occur by either partner following the divorce (Matthew 19:9; Mark 10:11-12).

**b. What is immorality?**

Basically, immortality is the physical participation in sexual activity with a person other than one's spouse or with an animal. The Bible defines immortality as such acts as fornication (sexual relations outside of marriage), adultery (sexual relations where at least one of the individuals is married to someone else – Leviticus 20:10), incest (sexual relations with a relative – Leviticus 18:6-18), homosexuality (sexual relations with a member of the same sex – Leviticus 18:22, Roman 1:26-27), and bestiality (sexual relations with an animal – Leviticus 18:23).

**c. Is “adultery in the heart” grounds for divorce?**

A question that arises in regard to the recognition of immorality as a legitimate ground for divorce is whether “adultery in the heart” (Matthew 5:28) constitutes actual immorality and is thus a valid cause for divorce. In the above passage, Jesus indicated, “that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart.” However, the statement of Jesus was not meant to expand the boundaries of immortality as a basis for sanctioned divorce, but rather to expose the hypocritical facade of self-righteousness put on by the Scribes and Pharisees to disguise their truly unrighteous hearts. Matthew 5:20 sets this context of exposing false righteousness as expanded upon in 5:28. While they constrained themselves from physically committing adultery, they were lusting after that sin in their hearts, which is the source of all man's evil (Mark 7:21-23). In a hyperbolic statement (one which uses exaggeration for the purpose of emphasis) Jesus indicates that, in his heart, the man has carried out the sin that he has managed to avoid externally. The same hyperbolic formula is used by Jesus in Matthew 5:21-22 to equate hatred for a brother with murder. But just as true murder requires an actual removal of life from another person, so true adultery requires an actual physical act. As verse 22 suggests, Jesus' point is not that the physical act has been committed but that an equivalent guilt has been incurred. “Adultery in the heart” therefore does not equate to actual immorality as a ground for a divorce.

**d. Immorality and then repentance**

Neither Matthew 5:32 nor 19:9, the only passages which refer to immorality as a justification for divorce, contain any indication of the frequency in which immorality must occur before a scriptural divorce can take place. Furthermore, the Greek word

*porneia*, which is used in these passages, provides no insight on the issue of frequency. However, much can be discerned from the tenor of Jesus' discussion of divorce in Matthew 19:4-8.

Jesus indicates here that God's ideal is for there to be no divorce at all: "What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." The indication is that divorce is to be viewed only as an extreme measure, not a preferred choice.

To seek a divorce on the basis of a single incident of immorality, especially when the offending spouse is fully repentant, may violate not only Jesus' injunction, but may also go against the repeated exhortations in Scripture to forgive one another (Matthew 6:14; Ephesians 4:32; Matthew 18:21-35, note the contextual connection). To press for divorce in such a circumstance would generally cause grave concern about the motivation of the initiating spouse (Proverbs 16:2). The individual is held accountable before the Lord for his motivation in seeking the divorce.

Even when multiple immoralities occur, much prayer and biblically based counsel should be pursued in seeking restoration in the marriage before the decision to pursue a divorce is made. Only when the offended spouse has concluded that the union of the marriage cannot be restored should divorce be initiated. The Lord's own example of patient forgiveness is given in Jeremiah 3:6-8, "I thought, 'After she has done all these things [committed repeated harlotry], she will return to me.'" The picture of Hosea's inexhaustible patience and forgiveness for his wife, Gomer, gives another picture of the extent to which such love can be tried.

If, in the case of multiple immoralities, the offending spouse repeatedly pleads repentance but continues to violate the marriage, then genuine nature of the repentance must be doubted. True biblical repentance results in a change of behavior (II Corinthians 7:10) not just sorrow for the incident. In such a case of inauthentic repentance, should the innocent spouse determine that the marriage cannot be restored he or she has the freedom to pursue divorce.

#### **e. Offending spouse initiating divorce**

Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 are the only passages that provide for a biblically justified divorce on the basis of immorality. By examining these passages, it can be determined under what circumstances such a divorce is valid. The first thing to note in examining them is that both are primarily statements against divorce. The emphasis of each is that, with one exception, when a man divorces his wife, he causes adultery to take place when either of them remarries. This is important to note because the passage isolates the only valid ground for divorce by what is identified in the exception clause. Any other cause is not justified, other than abandoned by an unbeliever (see following two questions).

Upon examining the exception clause, it must be questioned whether the immorality is specifically attributed to the wife, or whether it has simply occurred without reference to whom the guilty party was. If the former is the case, then the divorce will only be justified when it is initiated by the mate against whom the unfaithfulness occurred. If the latter is the case, then the divorce may be initiated by either spouse.

The answer to this question can be found by examining the root passage from which Jesus makes His statements. This passage is Deuteronomy 24:1, “When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her . . .” Clearly the passage refers to a fault on the part of the wife, which causes the husband to initiate divorce. In Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, Jesus is asserting that the only fault on the part of the wife that will bring about a justified divorce, and, subsequently, an adultery-free remarriage, is immorality on her part. The impact of the exception clause is to provide that the only basis for justified divorce is when a person chooses to divorce his or her mate due to the mate’s immorality. Any other arrangement lies outside of the exception clause and therefore falls under prohibition.

When immorality exists on the side of both parties, it would be within the intent of Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 to permit either party to initiate the divorce. However, since the overall intent of each passage is a statement against divorce, if it is with a heart attitude of switching mates, God would find the action to be sinful.

#### **f. Professing believer abandons marriage**

If the profession of Christ as Lord and savior was false, then a divorce would be sanctioned on the basis that an unbeliever had left a believer (I Corinthians 7:15). If, however, the profession was real, then a divorce would not be biblically justifiable because it would involve two Christians.

The critical issue is whether or not the profession is real and therein lays the difficulty. To determine the reality of another person’s profession towards Christ is something not easily done.

Some would contend that the action of leaving a mate would indicate that the person could not truly be a Christian. However, it is possible for a Christian to be disobedient to God’s will, even to the point of leaving a mate (I Corinthians 7:11a).

On the other hand, the Bible indicates that there are those who profess to be Christians, yet in reality are not. Titus 1:16 identifies such a condition: “They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient, and worthless for any good deed.” When someone denies God consistently by word or deed, he demonstrates that any previous profession of faith was not true. Such a person is not a Christian

(Matthew 10:33, Luke 12:9, I Timothy 5:8, 2 Peter 2:1, Jude 4, Hebrews 3:6,14, I John 2:19, 4:22-23). Special caution should be noted here. To say that someone has denied the faith, apart from a continuing verbal denial or an unchecked moral decadence, is presumptuous. A life pattern of such behavior should be identifiable on an objective basis.

Of specific note would be the condition where a professing believer abandons completely all financial support of dependent family members after leaving. I Timothy 5:8 says, “But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever.” Such a person is an apostate, the ultimate form of unbelief, and therefore the abandonment would fall under the guidelines of I Corinthians 7:15.

**g. Christian seeking divorce from unbelieving mate with no immorality**

What is the intent of the unbeliever concerning the status of the marriage. If their intent is to abandon the marriage and not return to it, then divorce becomes a legal technicality, for in the mind of that person the marriage is ended. In such a situation the believer would be justified in legally completing what the unbeliever has begun by intent. While there is no specific scriptural reference upon which to base this counsel, it is an extension of I Corinthians 7:15 which indicates that God recognizes the leaving of an unbeliever as a release from bondage for the believer.

The most frequent occurrence of this situation would appear to be incident of abandonment in which the spouse has left and has not been in communication. With a lack of contact it is not known whether there has been immorality or not. The most difficult and sensitive point in making a decision in this kind of situation lies in determining the intent of the unbeliever in taking such an action. If possible, it would be wise to have a neutral, mutually respected person inquire of the unbeliever whether he/she considers the marriage to be ended. Where the unbeliever is desirous of returning to the marriage or is undecided, the believer should not pursue divorce and thus risk violating the injunction of I Corinthians 7:12-13 not to send an unbelieving mate away.

**3. Issues of Separation**

**a. Remaining separate after a non-biblical divorce**

The pivotal passage in determining this issue is I Corinthians 7:10-11, “But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (but if she does leave, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not send his wife away.”

The parenthetical portion of verse 11 is text upon which those who advocate that a person can legitimately continue to be divorced in such a circumstance base their argument. They note that Paul gives two options, “. . . remain unmarried, or else be reconciled . . .” and they contend that the “or” makes it a balanced option; either one being equally legitimate. As well, they assert that if Paul had demanded reconciliation as the only choice then he would not even have mentioned the possibility of remaining unmarried.

These are strong arguments which are not easily refuted. However, there are several considerations which, when taken into account, lend weight of evidence toward the conclusion that continuing to be separated cannot be sanctioned.

First of all, the injunction not to leave the mate is very strongly stated. It is the primary message of the passage. The parenthetical portion of verse 11 is subordinate to it. It is highly unlikely that Paul would adamantly demand that a wife not leave her husband, and in the next breath indicate that if she disobeys the command of the Lord, she may continue in that divorced state with the Lord’s sanction. In Matthew 19:6, Jesus Himself said, “What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate,” (“separate” is the exact same Greek word translated as “leave” in I Corinthians 7:10-11). It would not be Paul’s intent to legitimize the very state that results from disobedience.

Secondly, the woman of whom Paul speaks in verse 11 would be willfully breaking what she knew to be the Lord’s command. The phrase “if she does leave” is an aorist subjunctive which anticipates a yet future possible event from the author’s perspective. This means that Paul is speaking about a woman who is leaving her husband despite the very instruction that Paul is giving. She knows it is wrong because Paul has written that it is wrong, yet she does it anyway. Can this person be truly repentant of disobedience without correcting the situation which is prolonging the sin? Such a person should be lovingly confronted and guided towards corrective action, not left in her disobedience.

The English translation of the “options” may contribute to a misunderstanding of what Paul is saying. It is possible to misconstrue the phrase, “let her remain unmarried,” as an injunction to the reader to “allow her to remain unmarried.” This is not the meaning of the phrase, but is a misunderstanding brought about by a Greek verb form having no direct English equivalent. The form is a third person imperative; English commands are all in the familiar person. “You do this,” “you remain unmarried.” The Greek allows the command to be directed to a remote person: he, she, or they. Maybe the best way to translate this third person imperative would be, “command her to remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband.” What we have then is a follow-up command to the one which has been broken. The first command is, “don’t leave your husband.” If you break that, the next command is to “remain unmarried or else be reconciled to your husband.” The second command then carries the very clear message that the divorcee is not to marry anyone else.

The last observation opens the way to finally understanding what Paul is saying and why he puts it the way he does. The answer lies in noting that Paul is deliberately sharing the Lord's instruction, "not I, but the Lord." When the Lord gave His instruction He made two points. First, He commanded married couples not to divorce (Matthew 19:6; Mark 10:9). Secondly, He indicated that if they did divorce and marry another, they committed adultery (Matthew 19:9; Mark 10:11-12). Notice that Paul's instruction follows this very pattern. Don't divorce, "the wife should not leave her husband," and don't remarry another, "command her to remain unmarried or else reconciled to her husband." Paul is warning that the sin of a deliberately disobedient divorce would be compounded to adultery if the disobedience extended into marriage to another! To further complicate the matter, after the marriage to another there would be no way to ever fully correct the damage of the original sin because Deuteronomy 24:1-4 would forbid the reuniting of the original marriage partners by any means.

The purpose of Paul's teaching in verse 11a then is not to open the way for a disobedient Christian to continue in the consequences of her sin, but rather to prevent her from sinning further. The one who disobediently divorces must, at the very least, remain unmarried to avoid adultery. The only legitimate marriage would be remarriage to her husband. But even this "very least" condition would leave her outside of the Lord's expressed command not to leave her husband. Only by being reconciled to her husband can she return to obedience.

## **b. Marriage Separations<sup>1</sup>**

More and more frequently, people are being told (by friends, counselors, pastors and mental health professionals) that if their marriage has a problem, they should consider a marital separation for a time. This counsel raises many questions:

- Is marital separation an issue of Christian liberty – something the individual can decide for himself if God has not given specific instruction?
- Are separations permissible, biblically?
- If separations are not biblical, are they a sin? Under certain conditions are they not a sin? Should Matthew 18 be invoked if one separates?
- If a separation has occurred, what is the church's counsel to the couple involved?
- If a spouse is sinning, shouldn't a separation be considered a partner's duty according to Matt. 18 and 2 Thes. 3:6?
- Many "conservative" theologians allow for separations, they can't all be wrong, can they?
- Are separations necessary for people to "cool down" and "work out their differences?"

<sup>1</sup> Section was drafted 8/17/1984; although reviewed by the Board, it was thought wise to not incorporate in to the standing "Divorce & Remarriage" document until other issues also need to be included. Added to this document 1/14/2020.

- Does 1 Cor. 7:11 indicate that a wife may leave/separate since it doesn't condemn the separation?

By example, marital separations are the exception, not the norm. There is a definite absence of reference to the idea of separations other than for a very limited set of purposes:

- preparation for warfare
- preparation for ministry (purification—sexual separation not dwelling separation) – Lev. 22:2-4; 15:16-24, 31-33
- for safety – Prov. 22:3

Separations are specifically forbidden by Scripture:

- separation is viewed as an act of divorcement – Matt. 19:6, 1 Cor. 7:10-11
- other than for prayer and fasting, by mutual consent, it is forbidden – 1 Cor. 7:5
- it violates the reality of being one flesh (whether in practice the couple is one spirit or not is irrelevant) – Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:6; Eph. 5:28-33

Spouses are commanded to remain with a sinning partner. The only exception is the act of divorcement for adultery or desertion:

- when the spouse is disobedient to the Word (it is unclear whether the spouse is an unbeliever or believer in this passage) – 1 Pt. 3:1
- when the spouse is an unbeliever who has not committed *porneia* – 1 Cor. 7:12-13

“Hiding” may be a valid form of “separation.”

- it covers a period when evil is reasonably expected to occur and lead to an innocent person's harm – Prov. 22:3

Note: When the word “separate” is used in the NT in the context of the marriage, it always refers to the act of divorce (*choridzo*).

Based on this information, we can make the following conclusions:

- Scripture does not make provision for “legal” separations in the Christian marital relationship.
- Scripture forbids one-sided decisions to separate for even prayer and fasting (and by implication, for any “less spiritual” excuse).
- God commands spouses to remain in the marital relationship, even when their partner is an unbeliever or disobedient believer.
- If a “believing” spouse is acting sinfully, this is cause for the church to carry out Matt. 18. Separation is not the spouse's action. During the discipline process, the sinning spouse is viewed like an “unbeliever,” and the spouse is commanded to remain with an unbelieving mate.

- The Christian is called to a life of patient endurance (James 1:2-3; 1 Pt. 4:1-2, 2:21-23; Matt. 5:10-12, 38-44). This includes persevering in a difficult marriage. We are commanded to not seek release from the marriage bond and obligations (1 Cor. 7:10-11, 24).

The applications are these:

- We cannot recommend, nor condone, separations (whatever their claimed motivation) that do not occur, by mutual consent, for prayer and fasting.
- A temporary “hiding” (during a period when one is likely to be wrongfully injured or abused) is permissible. It must last no longer than the hazard exists.
- One who separates (in a situation not approved by Scripture) is sinning and subject to church discipline.
- No matter what our sympathies may be, partners must remain together when they are having problems. Problems are not solved when people are apart, they are intensified and divorce becomes the inevitable outcome.
- Spouses cannot separate on the basis of carrying out “discipline” of their spouse. “Shunning” is not a command given to spouses. The one-flesh principle excludes one from cutting off part of their “body” (Eph. 5:22-33).

### c. Violence and physical abuse<sup>2</sup>

Because of the growing problem of violence within our society, and even within the Church, the Elders have endeavored to inform you of our policy with regard to this issue. What follows is a summary of our position on the church's role in dealing with family violence. Though its focus is mainly on the issue of violence directed at one's spouse, an even more aggressive set of actions would be appropriate in the case of child abuse. The Elders also consider themselves bound by the requirements of the civil authority that we report any known instances of child abuse. We will comply with that requirement.

Within the laws of Scripture and our society, physical violence resulting from sinful passions cannot be condoned or ignored by the church and its leadership. While isolated, non-repeating incidents of violence may be handled privately by strong reproof, correction, repentance and forgiveness, what are the church's actions and counsel in the case of a pattern of violence?

One does not need to study Scripture long to know that God abhors the violent person (Gen. 6:13, Ps. 11:5, Pr. 10:11, 28: 17). It is fortunate that our society attempts to recognize the sinfulness of violence and has provided laws and institutions which can be used to protect the individual from violent aggressors.

But should a Christian spouse or parent resort to the civil authority when an act of violence is occurring or has occurred? It is appropriate to do so. This permits an

<sup>2</sup> Board originally approved this section 5/2/1990. Added to this document 1/14/2020

independent validation of the violence to be documented by the appointed civil authority and initiates consequences for sinful behavior. The church recognizes that civil authority has been established by God to punish evildoers (Rom. 13: 1-6). If a person (even one who claims to be a Christian) violates the laws against violence, then that person has placed themselves under the control of and the power to be punished by the civil authority. Though the leadership of the church will want to be involved in the counsel and correction of the violent person, the control and punishment of that person has been placed in the hands of civil authority. Notice that even the apostle Paul exercised the protection of civil authority when his own life was threatened by the Jews in Acts 22-25.

Even in the case of the "first offense," it is important that an active and aggressive stance be taken by the local church to curb violence and get to the root of the problem as seen from both the victim's and aggressor's points of view. It is not possible for the leadership of the church to "take sides," however, against one who is accused of violent behavior when there is inadequate proof of the accusation. The Scriptures and our own experience show that accusations can be made for reasons other than righteous ones (Proverbs 10:12, 12:18, 18:13, 17, 20:19, 21:2, 19). The Scriptures also make it very clear that a minimum standard of proof and lack of repentance is required before the local church can openly discipline an individual (Deut. 17:6, 19:15-21, Mt. 18:15-16). In those instances where sufficient evidence of violence is lacking, the leadership will still actively work to assure that a pattern of violence cannot be hidden or perpetuated. If, instead, we have the testimony of credible witnesses of actual violence or civil authorities who have been summoned after a violent act, the leadership will take aggressive, protective action and insist that the violent person demonstrate an appropriate change in behavior and, if necessary, receive civil punishment for their violence.

In conjunction with dealing with the aggressor, leaders must also be prepared to reprove and correct any sinful behavior by the victim who contributes to the violent patterns. Though the violent person is fully responsible for their actions, the victim is also responsible for any sinful attitudes and actions which contribute to the build-up of violence. Both individuals must answer for their sinful actions, not just the one who is physically dominant.

Scripture does not justify taking legal action against a potential aggressor based on the fear of potential violence. If there is verbal threatening occurring, the fearful person should communicate their fear to the church's leadership who will assure that a place of hiding (Prov. 22:3) is available, rather than becoming the aggressor through legal actions. The Lord makes no mistakes when He commands us to be patient and enduring in difficult situations (1 Cor. 10:13, Phil. 4:13). God protects and strengthens us during tough and tempting times. The leaders of the church must counsel in harmony with the faithfulness of God rather than the fearfulness of the flesh.

In the event that one needs protection from a spouse, the leaders of the church are prepared to be supportive in two ways. First, the leaders will help establish a safe place

for the victims. Second, the leaders will help establish assurances of physical protection through the criminal justice system. This will include establishing the minimum legal restraints necessary to punish the sinful behavior while maintaining an open door to reconciliation. In no event will the leaders endorse nor assist in establishing legal restrictions that are intended to satisfy any desire for vengeance on the part of the victim (Rom. 12: 17-21). Nor will the leaders assist in a process that pursues divorce unless Mt. 19:9 or 1 Cor. 7: 15 are clearly applicable (unrepentant immorality).

#### 4. Issues of Remarriage

##### a. Remarriage following divorce

In given circumstances, God does allow remarriage following divorce. A general principle is that if the divorce was biblically justified, then a marriage to another is justified as well. If the divorce was not biblically justified then a marriage obligation may still exist towards the former spouse.

Specifically, the cases where a new marriage is allowed are:

- Sexual immorality was a cause for initiating the divorce, or sexual immorality has occurred subsequent to the divorce and is a reason for not continuing the marriage, or the spouse has married someone else (Matthew 5:32, 19:9).
- A non-believer has left a believer or, following the divorce, does not wish to be reconciled (I Corinthians 7:15: “The brother or sister is not under bondage,” is interpreted to convey freedom to marry another.”).

A new marriage is specifically not allowed where:

- No sexual immorality has occurred or if sexual immorality has occurred but it is not a factor in the decision by the non-offending spouse to remain apart (Matthew 5:32, 19:9, I Corinthians 7:11a).
- The non-believing partner did not want a divorce (cf. I Corinthians 7:12-13 and I Corinthians 7:11a).

The sinful implications of new marriage where the Bible has not allowed it are well documented. Essentially, the result is to cause adultery among those who enter into a new marriage following the divorce. Matthew 5:32 indicates that if the innocent spouse marries another then both that person and their new mate commit adultery. Matthew 19:9 and Mark 10:11 indicate that if the offending spouse marries then he/she commits adultery; by implication the person who marries the offending spouse commits adultery as well.

## b. Not marrying before former spouse marries or dies

Does a person who has been divorced need to wait until his/her former mate marries another or dies before he/she can marry?

At times such counsel is given to divorced people as being a biblical directive. However, before it is accepted it must be examined in relation to Scripture.

The first problem that arises in relation to this counsel is that Matthew 5:32, 19:9, and I Corinthians 7:15 all allow for marriage to another following a biblically justified divorce without any restriction spoken or implied about the former mate's marital status or life. To add on any additional requirements to these passages is to go beyond Scripture.

Some attempt to justify the statement that the former spouse must be dead to allow remarriage based on Romans 7:2-3, "For the married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband. So then, if, while her husband is living, she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is not adulteress, though she is joined to another man."

There are two problems encountered when one attempts to apply this passage to a person who has obtained a biblically justified divorce.

- The scope of Paul's argument in Romans 7 does not consider divorce. The argument is based on the assumption that the first marriage is intact at the time the woman is joined to another. By this act, she has committed bigamy and therefore adultery. In Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 remarriage following an immorality-based divorce is not considered adultery indicating, thereby, that the original marriage is no longer intact. In the framework of Romans 7, the original husband is no longer the woman's husband; that marriage is no longer existent. To deny this is to identify a supposed contradiction between Matthew and Romans which violates the inerrancy of Scripture.
- In examining both Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 it is apparent that the wife is still considered to be alive when the husband remarries, yet it is not considered to be adultery when the divorce was based on immorality.

There is one situation in which the counsel to remain single until the former spouse is dead can be considered to be sound. This occurs when the divorce was not biblical or continues to be without a biblical basis. In this case, to marry another prior to the remarriage or death of the former spouse would constitute adultery according to the Matthew passages. On the other hand, if the divorced spouse was to remarry first, then the resulting adultery would, "after-the-fact," provide grounds for the divorce. Also, if the divorced spouse was to die, then the person "is released from the law concerning the husband (or wife)," (Romans 7:1-3). Sexual immorality subsequent to the divorce may also be a cause for the non-offending spouse to enter a new marriage; both parties would

then be able to enter into a new marriage (Matt. 5:32). If the spouse is an unbeliever and refuses to now be reconciled, the believer is free to marry (I Corinthians 7:15).

**c. Offending spouse in an immorality-based divorce**

There is nothing in Scripture to indicate that the offending spouse in an immorality-based divorce cannot marry another. The impact of immorality followed by divorce is to break the bond which ties a marriage together (Matthew 5:32, 19:9), thus opening the way for a subsequent marriage. While the offending spouse must bear the guilt for having broken the bond and has responsibility to repent of the action, the fact exists that, upon divorce, the marriage has been legally dissolved and the way is clear for a new marriage by either party.

**d. Divorced as a non-Christian**

It is a very commonly held view that, based on passages such as II Corinthians 5:17, a Christian who was divorced as an unbeliever on nonbiblical grounds can marry another in God's will based solely upon his/her conversion. Those who hold position contend that if "he is a new creature" then "the old things passed away" means that he is released from any obligations to his pre-Christian marriage.

The principle difficulty with this view rests with the implication that new life in Christ releases us from prior obligations. While we are forgiven for our sins by salvation, we cannot claim freedom from binding obligations. A person who incurs a monetary debt as an unbeliever is still bound to repay it after being saved, and one who commits a crime while unsaved is still required to pay the earthly penalty for that crime even if he becomes a Christian and is saved from the eternal penalty. In the same way, a person who is married and subsequently divorced on unbiblical grounds as a non-Christian is obligated to the original marriage commitment after receiving Christ, barring a subsequent marriage, immorality, or a refusal to reconcile.

Based on I Corinthians 7:12-13, one would certainly not allow a man to abandon a marriage obligation to a non-Christian wife simply because he had subsequently been saved. This same obligation binds the man if he unjustifiably divorced his wife prior to his salvation.

The principle of continuing obligations despite salvation has the effect of binding pre-Christian marriages with the same requirements as Christian marriages. The only justifiable ground for divorce is immorality (Matthew 5:32; 19:9) or abandonment by an unbeliever (I Corinthians 7:15).

There are four situations that allow a Christian with a pre-salvation, unbiblical divorce to marry:

- A person may be reconciled to the former spouse, if that person has not married another.
- If the spouse, as a non-Christian, refuses to be reconciled, then the spouse becomes the unbelieving mate of I Corinthians 7:15, thus freeing the brother or sister from bondage and opening the way to marry another.
- If there has been subsequent marriage, Deuteronomy 24 does not allow remarriage to the former mate; therefore, the brother is free to remarry.
- If there has been subsequent immorality on the part of the divorced mate and this is a cause for not reconciling, then the brother is free to remarry.

**e. Another marriage has already occurred following an unbiblical divorce**

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 chronicles the sequence of divorce, remarriage, and subsequent divorce with the question of remarrying the original spouse.

“When a man takes a wife and marries her . . . and he writes her a certificate of divorce . . . and sends her out from his house, and she . . . becomes another man’s wife, and if the latter husband . . . writes her a certificate of divorce . . . or if the latter husband dies . . . then her former husband . . . is not allowed to take her again to be his wife.”

Based upon the principles of this passage, it would be wrong for the original partners to remarry.

Where a remarried person desires to repent of a non-biblically based divorce, the repentance should embody a recognition of his sin, confession of that sin to the Lord (Psalms 32:5; I John 1:9), and should result in a changed lifestyle, which will be demonstrated in his devoting himself to his new spouse.

NOTE: While the language of Deuteronomy describes the specific actions as relating to the husband as the instigator and the wife as the victim, the passage was not intended to apply only to that circumstance. Reversed roles of husband and wife would have the same effect. It is often the pattern of Scripture to state commands in regard to the man which actually apply to both sexes. For example, the tenth commandment in Exodus 20:17 states, “you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife,” and yet all would acknowledge that the command would apply to a woman not coveting her neighbor’s husband as well. Again, when Deuteronomy 19 describes that refuge was available to a man who accidentally murders another and later talks about the consequence of giving false testimony against a man, it is apparent that the male references would be applicable to females as well.

### III. Primary Scriptural Passages Pertaining to Divorce and Remarriage

#### 1. Deuteronomy 21:1-4

##### Thesis Statement

In Deuteronomy 24:1-4, Moses acknowledges the situation that a man in his day could divorce his wife on the grounds of extreme personal displeasure towards her. Nonetheless, to avoid the problem of a devalued view of marriage, and to underscore the serious nature of such a divorce action, Moses prohibited subsequent remarriage between the two original parties if the wife had been involved in a subsequent marriage to another man.

In the study that follows, it will be shown that the divorce grounds of the passage do not include sexual immorality. Although God, through Moses, allowed for divorce on grounds that stopped short of sexual immorality, this should not give the conclusion that God's stamp of approval was bestowed upon the action.

##### Analysis

There is very little information on divorce practices and procedures during the period of the Old Testament. Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is the only extended Old Testament allusion to the actual procedure that was followed. The structure of the passage gives a hypothetical situation, and the resultant consequences. The structure can be summarized as follows:

- vs. 1: A man marries a woman and subsequently finds some "indecency" in her. He then writes her a "certificate of divorce" sends her away.
- vs. 2: She remarries another man
- vs. 3: The remarriage dissolves either through divorce or the husband's death.
- vs. 4: Consequence: The first husband may not remarry her, since:
  - she has been "defiled";
  - this would be an "abomination" before the Lord; and
  - this would spread the contamination of sin throughout the land.

Moses is not giving open encouragement to the practice of divorce in this passage. He is dealing with a situation in which divorce has occurred. At the most, he is implying a grudging tolerance of the divorce.

A comparison of major English translation of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 reveals one translation that differs significantly from the rest; that is, the Authorized Version. All recent major translations

end the protasis (the “if” section) at the beginning of verse 4, although the KJV ends it at the middle of the first verse:

“When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it comes to pass that she finds no favor in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement...”.

The King James Version thus gives the appearance of Moses as encouraging divorce. This is the same error in interpretation which Christ corrected in Matthew 19:8. After being asked, “Why did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce . . .” Christ corrects the questioners with his reply “Moses permitted you to divorce you wives . . .”

The conclusion is that Moses is neither establishing nor encouraging divorce in this passage. Instead, he is adding a restriction to what is generally known to have been an existing practice of the time in Eastern cultures, perhaps to inhibit impulsive divorces on the part of overeager husbands.

#### Interpretation of “Indecency”

The exact meaning of “indecency” (NASV) in the first verse is obscure. The phrase *erwat dabar* can be literally translated “a nakedness thing” or “a matter of nakedness.” The phrase *erwat dabar* occurs only twice in the O.T., but the key term *erwat* occurs some 54 times in the Old Testament. The NASV has translated it as “nakedness” 48 times (32 times in Leviticus 18 and 20). The noun translated “nakedness” is itself derived from the verb *arah*, which means to uncover, leave destitute, discover, empty, raze, or pour out. Ronald Allen points out that “. . . nakedness in the Old Testament, after Genesis 3:7, is a symbol of human shame, the evil fruit of sin.”<sup>3</sup> The following are various options that have been suggested to interpret what “indecency” means:

- a. Some have suggested that Moses had adultery in mind, and was using a euphemism rather than the term “adultery” itself. In this case the man in our passage has discovered that his wife has become involved in adultery with another man, and consequently divorces her. However, adultery could hardly be in view in this passage. Adultery had already been labeled as a capital offense (Leviticus 20:10, Deuteronomy 22:22). There is no reason to assume that divorce was even an option in the case of adultery in the time of Moses, since the purpose for the death verdict was to purge the nation of such evil! Furthermore, if Moses had wanted to refer directly to adultery in Deuteronomy 24, there is no hint in the context as to why he would want to approach the subject euphemistically, especially when he uses straightforward language about the subject in every other passage bearing on the problem of adultery.

<sup>3</sup> R. Laird Harris, ed. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* Vol. 2 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), p. 695.

- b. Others have suggested that Moses is using the more general term *erwat dabar* to suggest the broader range of sexual immorality. Under this interpretation the phrase would include such matters as incest, homosexuality, bestiality, and pre-marital intercourse. Just as in the case of adultery, previous Mosaic statements make this interpretation impossible. Incest is forbidden in Leviticus 18, and the penalty is to be cut off from among their people (vs. 29). Homosexuality was punishable by death (Leviticus 20:13). Bestiality was also a capital offense (Leviticus 20:16). Yet another capital offense was the situation where a man married a woman he had thought was a virgin, only to subsequently discover she had not been a virgin (Deuteronomy 22:21-22). In the case of a man who had involved himself in per-marital sex and then married the girl, he was under specific injunction to never put her away in the future (Deuteronomy 22:28-29).
- c. The suggested interpretation that seems to be the most defensible is that *erwat dabar* is speaking of anything which would provoke serious displeasure or even repugnance on the part of the husband, short of sexual immorality itself. Though such an interpretation might at first appearance seem to be too lax or liberal, it is nonetheless supported by the following considerations. First, this interpretation does not have the problem of identifying *erwat dabar* with any of the sexual infractions that were condemned in other Mosaic passages, requiring punishment by death. Secondly, the near use of phrase in an adjoining context supports a picture of strong repugnance. In Deuteronomy 23:14, the phrase is used as a description of the excrement which is to be located outside the camp, rather than left in the camp, and which is to be covered up. For excrement to be left in the camp and uncovered would be *erwat dabar*. Thirdly, the interpretation fits the already stated indefiniteness of the phrase under consideration. Apparently Moses is saying here, “Whatever the basis for the strong displeasure with your wife that led to your divorcing her, if she remarries and is then divorced again or widowed, she may not remarry you.” Finally, this interpretation of the phrase would then be seen to harmonize with Matthew 19:3-9, where the Pharisees are asking Jesus if it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife for “any and every reason.” When they infer here their understanding that this was the correct interpretation of Deuteronomy 24, Christ does not object, but says “. . . it was not this way from the beginning.” In doing so, Christ places Deuteronomy 24:1-4 in its greater context, the emphasis being placed on the sanctity of marriage which the Lord God set forth from the very creation of man in the Garden.

#### Contribution of Deuteronomy 24:1-4

This passage uniquely addresses marriage of the original partners to each other after a non-immorality based divorce when there has been an intervening marriage. Moses termed this action an abomination before the Lord. There is every reason to believe it remains as displeasing to Him today.

## 2. Ezra 9-10

### Thesis Statement

Ezra chapters 9-10 provide an account of divorce proceedings that were brought about because Israelite men had married foreign women. This was contrary to the regulations forbidding intermarriage as set forth in Deuteronomy 7:3-4 and Exodus 34:11-16. Divorce, in this context, was allowed on the basis of Deuteronomy 24:1, which appears to have provided the procedural guideline for this action.

### Contextual Analysis

During the reign of Artaxerxes I, King of Persia, Ezra, a Jewish priest well versed in the Law of Moses (Ezra 7:6), was allowed to return to Jerusalem to reestablish the religion of Israel. He was given special authority by the king of Persia to inflict punishment upon those who would not submit themselves to the law of God and the law of the king (7:25-26).

After a four-month trip, Ezra and a large contingent of Jewish families arrived in Jerusalem from Babylon (ch. 8). The exiles proceeded to offer sacrifices and deliver to the satraps and governors the letter which Artaxerxes had given for Ezra's safe journey, and the assurance of provisions for the worship observances of the returning band (7:12-26).

After Ezra had been in Jerusalem for about four months<sup>4</sup>, the leaders of those exiles who had come to Jerusalem before the trip led by Ezra, reported to Ezra that the Israelites had not kept themselves separate. The Jewish people had intermarried with the people from among the surrounding cultures. From a comparison of the lists in chapters 8 and 10, it appears that even some of those who had returned with Ezra to Jerusalem had, in the intervening months, been involved in intermarrying.

When Ezra heard of the intermarrying of the exiles with the neighboring peoples he lamented, tore his cloak and tunic, pulled hair from his head and beard, and sat in mourning. Meanwhile, the people gathered.

At the time of the evening sacrifice, Ezra arose with hands outstretched and began to pray. By this time a large crowd had gathered. One of the men, Shecaniah, upon hearing Ezra's prayer of confession and plea for mercy, suggested that the men send their foreign wives away, i.e. that they divorce them (10:2-4). Ezra responded and placed the people under oath to do this.

<sup>4</sup> The figure of four months is derived from the figures provided in 7:8-9 and 10:9. It is said that the exiles gathered together in Jerusalem within three days of the proclamation which followed on the heels of Ezra's discovery of the intermarriage problem. Thus, from the time of Ezra's arrival in 5-1-7 until the date provided for the gathering of the people, 9-20-7, there passed approximately four months.

A proclamation was then sent out to all of the men of Judah and Benjamin stating that they should gather in Jerusalem. As the assembly sat in the square before the temple, Ezra told them that they should separate from their foreign wives. The men responded favorably and plans were made for the selection of men from each town who would investigate each case of intermarriage from their particular town. The process of investigation began 10 days after the assembly in Jerusalem and was completed three months later. (10:16-17)

#### Relationship of Ezra 9-10 to Deuteronomy 24:1

Ezra must have begun teaching the Law soon after his arrival in Jerusalem (7:8-10). Assuming that Deuteronomy was the book of the Law that he had been teaching, it would not have taken him very long to reach the seventh chapter.<sup>5</sup> Having had the opportunity to hear the words of the Law and reflect upon the practices of the people in their own community, the leaders of the Israelites came to report to Ezra an infraction of the Law which they had just been taught.

It is interesting to note the language used by the leaders as they approached Ezra. The detestable practices of the neighboring peoples with whom those Israelites came into contact were said to be “like those of the Canaanites . . . etc.,” and a string of names is given which are similar to the lists of peoples in Ex. 34:1-16 and Deuteronomy 7:1-4. The rising concern over the social dilemma was clearly due to Ezra’s teaching of the Law.

Where Deuteronomy 24 comes into play is in Ezra 10:2. In response to Ezra’s mourning, Shecaniah suggested that the men send their foreign wives and children away. Ezra was not the one to suggest that the men divorce their foreign wives – they brought it up themselves. In addition, there was the statement by Shecaniah, “Let it be done according to the Law.” (vs. 3) The only specific law which Shecaniah could have been referring to was Deuteronomy 24:1. In as much as the Law had been broken by intermarriage with those of surrounding cultures, it was thought best to remedy the situation by any means possible as long as “it be done according to the Law.” Ezra is a testimony to the breadth of situations that this passage in Deuteronomy was understood to have covered. According to the Israelite’s and Ezra’s interpretation, the meaning of *erwat dabar* was broad enough to cover even this situation. The foreign women, in light of Ezra’s teaching, did not “find favor” in the men’s eyes and so they were divorced according to the legal provision made in the Law for ending marriages.

Throughout Ezra 10, one can see a close connection between the actions taken by the post-exilic Israelite community and the pattern for legal divorce presented in Deuteronomy 24. In Ezra 10:2-3, something about the women was identified as displeasing. Each case was then investigated by representative leaders. Finally, the women were put away (10:19, 44). In addition to the actions required by Deuteronomy 24:1, a guilt offering was presented (10:19). This would not have been the result of the teaching in Deuteronomy 24:1, but in response to

<sup>5</sup> There are several theories about the identification of “the Law” that Ezra used. The three main theories are: 1) the entire Pentateuch, 2) variously gathered portions of priestly writings, and 3) the book of Deuteronomy. W.J. Dumbrell, “Malachi and Ezra – Nehemiah Reforms,” *The Reformed Theological Review*, 35:2 (May-August, 1976), p.47.

violating the command given in Deuteronomy 7, and shows the concern of conscientiously following the legal ordinances. It is not out of place to read into the process presented in Ezra 10 the giving of a certificate of divorce as the actions were “done according to the Law.”

#### Relation of Ezra 9-10 to Malachi 2:10-16

Many of the problems dealt with in the book of Malachi are those that plagued the community of Israel during the time of Ezra. In fact, many scholars will date the writing of Malachi to the years immediately preceding the reforms brought into effect by Ezra and Nehemiah.

Malachi 2:11 also presents the problem of intermarriage. It is even possible in the context of the Malachi passage to deduce that polygamy was going on as well as intermarriage.<sup>6</sup> The apparent readiness of the men to divorce their foreign wives in Ezra 10 might suggest that not only was their zeal to obey the Law, but that polygamy is also present. It would seem far easier to put away a foreign wife if there were another wife, an Israelite woman, at home to satisfy physical and emotional needs (This, of course, is only speculation, since the text does not specifically identify the presence of polygamy).

The connections between Malachi<sup>7</sup> and Ezra in their respective marriage and divorce passages are as follows:

- a. In both books, the men of Judah had broken faith by marrying foreign women who had foreign gods. (Ezra 9:2, Malachi 2:11)
- b. Both state that those who would continue in this sin should be cut off from the community of Israel. (Ezra 10:8, Mal 2:12)
- c. Both Ezra and Malachi suggest the possibility of polygamy.
- d. Both books are in line with the teaching of Deuteronomy 24:1 on the issue of procedure of divorce. (Ezra 10:2-17, Malachi 2:16)

All in all, it appears that both Ezra and Malachi were addressing the same social situation among the Israelites concerning intermarriage and both shared a viewpoint concerning divorce and its place in Old Testament legislation and life, drawn from the teaching of Deuteronomy 24:1.

#### Contribution of Ezra 9-10

The chief contribution of this passage toward our understanding of divorce and remarriage involves continuity of the Old Testament standard on divorce in the Israelite community.

<sup>6</sup> Refer to section on Malachi 2:16.

<sup>7</sup> Many scholars even suggest that the author of Malachi was Ezra. The designation, “Malachi,” could either be used as a personal name or as an editor’s title for an anonymous book. Using the latter option, the Hebrew word *malachi* would then be translated “my messenger” or “my angel,” as it is in Zech. 1:9, 11, etc. Jerome, Rabbi Rashi (1040-1105), and Calvin were inclined to accept this view and identify *malachi* “my messenger” with Ezra. On the other hand, tradition is strong for accepting Malachi as the personal name of a post-exilic prophet living at approximately the same time as Ezra. Joyce G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi: An Introduction & Commentary*; Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Illinois, Tyndale House, 1972), p. 212.

Deuteronomy 24:1 is clearly the foundation which allowed the divorce action in Ezra 10 to be pursued.

This passage illustrates the laxity (not according to ancient Near Eastern standards but according to those of our Lord seen in Matthew 19:8-9 etc.) with which the divorce issue was approached in Old Testament times.

Finally, it must be said that the New Testament believer is not free to follow the more permissive practice recognized by Deuteronomy and illustrated in Ezra, but is obligated to maintain the higher standards reintroduced from Genesis by our Lord.

### **3. Malachi 2:16**

#### Thesis Statement

The reading of Malachi 2:16 begins, “If hating, send away, says Yahweh, God of Israel.” This translation is supported by all ancient versions, by the syntactic evidence concerning the present reading of the Masoretic text, and by the consistency of this reading with the context of Malachi; nevertheless, most modern translations render the passage, “. . . for I hate divorce.” The passage does not provide specific guidance in the area of divorce and remarriage.

#### Historical Setting

The prophet Malachi is reprimanding the people of Israel for their sins in regard to temple worship and for immorality in the community. Internal evidence indicates that the book was written after the return of the exiles from Babylonia and the reconstruction of the Temple, yet written before the reforms which had been placed into effect by Ezra and Nehemiah. The sins which were characteristic of the pre-exile 8<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries still plagued this early fifth century BC community.

#### Contextual Analysis

In 2:10-16, Malachi affirms the commonality of one God in a covenant relationship with His people. Israel is reminded that they are a nation created by one God, not the multitude of gods represented by the spouses in religiously mixed marriages.

Two examples of “breaking the faith” or “dealing treacherously” with one another are given by Malachi. First of all, some in Judah had married foreigners; this desecrated the sanctuary. With the marriage of foreign wives also came the worship of their gods. The last phrase of vs. 12, “even though he brings offerings to Almighty Yahweh,” would suggest that a type of religious syncretism was evolving. A man might be found to worship a foreign god in his home and yet bring offerings to the Temple of Yahweh as if to honor Him as well. Malachi responds, “may Yahweh cut him off from the tents of Jacob.” A quick look at the reforms brought about by both

Ezra and Nehemiah will readily show that this type of intermarrying with surrounding cultures was in fact going on at this time.<sup>8</sup>

The second example of treacherous actions is contained in 2:13-16 and is set in a type of synonymous parallelism with verses 10-12. The statement, “another thing you do,” provides the transition. A parallel thought does seem to exist, as if the prophet were saying, ‘here is another thing that you are doing which closely parallels your unfaithfulness to Me.’ The charge was that they had ignored the sacred covenant relationship with their wives (vs. 14), just as they had ignored the sacred covenant that they had with Yahweh to worship Him and Him alone.

Biblical scholars agree that the original words of 2:15 are uncertain to us today. The NIV translation, “Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are His,” has the most support.<sup>9</sup> The verse points out that God has made them one and they are not to deal treacherously with the wives of their youth.

### Primary Text

The first seven Hebrew words of the Masoretic Text (MT) in verse 16 are the heart of this passage concerning the issue of divorce. The relationship of the first three words to the following four words is the point of contention among translators.

The first word is a particle, *ki*. In this position, it will take one of these senses most satisfactorily. It will either be causal (because or for), temporal (when), or conditional (if). The second word is a stative verb, *saneh*, meaning “to hate.” With the Masoretic vowel pointing it can be a Qal perfect 3ms verb, “he hated” or a Qal active participle ms “hating,” or “he hates.” The third word is again a verb, *shalah*, “to send.” It can be either a Piel imperative 2ms, “Send away! Let go! Set free!” or a Piel infinitive construct without a prepositional prefix denoting the abstract concept, “sending away.” The initial phrase is then followed by the statement, “says Yahweh, God of Israel.”

There are three major proposals in the reading of this clause.

- a. “I hate divorce, says the LORD God of Israel.” This is the most common translation seen in modern texts. It is the reading of the NIV, the NASB, and the Jerusalem Bible among others. Commentators argue that this is the meaning of the Hebrew text even though the actual reading of the MT does not contain the first person singular pronoun. Joyce

<sup>8</sup> Elephantine, a Jewish community in Egypt showed a similar problem of religious syncretism.

<sup>9</sup> NASB reads for 2:15, “But not one has done so who has a remnant of the Spirit. “The divergence is brought about because of the Hebrew word *sh’r*. The NASB has held to the vowel pointing that is resident in the Masoretic text making the word mean “remnant” resulting in “remnant of the Spirit.” The translators of the NIV chose another vowel pointing to stand with the same Hebrew consonants to give the word for “flesh” and the translation “flesh and spirit belong to him.” This translation does demand a little less mental juggling of the Hebrew text, even though it does lead to some vowel changes. This is justified because the vowels of the MT were not part of the original text and are open to interpretation.

Baldwin, in her commentary on Malachi, states, “Evidently the text suffered early at the hands of one who wanted to bring Malachi’s teaching in line with that of Deuteronomy 24:1.”<sup>10</sup> Baldwin feels that the reading of the MT “undermines all that the prophet is seeking to convey.”<sup>11</sup> (The reading of the MT is handled in the third proposal).

This reading is close to Jesus’ teaching on divorce in the New Testament. If that reading is accepted, then Malachi acts as a kind of moral stepping stone. As Baldwin has put it, “Malachi’s plea prepares the way for the teaching of Jesus.”<sup>12</sup>

Although it is possible that the text has suffered at the hands of some editorializing scribe, there is no textual evidence at all that would point to this. No ancient text, neither Hebrew nor a translation, provides a basis for the kind of consonantal emendation that would be necessary for the text to read, “I hate divorce.” W.J. Dumbrell writes, “The translation of verse 16 as “I hate divorce” is exceedingly improbable . . . The tense of first person in translation of vs. 16 is interpretive.”<sup>13</sup>

- b. “The LORD God of Israel said that he hates divorce.” This is similar to the interpretive lines of the last translation. It is the reading of the KJV, Rotherham’s Emphasized Bible, and others. This reading makes God speak of Himself in the third person. This is out of character for the pattern established in the five other major statements of Yahweh that make up the theological core of the book (1:2 “I have loved you;” 1:14 “I am a great King;” 3:1 “I send my messenger;” 3:6 “I the LORD do not change;” 3:17 “They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts.”). The other way of viewing the statement is that the prophet himself is referring to a statement which Yahweh has made in a manner which is not characteristic of normal Hebrew syntax.
- c. “If hating, send away, says Yahweh, God of Israel.” A restatement of the sense of the text would be, “If you hate her, send her away!” This is the best reading of the MT; support is given even by those who believe the text has suffered scribal alteration. Joyce Baldwin writes, “The Hebrew in fact reads, ‘if he hates send (her) away,’ a sense found also in the ancient Versions.”<sup>14</sup> Calvin writes, “This then is the reason why the Prophet now says, ‘If thou hatest, dismiss.’”<sup>15</sup> John Milton makes reference to this reading of Malachi with, “Yea God himself commands in his Law more than once and by his Prophet Malachi, as Calvin and the best translators read, that ‘he who hates, let him divorce.’”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Joyce Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary*, Volume 24, ed. D.J. Wiseman, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, Illinois: 1972), p. 241.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>13</sup> W.J. Dumbrell, “Malachi and the Ezra-Nehemiah Reforms,” *The Reformed Theological Review*, 35:2 (May-August, 1976), p. 47.

<sup>14</sup> Baldwin, p. 241.

<sup>15</sup> John Calvin, *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, Calvin Commentaries (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Printing Co., 1849), p. 560.

<sup>16</sup> John Milton, *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, 1645 edition, (Microfilm), p. 15.

It was Calvin's view that the Jews were practicing polygamy. They would marry foreign women while at the same time retaining their Jewish wives forcibly. To this adultery was added their cruelty. They had broken the covenant that they had made with their Jewish wives. He writes:

The prophet here, I doubt not, shakes off from Jews their false mask, because they thought that they could cover over their vice by retaining their first wives. "What else is this," he says, "but to cover by a cloak your violence, or at least to excuse it? For ye do not openly manifest it; but God is not deceived, nor can his eye be dazzled by such a disguise; though then your iniquity is covered by a cloak, it is not hid from God; nay, it is thus doubled because ye exercise your cruelty at home; for it would be better for robbers to remain in the wood and there to kill strangers than to entice guests to their house and to kill them there and to plunder them under the pretext of hospitality. This is the way in which you act; for ye destroy the bond of marriage, and ye afterwards deceive your miserable wives, and yet ye force them by your tyranny to continue at your houses, and thus ye torment your miserable wives, who might have enjoyed their freedom, if divorce had been granted them."<sup>17</sup>

Such an interpretation is very much in keeping with the overall theme of Malachi 2:10-16. The objection which Baldwin and others raise (i.e. that the reading "if hating, send away" would promote divorce) does not recognize the pattern of Old Testament thought on divorce, nor does it take into account the possibility of polygamy.

Comparison of the three interpretations indicates that this third interpretation of the current Hebrew text is the most supportive. In the Hebrew text, the initial particle is understood to be temporal or conditional denoting real conditions, and the first verb can stand either as an active participle or a stative perfect, expressing a state or condition. The really important contrast comes in the conjugation of the second verb. Here it is taken to be not an infinitive construct but an imperative.

### The Reading of Ancient Versions

It has already been noted in Joyce Baldwin's quote above that the ancient versions agree with the reading, "If hating, send away." No ancient version is found divergent from this reading.

The Septuagint (LXX) on Malachi 2:16 follows the MT in its syntax and wording.<sup>18</sup> This indicates that the LXX translators understood the initial Hebrew particle of verse 16 to be

<sup>17</sup> John Calvin, p. 561.

<sup>18</sup> Exceptions are only late in the verse where "impiety" is used for the Hebrew "violence" and "thoughts" for the Hebrew "clothing."

conditional or temporal, the first verb to be a participle, and the second verb to be an imperative. This shows that the reading presented by the MT was the same as the reading of the Hebrew text used by the translators of the LXX in 285-200 BC.

Jerome's Latin Vulgate is the next important witness to the above reading of Malachi 2:16. Jerome was commissioned by Pope Damasus I to produce a Bible for the Latin-speaking church. He was chosen as a scholar, eminently qualified for this task because of his detailed knowledge of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Ernst Wurthwein notes:

“The work which represents the real achievements of Jerome, establishing his significance for the history of the text and exercising the broadest influence for the history of western culture, is his translation of the Old Testament from the Hebrew text which he accomplished in the years 390-405. He alone among the Christians of the West was capable of making this translation from the original text, because of his knowledge of Hebrew.”<sup>19</sup>

Jerome's Vulgate, at Malachi 2:16, reads “*cum odio habueris dimitte dicit Dominus Deus Israhel,*” translated, “If you hate, send away (imperative), says the Lord the God of Israel.” (It is interesting to note that the editors of this text have added a side reference to Deuteronomy 24:1 at this point.)

The Targums, a translation of the Hebrew text into Aramaic in the post-exilic period when the larger part of the Jewish community no longer understood Hebrew, also gives this reading of Malachi 2:16, “If you hate her, divorce her.” This can be seen in the Targum Jonathan for the Prophets, which, along with Targum Onkelos for the Pentateuch, was the least known of the Targums. The Targum Jonathan was authoritative for Judaism. It was one of the official Targums and attempted to reproduce the Hebrew text quite literally.<sup>20</sup> It was evidently established in Babylon in about the fifth century AD after a long history of development.<sup>21</sup>

Cyril, the Patriarch of Alexandria (412-444), adopted this interpretation of the text. This is significant only in the fact that Cyril is an important witness to the Alexandrian text in his commentaries.

It is interesting to mention the Syriac Peshitta at this point, which completely leaves out Malachi 2:16a. The Peshitta was a translation used by the Syrian Church. After the LXX, it stands as the oldest and most important rendering of the Hebrew Scriptures into another language.<sup>22</sup> An omission of Malachi 2:16a would at least suggest that the moral difficulty of God telling the Judean men to divorce their wives if they hated them, in light of the NT teaching on divorce, caused the translators of the Peshitta to leave the phrase out of their work completely. This is

<sup>19</sup> Ernst Wurthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Biblia Hebraica* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 92.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 78.

<sup>21</sup> According to the local text theory, the Hebrew text from Babylon represents the proto-MT and is the most reliable text of the Old Testament, with the possible exception of the books of Samuel and Jeremiah.

<sup>22</sup> R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: 1969), p. 240.

only a supposition, but it is plausible and worthy of serious consideration. Such practices are known in the history of textual transmission and translation.<sup>23</sup>

#### Contributions of Malachi 2:13-16

The major contribution of this passage does not involve divorce but God's compassion toward those who are oppressed. In this case, the wife was being mistreated by a husband who hated her and had probably taken an additional wife. God did not want the woman to suffer at the hand of this hard-hearted tyrant and so, in His compassion toward her, tells the man that he should give her freedom.

#### 4. Matthew 5:31-32

##### Thesis Statement

The emphasis of this passage is to highlight the wrong that a husband does to his innocent wife by his unjust action of divorce.<sup>24</sup> If a person divorces a spouse for any reason other than fornication, the initiator has caused the spouse to sin if he or she should remarry. Fornication is defined as sexual activity outside of a proper marriage relationship. The passage corrects the belief of the scribes and Pharisees that God's standard of righteousness extends only to processing a divorce bill.

##### Contextual Analysis

Although the Sermon on the Mount is basically directed to the disciples (5:1), the multitudes were also present (7:28). The clear instruction of 5:13-16, using the analogy of the salt and the lamp, is directed at teaching believers in an unbelieving world.

The people of God's kingdom and their expected blessings are outlined in 5:13-16. Genuine righteousness is defined in 5:17-7:12 which includes the passage in question. Genuine righteousness must be defined because of the emphasis which the teachers of the day were placing on external practices being sufficient to merit righteousness. This contrast is introduced in 5:17-20. This is not a contrast between the Law and Christ's commands as He makes it clear in 5:17 that His purpose is not to abolish the Law. The contrast is with the external righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, whose righteousness must be surpassed if a person is to gain entrance into the Kingdom (5:20).

A movement from the external to the internal can be seen by each of the first two contrasts. The people of the time had been taught that not committing murder kept a person free of guilt

<sup>23</sup> Although not ancient sources, it is of interest to note that the Geneva Bible of 1560 and the Knox translation of 1944 are two examples of more modern translations which do contain the suggested reading of Malachi 2:16.

<sup>24</sup> Guy Duty, *Divorce and Remarriage* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany Fellowship, Inc., 1967) p. 29.

regarding this command, yet Christ showed that it extended to anger and hate (5:21-26). Not committing adultery is similarly defined as making no provision for temptation (5:27-30).

The divorce passage under consideration follows the same pattern. Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is purposely misquoted in Matthew 5:31, probably with the emphasis that the Pharisees and scribes had used. Their interpretation placed the emphasis on the external; i.e., get the paperback right and everything will be acceptable before God.

As in the prior passages, Jesus moves from the external emphasis towards the heart's attitude and secret actions. The man who divorces his wife for some superficial reason has unjustifiably set aside the marriage covenant between them. He is said to "make her commit adultery" for she will undoubtedly remarry. Remaining single in the hope of reconciliation to a former spouse was unknown in biblical times. This would have been a sobering warning to the man who divorced his wife for some superficial reason, and then reflected self-righteously on his own non-adulterous record.

#### The Textual Integrity of the "Exception Clause"

The phrase "except for the cause of fornication (*porneia*)" in 5:32 and 19:9 is generally referred to as the "Matthew exception clause." The textual integrity has at times been an issue because it is speculated by some that this must be an addition by a scribe at a later date, thinking that Jesus' statement needed qualification. The number of authors who seriously propose this as a concern is limited; those who do believe it to be altered offer subjective argumentation rather than clear textual evidence.<sup>25</sup> There is no known manuscript that omits the exception clause. All of the early church fathers accepted the statement and considered fornication as justifiable grounds for divorce.<sup>26</sup>

#### Meaning of *Porneia* and *Moicheia*

The exception clause has no meaning unless the term *porneia* (fornication) is understood. The use of *moicheia* (adultery) must also be defined as it is used in the context and is similar to *porneia*.

The conclusion of this study is that *porneia* is sexual activity outside of a proper marriage relationship regardless of marital status; *moicheia* is unfaithfulness toward one's marriage partner. *Porneia* would be the broader term, and would encompass *moicheia*.

*Moicheia* is sexual activity of a married person with a person who is not his rightful mate.<sup>27</sup> Romans 7:1-3 clearly teaches that a woman whose husband is living is still bound to him. If she marries another in this situation she has committed adultery; it is *moicheia*.

<sup>25</sup> For example, see Les Woodson, *Divorce and the Gospel of Grace* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1979), pp. 17-19.

<sup>26</sup> Guy Duty, pp. 73-76 and J. Carl Laney, *The Divorce Myth* (Minneapolis, Minn.: 1981), p. 66.

<sup>27</sup> New Testament usage of the term is less frequent than *porneia* (35 compared with 54). Most of the usages are in lists or used as a noun without explanation, which makes them of little help in defining the term. The Septuagint

The term *porneia* has a much broader meaning than *moicheia*. I Corinthians 5:1 uses the term *porneia* to describe a man who had his father's wife. Paul is affirming that incest is included in the term. I Corinthians 6 continues to deal with the theme of immorality. A contrast is set up between a person joining himself with a harlot (same root, *pornee*) and one who joins himself with the Lord. "The body is not for *porneia*, but the Lord . . ." (6:13), Paul writes. *Porneia* is used in a general sense as any immorality showing unfaithfulness but specifically related to the use of the body.

The motivational root of *porneia* is clearly lust in I Thessalonians 4:5, as it also is in I Corinthians 7:2. *Porneia* is the natural result when any man or woman fails to flee immorality and pursue righteousness.

*Porneia* and *moicheia* are often used in a list together, as in Matthew 15:19, Mark 7:21, and Galatians 5:19. This would indicate that they have somewhat different usages and are not completely equivalent terms. However, no conclusion may be drawn from such passages as to their overlap of meaning.

Revelation 2:20-22 uses the two terms of *porneia* and *moicheia* to describe the same participants. The admonition is to the church in Thyatira:

"But I have this against you that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bondservants astray, so that they commit acts of *porneia* and eat things sacrificed to idols. And I gave her time to repent; and she does not want to repent of her *porneia*. Behold, I will cast her upon a bed of sickness, and those who commit *moicheia* with her into great tribulation unless they repent of her deeds." (Revelation 2:20-22)

The first usage of *porneia* is placed alongside the eating of things sacrificed to idols. Verse 22 switches to *moicheia* with no explanation. *Moicheia* has implications beyond sexual sin; the marriage covenant is in view and the extra-marital activity violates the strong love relationship between man and woman. Scripture often uses both *porneia* and *moicheia* to describe idolatry. Passages which speak of idolatry for unbelievers use *porneia* (Revelation 14:8, 17:2, 17:4, 18:3, 19:2), yet, where Israel is concerned, they are referred to as adulterous (*moicheia*) generation (Matt. 12:39, 16:4, Mark 8:38).<sup>28</sup> This further substantiates the idea that *porneia* is the broader term.

(LXX) uses *moicheia* for *na'aph* the common term for any extra-marital sexual relationship by a married woman and the extra-marital sexual relationship of a man with a married or engaged woman. Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology Volume 2* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), p. 582.

<sup>28</sup> Revelation 2:14 uses *porneia* to describe the idol-worshipping sons of Israel; however, here as well as in Revelation 2:20-22, it is the eating of things sacrificed to idols. This would support the conclusion that *porneia* is the more general term. I Corinthians 10:8 includes idolatry and sexual immorality.

Guy Duty presents an impressive list of dictionaries and lexicons as well as a number of citations from early Christian writers to indicate that *porneia* is also used in relationship to sexual activity of a person who is married.<sup>29</sup>

#### Interpretation of the “Exception Clause”

One possible interpretation of the exception clause is that it applies only when a person’s spouse is a practicing harlot.<sup>30</sup> This view must be rejected on the following grounds:

- a. The noun form (harlot . . . *porne*) is not used in Matthew 5:32 or 19:9 as would be expected if the above interpretation was correct.
- b. The majority of the uses of *porneia* are specific exhortations to flee immorality. Considering these passages as “flee harlotry” would betray their contexts that demand a broader scope of personal holiness.
- c. As previously stated, *porneia* includes adultery. If a woman leaves her husband to live with another man, she would not be called a practicing harlot, but she most certainly would be having sexual activity outside of a proper marriage relationship (i.e., the definition of *porneia*).
- d. The interpretation would do violence to texts which use *porneia* in relationship to incest (I Corinthians 5:1).

Another possible interpretation is that the exception clause only applies to the engagement period.<sup>31</sup> This view must be rejected for the reasons outlined by Jay Adams.<sup>32</sup>

- a. Marriage is in the context of the divorce action, not engagement.
- b. Deuteronomy 24, which is the Old Testament passage in view in Matthew 5:31-32, deals not with engagement, but marriage.
- c. Deuteronomy 22:13-19 and 22:28-29 are two cases where divorce is prohibited for any cause. The point of the passages would be lost if no one could ever divorce his wife.
- d. The Talmud clearly speaks and discriminates between divorce after engagement and divorce after marriage.

Furthermore, if two are engaged and separate, how could the one cause the other to commit adultery?

A third possible interpretation is that the exception clause only applies within the prohibited incestuous relationships of Leviticus 18:6-18.<sup>33</sup> This position is built primarily from a summary

<sup>29</sup> Duty, pp. 52-62.

<sup>30</sup> Wallace R. Wilson, *An Examination of the Problem of Divorce and Remarriage* (Renton, Washington: Highlands Community Church, 1976), as first quoted by John Lawrence, p. 14, and reiterated p.16.

<sup>31</sup> Bill Gothard, “Supplementary Alumni Book, Volume 5, 1979” (USA: Basic Youth Conflicts, 1978), p. 8. Also, see: James Boice “The Biblical View of Divorce,” (Eternity 21 December, 1970), p. 20; and Theodore H. Epp, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage In The Bible* (Lincoln, NE: Back to the Bible, 1954)

<sup>32</sup> Jay Adams, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), pp. 55-56. Not all of Adams’ arguments are included.

<sup>33</sup> J. Carl Laney, *The Divorce Myth* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House, 1981), pp. 66 ff.

statement in Acts 15:13-21 of the Leviticus passage. Acts 15 records what is generally known as the council at Jerusalem. James asks the Greek believers to abstain from idols, *porneia*, things strangled, and the drinking of blood (15:13-21). When the letter was written (Acts 15:23-29, the order was changed to abstain from idols, from blood, things strangled, and *porneia* (vs. 29). The latter sequence matched exactly the order in Leviticus 17-18; according to proponents, this is too close to be a coincidence.

However, this interpretation must be rejected on the following grounds:

- a. Leviticus 18:6-18 deals with incest, but the chapter continues with some important additions, including adultery (18:20), homosexuality (18:22), and bestiality (18:23). It may be concluded that the apostles understood *porneia* to include these four categories.
- b. Passages cited throughout this section indicate that *porneia* has a general application to sexual activity. The interpretation would not be in keeping with the normal sense of the word.
- c. The basis for the “prohibited incestuous relationships” interpretation relies heavily upon the fact that the exception clause is only in the Jewish-oriented Matthew and not Mark or Luke. However, non-Jewish cultures prohibited incest as well (I Corinthians 5:1-2).
- d. Early Christian writers recognized divorce because of *porneia* apart from incest<sup>34</sup> as did the Talmud.

Carl Laney, who allows a general use of the word but supports the incestuous relationship interpretation for the exception clause, asserts that *porneia* in the context of Matthew 5:32 could not mean illicit or deviant sexual behavior.<sup>35</sup> His reasons are important and need to be addressed as follows:

- a. Laney states that if a broad interpretation of *porneia* were the case, then the Mark 10:2-12 account would be misleading since it did not include the exception clause. Response: His own interpretation that *porneia* means incest would be no less “misleading” as the Gentiles would also need explanation.
- b. Laney indicates that a contradiction would exist between the statement in Matthew 19:6, “let no man separate,” and the exception clause if *porneia* meant illicit sexual relations. Response: This mixes the issue. A person who has committed *porneia* has violated the marriage vow already and interfered with the one-flesh relationship.
- c. Laney asserts that Christ’s teaching would only side with the current day rabbinical school of Shammai<sup>36</sup> on the issue of divorce with a broad interpretation. Response: Jesus sided with the Herodians in the dispute about taxes and with the Pharisees over the resurrection of the dead.
- d. Laney objects that the passage would contradict I Corinthians 7:10-11, “not to divorce.” Response: Fornication is not in view in the I Corinthians passage; rather, the Corinthians were separating from their mates, thinking this was more spiritual.

<sup>34</sup> Duty, pp. 58, 112-121.

<sup>35</sup> J. Carl Laney, pp. 66 ff.

<sup>36</sup> Shammai and Hillel were two famous rabbis who were the heads of rabbinical schools in Jerusalem about a generation before Christ. Hillel taught that a Jew could divorce his wife for any cause whatever. Shammai held that divorce was lawful only for the cause of fornication. Duty, pp. 24 ff.

- e. Finally he states that *moicheia* is the normal term used for sexual unfaithfulness to the marriage commitment, whereas the passage says, “except for *porneia*.” Response: *Porneia* would still be reasonable as it is used for incest and homosexuality, but *moicheia* is not. *Porneia* is the broader term and includes *moicheia*.

In conclusion, the “exception clause” is best interpreted as sexual activity outside of a proper marriage relationship. The more general term *porneia* is used to make allowance for such activity as incest, bestiality, and homosexuality, yet includes adultery.

#### Importance of the Term “Cause”

The term “cause” is not to be ignored. *Porneia* is to be a definite factor in the initiating of the divorce or in the decision to consider the marriage obligation towards the spouse to be at an end. There may be many other reasons for the person to initiate or continue the divorce. Sexual immorality may not even be the major factor; nevertheless, it must be a factor. Weighing the significance of this factor for the person initiating the divorce is subjective. If their spouse’s sexual immorality is only an excuse to initiate divorce, then it can hardly be a “cause.”

#### The Change from Stoning to Divorce

There is no clear biblical evidence or extra-biblical literature that includes when stoning was no longer practiced in Israel for the cause of sexual unfaithfulness. Matthew 1:19 suggests that when Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant, the alternative considered by him was putting her away either publicly or privately. The Roman courts alone had the power of death, and it was not invoking for adultery.<sup>37</sup> The woman who was caught in adultery and brought to Jesus is clearly intended as a trap, attempting to implicate Him in an illegal stoning (John 8:5-6). To state that sexual unfaithfulness in a marriage at the time of Christ warranted the punishment of death is to ignore the cultural context of the period.

#### Divorce Initiated by Which Party

The phrase “except for *porneia*” provides the only righteous basis for a believer to separate from and divorce his or her spouse, yet the issue must be addressed as to who has committed the adultery. Although the passage does not specifically state that the *porneia* is on the part of the one being divorced, and that the divorce is initiated by the one who has not committed *porneia*, it certainly implies that this is the case.

Both Matthew 5:31 and 19:9 have Deuteronomy 24:1 cited within the context. The Deuteronomy passage refers to a fault on the part of the wife that causes the husband to initiate the divorce. “When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her . . .” (Deuteronomy 24:1). In both Matthew

<sup>37</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, general editor, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan; Zondervan, 1975), p. 66.

passages, Jesus is asserting that the only fault on the part of the wife that will bring about a justified divorce, and therefore an adultery-free remarriage is immorality on her part. The impact of the exception clause is to provide that the only basis for a justified divorce is when a person chooses to divorce his or her mate due to the mate's immorality.

The example of how covenant relationships are dissolved within Scripture provides further evidence that a person responsible for breaking the covenant does not have the right to completely dissolve the covenant. A responsive act by the other party is required.

The Mosaic covenant was broken by the people for many years, yet not until the crucifixion of Christ does God recognize a new covenant to exist (Jeremiah 31:31-32). God did not allow the people's disobedience to dissolve the covenant between them; only when He took the responsive action of dissolution to their disobedience was the old covenant replaced. Israel remained His people throughout their rebellion, until He gave them a writ of divorce (Jeremiah 3:8).

The conclusion that the spouse who has committed the immorality cannot initiate the divorce is consistent with the basic nature of the marriage bond as a covenant (Matt. 2:14). Under a covenant between two people, when one of the two covenanters violates the agreement, it then rests with the other party to determine if he is willing to forgive the violation and continue the covenant, or if he will terminate the covenant based upon the event.

Finally, for the spouse who has committed the unrighteous act of *porneia* then to say that this is a righteous basis for that same spouse to initiate divorce, would be an incredible twist of logic. If both parties have committed *porneia* then either would have a legally moral basis to initiate the divorce. However, a careful examination must be made to assure that the marriage has been so thoroughly wrecked through *porneia* that the parties cannot continue. For a spouse to initiate a divorce when he or she has not repented and asked forgiveness for his/her own sin with a willingness to remain faithful, such is an unrighteous divorce action (Luke 16:18).

### Questions Beyond the Scope Of The Passage

The passage does not answer a number of questions. A person would naturally ask, "How long must my mate be unfaithful?" Those who are perhaps eager to divorce might ask, "Is once enough?" A wider range of biblical principles must be utilized to provide guidance for the, "how long?" or, "to what extent?" questions. (See Luke 16:18 exposition).

Authors will often advocate the position of allowing only the "not-guilty" party in the marriage to remarry based upon this passage, yet no evidence is offered.<sup>38</sup> The New Testament culture knew nothing of a person being required to forever remain single because of fornication or adultery. With a biblical basis for divorce, there is basis for remarriage.

<sup>38</sup> Robert J. Plekker, *Divorce and the Christian – What The Bible Teaches* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House, 1980), p. 69 and Duty, p. 127.

### Major Contributions of Matthew 5:31-32

A person becomes guilty of two counts of adultery when he divorces his mate for reasons other than sexual unfaithfulness; both the divorced mate and the new spouse are made to commit adultery. Clearly, divorce initiated on a non-*porneia* basis is prohibited (divorce initiated by non-Christians is covered by I Corinthians 7:12-16).

Matthew 5:31-32 recognizes the disastrous effect of any illicit sexual relations upon the marriage relationship. When sexual unfaithfulness occurs, the one who has been unfaithful has violated the marriage covenant and pursued what God has commanded not to be done. The passage does not command that divorce must occur because of *porneia*, nor must the two marry each other again if they desire to continue in the marriage after *porneia*. Nevertheless: God recognizes the destructive nature of sexual unfaithfulness and allows for divorce on the basis of *porneia*.

### 5. Matthew 19:1-12 And Mark 10:1-12

These two passages are handled in the same section because of their similar context and similar wording. The differences are discussed after a detailed analysis of the Matthew passage.

#### Thesis Statement

Christ teaches in each passage that when divorce is initiated on a basis other than sexual immorality, a subsequent remarriage constitutes adultery. The Mark passage includes the application for both husband and wife as both were known to initiate divorce in the Gentile culture. The Matthew passage emphasizes the man's role of causing the adultery when he initiates the divorce action on other than a sexual immorality basis; this would come as a surprise to the Hebrew man, because in his culture it was thought that only the woman could commit adultery.

The inclusion of the phrase in Matthew, "except for *porneia*," is interpreted as, "except for sexual immorality." Sexual unfaithfulness then becomes a legitimate basis for divorce just as in the Matthew 5:32 passage. Mark 10 does not include the statement, "except for *porneia*," as this is generally understood in both the Gentile and Hebrew cultures; it was most likely included in Matthew because of the current Hebrew debate about what *erwat dabar* (some uncleanness) meant in Deuteronomy 24.

#### Contextual Analysis

Matthew, chapter 18, takes place in Galilee where Jesus is teaching regarding humility, the lost sinner, church discipline, forgiveness, and mercy. As He moves into Judea beyond the Jordan (southern Perea), the Pharisees approach Him for the purpose of testing Him with a controversial question about divorce.

Divorce was a test question because there were two differing schools of thought on the issue. The more liberal “Hillel” view was that anything causing the husband embarrassment or annoyance could justify divorce.<sup>39</sup> The view was popularly held among the Pharisees.<sup>40</sup> The second view was that of Shammai who believed that divorce was allowed only if moral unchastity or something morally shameful was the basis for the action.

A possible additional reason for the question being a test question was that Jesus was in the region where John the Baptist had been arrested and later executed for speaking out against Herod Antipas’ divorce and subsequent marriage. He had divorced his wife to marry the wife of his brother Philip who was still living. The divorce issue was not new to the people of the region. Since Herod was still the king, it would not be a favorite issue to discuss publicly. Regardless of how Christ answered the question, He was certain to offend someone.

Detailed Analysis, Matthew 19:3-12

“. . . and some Pharisees came to Him, testing Him, and saying, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all?’” (vs. 3)

This passage was one of a series of tests meant to discredit Jesus (12:14, healing on the Sabbath; 22:17, 22:35). A likely way for the Pharisees to be rid of Jesus was for Him to anger Herod. The Pharisees were said to confer with the Herodians who supported the dynasty (Mark 3:6, Matt. 27:16). Agreement with Shammai would alienate those of Hillel and particularly Herod. Agreement with Hillel would make Him look morally lax in His teaching. Should He reject both viewpoints and denounce divorce, they could denounce Him for contradicting the teaching of Moses in Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

The way in which the question was asked, “is it lawful,” indicates that they viewed divorce as primarily a legal question. The question deals specifically with a man divorcing his wife because the wife had no such authority in Jewish culture. The basis, “any cause at all,” is likely to be a reference to the Deuteronomy 24:1-4 use of “*erwath dabar*” as the basis for divorce. Christ answers specifically in verse 9, but first points to the spiritual issue and basis for marriage as set forth in Genesis, chapters one and two.

“And He answered and said, ‘Have you not read, that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female?’” (vs. 4)

Jesus’ intent is to show the Pharisees that marriage is bound up in creation and not a product of later development by man.<sup>41</sup> God created man and woman from the beginning for one another; not many women for one man. He had made woman from man and intended them to unite as one again in marriage.

<sup>39</sup> William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), p. 353.

<sup>40</sup> William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1973), p. 714.

<sup>41</sup> R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Publishing House, 1964), pp. 726-740.

“And said, ‘For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh.’” (vs. 5)

Genesis 1:27, “God created male and female,” and 2:24, “cleave to wife and become one flesh,” are linked to indicate God’s divine ordinance for marriage. Woman was made from man and they would be re-united in the intimacy of the marriage act where the two would become one flesh. The words “for this cause” have reference to Eve coming from Adam’s physical body. For future generations, the man’s prior flesh relationship with parents will be left and he will be united, or literally, “glued,” to his wife. The Greek form of “shall cleave to” would be better translated “be united/glued to” since it is in the passive. This indicates that God did the uniting of the two into one flesh. The Pharisees still saw two persons; God viewed them as one flesh.

“Consequently, they are no more two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate,” (vs. 6)

For emphasis and clarity, Christ repeats in His own words what was previously said in Genesis. “Let no man separate” is a command to cease the ongoing divorce activities. Man shall not separate what God has joined together as one. God’s intent was that marriage is to be a permanent bond. It should be noticed that the passage does not say that “man cannot separate;” rather, it is imperative that he should not separate and therefore implies that divorce is possible.

“They said to Him, ‘Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate and divorce her?’” (vs. 7)

The Pharisees were countering Christ’s teaching on the permanence of marriage with an appeal to Deuteronomy 24:1-4 that served as their basis for the divorce action. They saw this passage as legalizing divorce as long as a bill of divorcement was provided for the wife. They use the word “commanded” to indicate that the Mosaic teaching sanctioned divorce. They believed that the dissolution of the marriage was contemplated as part of God’s moral will.<sup>42</sup>

“He said to them, ‘Because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way.’” (vs. 8)

“Hard-heartedness” is defined as a harsh, stern, and unrelenting attitude with a lack of feeling and proper perceptions; this was the attitude of the husbands toward their wives.<sup>43</sup> Christ states that Moses “permitted” divorce rather than “commanded” as the Pharisees had stated.

<sup>42</sup> R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Mark’s Gospel*, (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Publishing House, 1964), p. 416.

<sup>43</sup> William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Mark*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 377 and John A. Broadus, *An American Commentary on the New Testament: Volume 1: Matthew* (Valley Forge, Virginia, Judson Press, 1886), p.398.

A possible interpretation is that this was a Mosaic concession, temporarily relaxing God's original divorce ordinance of marriage because of the people's obstinate resistance to God's will. This interpretation is unacceptable since it would have God approving what He has recognized as sin.

A more defensible interpretation is that Christ represents this concession as a protective measure to the wives due to the harshness and unkindness being practiced by the husbands, and to restrain their actions. This is consistent with God's intent for marriage and most closely agrees with the purpose stated in Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

“And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality and marries another commits adultery.” (vs. 9)

Christ has corrected the legalistic view of the Pharisees toward divorce by taking them back beyond Moses to God's purpose and intent in marriage. He has stated that in marriage man and woman become one and that man should not separate what God has brought together. He has established and stressed God's moral framework for marriage rather than the legal framework for divorce. With this foundation, Christ now answers the test question of verse 3, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all?” He is explicit in His answer and instructs us as to the consequence upon the husband if there is a divorce.

The Pharisees were divorcing for “any cause,” usually with the intent to remarry. Christ emphasizes that divorce “for any cause” does not remove the marriage obligation as this would constitute adultery when a subsequent marriage occurs. The “whoever” stands out, indicating that there is no exception because of a position of status or authority.

In this passage He provides the only exception where the divorce action followed by remarriage will not constitute adultery. In the case of immorality (*porneia*) God has deemed the sanctity of the marriage covenant as violated and allows for divorce, yet does not command it to occur. *Porneia* is a general term of immorality that includes fornication, adultery, unchastity, prostitution, incest, homosexuality, sodomy and every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse.<sup>44</sup> (See the section on Matthew 5:31-32 for a more complete discussion of *porneia*.)

The Jews of the first century thought that only the woman could be guilty of adultery since adultery was defined as the violation of another man's bed. Jesus' statement would have been very eye opening and objectionable to the Jews because of its identification of a man's remarriage following divorce on a non-*porneia* basis with adultery. Yet the husband has no more right to be unfaithful than the wife; both could be guilty of adultery.

“The disciples said to Him, ‘If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry.’” (vs. 10)

<sup>44</sup> Broadus, pp. 111-112 and William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, second edition* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p.693.

The disciples understood from Christ that:

- a. Marriage cannot be dissolved just for any cause;
- b. Divorce is allowed should the wife be guilty of sexual activity outside of the marriage;
- c. Divorce on any other grounds other than *porneia* followed by a new marriage constitutes adultery.

Since the majority of the listeners would probably hold to the lax Hillel viewpoint where many causes for divorce were acceptable, Christ's statements were viewed as unusually strict. They were looking for their own personal satisfaction rather than the long-term benefit of loving and serving in a difficult marriage.

“But He said to them, ‘Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother’s womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept this, let him accept it.’” (vs. 11-12)

When Christ states that “not all men can accept this statement,” it is unclear if “statement” refers to what the disciples said or if it refers to His own prior statements. If it refers to the disciples’ statement, then He is saying that only eunuchs could agree with them, for most men and women were created for marriage. If the reference is to what Christ has said about God’s intended permanence in marriage, then it indicates that all things are possible with God and those to whom marriage is given. Neither interpretation impacts the topic of this study and shall not be pursued further.

Verse 12 directly addresses the disciples’ statement in verse 10 about it being better not to marry. The three categories of eunuchs are listed by Christ to indicate that this is true in some cases. The implication of those who make themselves eunuchs for the work of God is to commend such action. Christ agrees with their statement in a limited sense, but for those who are not in one of the three categories, marriage is the implied alternative.

Detailed Analysis, Mark 10:1-12

Although the Matthew and Mark passages have been determined to relate the same event because of the similar setting, statements and questions, there are differences between the accounts as each author is emphasizing different aspects or not disclosing the complete discourse. Matthew includes the exception clause, the reactionary statement by His disciples, and the explanatory statements regarding eunuchs; whereas Mark omits each of these. Mark includes the question by Jesus, “What did Moses command you?”, the location where the questioning occurred, and teaching on the consequences of when the wife divorces. The differences are discussed as follows:

“And He answered and said to them, ‘What did Moses command you?’” (vs. 3)

This is a leading question, omitted in the Matthew passage. Such a question is drawing from the Pharisees the details behind their initial question.

“And in the house the disciples began questioning Him about this again.” (vs. 10)

Mark provides the change in audience and environment, showing that Christ is now in the house. The topics of the earlier situation would now be discussed again.

“And if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery.” (vs. 12)

Mark 10:11 and Matthew 19:9 include parallel situations; that is, a husband divorcing his wife. However, Mark contains the additional situation in verse 12 of the wife divorcing the husband. The principle is the same no matter who initiates the divorce. In Matthew, the reader is the Jew whose culture did not recognize the wife as having the legal authority to divorce. The readers of Mark are Roman Gentiles who have recognized the wife as legally able to divorce her husband.<sup>45</sup>

The Mark passage does not include the exception clause of Matthew 5 and 19. In each of the Matthew passages and exception for *porneia* is only briefly mentioned and not elaborated upon. The exception is mentioned as a matter of course which all would take for granted.<sup>46</sup> Even the strictest school of the Rabbis acknowledged *porneia* as a legitimate basis for divorce. The Roman and Greek cultures also accepted adultery as sufficient grounds for divorce.<sup>47</sup>

As has been noted, the above account variances are readily explained and are not contradictory. The following reconstruction of the events will be very helpful in explaining the variances as well as the differences in terminology, such as “permitted” v. “command”:

- a. Matthew 19:3
- b. Mark 10:3-8
- c. Matthew 19:7-9
- d. Mark 10:10-12
- e. Matthew 19:10-12

#### Contribution of Mark and Matthew 19

As in Matthew 5, Matthew 19 indicates that divorce on grounds other than that of sexual unfaithfulness will result in adultery when a new marriage occurs. The Mark passage extends the principle to both the husband and the wife; each has the responsibility to maintain the marriage.

As William Hendriksen points out:

“. . . by means of a few simple words, Jesus discourages divorce, refutes the rabbinical misinterpretation of the law, reaffirms the law’s true meaning, censures the guilty party,

<sup>45</sup> Lane, p. 358 and Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Mark’s Gospel*, pp. 421-422.

<sup>46</sup> Broadus, p. 399 and J.A. Alexander, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. Mark*, (Minneapolis, Minn.: Klock and Klock Christian Publishers, 1980), p. 276.

<sup>47</sup> Unger, p. 23.

defends the innocent, and throughout it all upholds the sacredness and inviolability of the marriage bond as ordained by God.”<sup>48</sup>

## 6. Luke 16:18

### Thesis Statement

The Luke 16:18 passage is descriptive of God’s desire for marriages to last the lifetime of the partners. The context of the passage shows that Jesus is using the statement as a condemnation of the Pharisees’ and the scribes’ hypocritical attitudes and of their practice in altering Scripture.

Although the passage is not an extensive treatment of the divorce and remarriage issue, discussing neither desertion nor *porneia* as grounds for divorce, the passage does deal with a legalistic attitude. The attitude is one of looking for a proof-text in Scripture for an escape from an undesirable marriage.

### Contextual Analysis

The major theme of Luke chapter 15 and 16 is that God’s people will share in the joy of heaven at the repentance of sinners, for they believe God’s Word. Those who attempted to be righteous by ceremonial law-keeping instead of by faith placed qualifications upon the Law so that they might not be condemned. This resulted in pride over their “ability to measure up” and their displeasure that God’s grace was available to common people. At the heart of their system was the practice of re-defining Scripture. Luke 16:18 addresses the sinfulness of the attitude that says that divorce is acceptable as long as the divorcement bill is processed. This action typified their altering of the Law for their own purposes. Chapter 15 illustrates God’s yearning for the lost in direct contrast to the Pharisees’ and scribes’ attitude of contempt. The situation described in 15:1 indicates that those with lifestyles condemned by religious community were coming to Christ. The Pharisees’ reaction prompts the series of three parables.

In each parable, something is lost, it is found, and there is a shared joy. The last parable illustrates the lack of joy on the part of the older brother that is parallel to that of the Pharisees. The parable of the prodigal son does not directly condemn the attitude but emphasizes that the son was serving out of obligation, obeying the commands without love. This kind of service revealed self-centered pride and was the root problem of the Pharisees.

The parable of the shrewd steward (16:1-13) shows that worldly people are often more forward looking than those who have access to the truth. As summarized in 16:13, it is impossible to serve two masters. The Pharisees themselves were trying to serve God outwardly, but inwardly they were lovers of money.

<sup>48</sup> Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 380.

The immediate context of 16:14-18 centers upon their attitude that they could enter the Kingdom through personal rules which enables them to keep those parts of the Law which they could not otherwise keep. God knows their hearts and judges them detestable. The Law is complete and adequate to show man's total need for forgiveness based upon faith, for it cannot be truly altered by their "interpretations."

Divorce and remarriage is given as a specific example of the altering of God's Law which was practiced at the time. The emphasis of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 was interpreted by the Pharisees to be that God was most interested in correct processing of the bill of divorcement (Matthew 19). The characteristic attitude was looking to the Law for loopholes to escape an undesirable marriage. Jesus is pointing out that they still stand guilty in their committing adultery.

The final parable of the rich man and Lazarus emphasizes the need to believe God's Word and the eternal consequences of circumventing its truth. Jesus shows the parallel between the Pharisees' and scribes' unbelief of the Scripture and their unbelief of God's miraculous evidences (16:31).

#### Comparison With Matthew 5:32

The similarity between Luke 16:18 and Matthew 5:32 needs to be examined to discern the unique contribution of each passage. There are three differences.

- a. The Luke passage includes the phrase "and marries another" where the Matthew passage implies that remarriage occurs. The situations are different in that Matthew deals with the remarriage of the woman and Luke deals with the remarriage of the man. The inclusion of the added phrase seems to be that the reason for divorce was for the man's intended purpose of remarriage to someone other than his spouse. The Matthew passage deals with the indirect responsibility of having caused the adultery of another when he divorces her on a non-*porneia* basis and she remarries.
- b. Luke does not include the "except for *porneia*" clause of both Matthew 5:32 and 19:9. Such an omission from the discussion is understandable since the theme of the parables here in Luke and the specific discussion in 16:14-18 is about the hypocrisy of setting aside God's law; a full discussion of when or when not divorce/remarriage would be the justified action would not be germane. Such a discussion at this point in Luke would detract from the main message.
- c. The phrase in Luke, "from a husband." This phrase falls in the second situation of someone who marries the divorced person (16b). This phrase seems to qualify the statement that Jesus is still speaking of the action of the man, for this is one who is divorced from a husband. Luke's use of the term *aner* (husband) can as well be interpreted simply "a man." The term divorce (put her away) clearly indicates separation where the term *aner* could mean either "husband" or "man." It is concluded that the phrase was included to clarify that the illustration was dealing with the action of a man.

#### Contribution of Luke 16:18

This passage implies God's desire for marriage to last for the lifetime of the partners, and for it not to be set aside because someone else seems more desirable. *Porneia* as a past action is not discussed; the situation is men switching wives and thinking that they were righteous when they took care of the paperwork (bill of divorcement).

Of all the passages on divorce/remarriage, Luke 16:18 uniquely deals with the heart-attitude of a person who is looking for loopholes in God's law to free himself from an undesirable marriage. The true believer, who understands forgiveness and reconciliation by grace, will desire to obey God's ideal out of gratitude for his own forgiveness.

## 7. I Corinthians 7:10-16

### Thesis Statement

This passage contains a very comprehensive teaching on Christian divorce for causes other than immorality. In scope, it deals both with marriages that involve two Christians and marriages that involve a Christian and a non-Christian. In marriages that involve two Christians, Paul indicates that there is to be no divorce. In marriages that involve a Christian and non-Christian, the believer is never to be the initiator of a divorce (note: the passage does not consider immorality based divorce). Only if the unbeliever seeks divorce should it be allowed to occur. In that case, the Christian should not attempt to thwart the divorce. When the believer is freed from the marriage, through the unbeliever's divorce action, he or she is then free to be remarried.

### Contextual Analysis

As indicated in verse 1, Paul is in the process of answering a question posed to him in a letter from the Corinthians. The question was probably, "Is it good for a man not to touch a woman," that is to remain celibate? From verse 5, it becomes apparent that some were not participating in the sexual responsibility within their marriages under the excuse of a higher calling of celibacy.

Paul's initial response follows this chain of thoughts:

- a. Yes, celibacy, when considered in isolation, is good; but it is not intended to be the means of avoiding sexual sin. Marriage is the remedy to such temptation, not celibacy. If you are sexually oriented, then marry (vs.1-2).
- b. Being married, fulfill your sexual responsibilities to one another so that you will not be tempted (vs. 3-5).
- c. However, marriage is not mandatory if you have the gift of singleness and are not sexually oriented, for such person's celibacy is a blessing (vs. 6-7).

Starting with verse 8, Paul begins to provide counsel on the issue of celibacy versus marriage to a spectrum of situations: bachelors and widows, partners in a two-Christian marriage, the Christian partner in a mixed marriage (Christian and non-Christian), and finally, virgins.

To the bachelors and widows, Paul’s instruction is to remain celibate if they have the self-control as provided in the gift of celibacy. If not, then they should marry.

Next comes the instruction to those who are married. Although the instruction is general, it is definitely given in the context of the consideration of celibacy. The lead-in concerns celibacy and the verses which follow the primary text continue the theme. Verses 17-24 deal with the issue of remaining in the same life-circumstances in which you were when you were called. This provides the general principle for concluding that those who are married should remain married. Verse 25ff deals with celibacy for virgin daughters.

From this context, it is concluded that the instruction to the married considers the possibility of divorce as a means of becoming celibate. Whether or not such divorces were actually taking place in Corinth or were being seriously considered is not known, but, at the very least, Paul felt that there was this potential.

#### Detailed Analysis

“But to the married, I give instructions” (vs. 10)

Although the phrase “to the married” appears at first glance to be very general, when it is compared with verse 12, it becomes apparent that it is meant to describe a specific circumstance. In verse 12, Paul addresses “the rest” and proceeds to describe the marriage between a Christian and a pagan, that is, a “mixed marriage.” If these are “the rest,” then the main body must have been “matched marriages” of Christian married to Christian. Because Paul is writing to a Christian church, the circumstance of a marriage involving two unbelievers lies beyond the scope of the passage. Consequently, Paul’s instruction in verse 10 and 11 is issued to matched, Christian marriages.

“not I, but the Lord” (vs. 10)

Paul is not asserting his own authority to speak on this issue but rather appeals directly back to Christ’s instruction on divorce as recorded in the Gospels.

“the wife should not leave her husband” (vs. 10)

The word “leave” is the Greek word which means “to separate, divide, part, put asunder.”<sup>49</sup> The word had almost become a technical term in referring to divorce during the first century.<sup>50</sup>

The condition of leaving is viewed with finality; the person leaving does not intend to return. It is clear that Paul is intending to speak of divorce with the use of the word “leave” by his

<sup>49</sup> James Henry Thayer, *Greek – English Lexicon of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), p. 674.

<sup>50</sup> Moulton and Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 696.

parenthetical comment in verse 11. There he says, “but if she should leave, let her remain unmarried.” He indicates that her condition is that of being “unmarried,” which makes it clear that a divorce has taken place.

Paul, by the Lord’s command, indicates that a Christian woman is not to leave and divorce her Christian husband. This indeed is the essence of Christ’s teaching in the gospels. Paul does not go into elaboration or justification of the point as Christ has said this clearly.

A question which might arise in regard to the terseness of the instruction concerns why Paul makes no acknowledgement of the exception clause of Matthew 5:32 and 19:9. This issue is quickly cleared when the context of Paul’s statement is considered. Paul is addressing a defined circumstance; that is, divorce considered as a means of attaining celibacy (see introductory notes on context). He is not considering the topic of divorce in general. Divorce based upon sexual immorality is outside of the issue being addressed.<sup>51</sup>

“but if she does leave, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband” (vs. 11)

From the pointed command not to leave, Paul immediately considers the situation where the Lord’s command has been disobeyed; a wife has chosen to divorce her husband.

In attempting to explain the presence of this conditional situation, many have concluded that an incident of divorce for celibacy had already occurred. Their explanation is that Paul, being aware of this event, provides specific instruction after the fact. However, this explanation cannot be accepted due to the grammar employed by the apostle.<sup>52</sup> Paul was anticipating that some would go ahead with divorce despite the Lord’s command.

Paul’s instruction to the person who would disobey the Lord and divorce her mate is that she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled back to her husband. She cannot use the fact that, right or wrong, the divorce being complete, she can now marry another person. If she is to return to the married state, it must be with her original husband. Paul does not consider any adulterous behavior subsequent to the divorce because this is outside the scope of his consideration in the situation.

Paul is not here condoning divorce without remarriage. To do so would be contrary to the Lord’s instruction from which Paul is drawing (Mark 10:9). Rather, Paul is cautioning against compounding the sin of divorce with a further sin of adultery, should the woman marry another person (Mark 10:12).

<sup>51</sup> Charles J. Ellicott, *St. Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians: with a Critical and Grammatical Commentary*, (James Family 1980), p. 117.

<sup>52</sup> “If she should leave” is a third class condition with an aorist subjunctive which implies the consideration of an event still future from when the statement was made. A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in Light of Historical Research* (Broadman Press, 1974), p. 848.

Although the condition is stated in regard to the wife, there can be little doubt that it applies to a husband as well. Either the Corinthians had written him about a specific situation or he had a situation in mind throughout verses 10 and 11.

“the husband should not send his wife away” (vs. 11)

Paul indicates that the husband must not divorce his wife either. Neither husband nor wife in a matched marriage is to seek divorce.

The bottom line is that, sexual immorality excepted, there is not to be any leaving or sending away of spouses in a Christian marriage. Divorce is not permitted.

“to the rest” (vs. 12)

Paul now addresses himself to the mixed marriages (see the note on verse 10). As the context indicates, the Corinthians were attempting to use divorce as a means to becoming celibate and, in their judgment, moral spiritual. The mixed marriage would provide a built-in justification for their twisted thinking. They probably reasoned that if it was more spiritual to be celibate than to be married to a Christian, then it would have to be far more spiritual to divorce from a pagan and thus, to be celibate or even to marry a believer. Their thinking, by implication from verse 14, was that married to a pagan was polluting to the Christian mate.

“I say, not the Lord” (vs. 12)

Paul is not giving his instruction any less authority than that of the Lord. The reason for his qualification is that the Gospel instruction by Jesus did not address the situation of a mixed marriage. Jesus had addressed His remarks to the Jews who by law could only marry other Jews, so marriage to a pagan was outside the scope of His comments. For Paul’s recognition of his own authority, one need only consult verse 25 where Paul elaborates on his need to speak where the Lord had been silent. His statement is, “I give an opinion (maybe better translated “judgment”; the word comes from the root “to know”) as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy.” Paul’s judgment is trustworthy based on the Lord’s special gift to him as an apostle. This is a clear statement of his own recognition of accuracy and authority as an apostle.

“that if any brother has a wife that is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, let him not send her away.” (vs. 12)

This is the mixed marriage. The term “brother” is the common designation of a Christian. He is said to have an unbelieving wife. Paul’s opening instruction to this group is that the Christian is not to send away his unbelieving wife if she wants to stay with him. The implication of this command is that a Christian is not to decide to divorce a pagan spouse. If the issue of continuing the marriage is left to him, he is to remain married. The fact that a spouse is a non-Christian is not grounds for divorce.

“And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, let her not send her husband away.” (vs. 13)

The same command against divorce is given to the Christian woman married to a pagan husband. Divorce is not to be initiated by the Christian (unless under the basis of *porneia* in Matthew 5 and 19 or desertion in I Corinthians 7:15).

It is important to note here that Paul is not giving a subtle endorsement to mixed marriages between a Christian and a pagan. He expressly forbids such marriages in verse 39 where he allows that a widow “is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.” She is only to marry another Christian. The mixed marriages that he addresses here in chapter 7 are, in all probability, the result of one of the spouses becoming a Christian after marriage.

“For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband.” (vs. 14)

Paul anticipates a possible rationalization on the part of the Christian who is seeking greater spirituality through divorcing a pagan mate and living as a celibate or marrying a Christian. The argument would run that marriage, a union creating one flesh from two, to a pagan would contaminate the Christian and result in a loss of holiness and spirituality. Paul counters the argument by indicating just the opposite. Far from the pagan contaminating the Christian, the Christian actually sanctifies the pagan.

The use of “sanctified” here is not meant to denote salvation. This is clear from verse 16 where the question of the pagan spouse’s salvation is still unresolved. Rather, the word is used in its most basic sense as denoting something that has been “set apart.” The concept is that through marriage to a Christian, a pagan is brought into a unique condition of being “set apart” to special standing with God “through his wife.” As God blesses and cares for the Christian, the pagan will be blessed and cared for as well.

“for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy” (vs. 14)

If the sexual union of a Christian with a pagan spouse somehow resulted in the pollution of the Christian, then most certainly any children produced by such a union would be polluted as well. Paul assures the Corinthians that this is not the case; their children of a mixed marriage are holy. Again, he is not implying that they are saved, but rather are “set apart” to special blessing by their relationship to their Christian parent. The word “holy” is the noun form of the verb “is sanctified.”

“Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave” (vs. 15)

While the Christian in a mixed marriage is not allowed to divorce the pagan mate, there is the possibility that the pagan mate may initiate the divorce. This will at times occur especially in marriages where one has become a believer after the marriage. The situation is that the

unconverted partner is so offended by the Christian confession of his mate, that he chooses to leave rather than accept the change. In this case Paul's instruction is to let him leave. The Christian is not to attempt to block the divorce or to make sufficient compromise in her Christian confession to make the pagan stay. If Christianity is the issue, then better that the marriage should fail than the testimony.

A note of caution is required. Paul is not encouraging the Christian to drive away her pagan husband through nagging or belligerent behavior. If there is offense, it should be with the gospel, not the person who professes it. God will hold the Christian as disobedient who drives away an unbelieving spouse and claims this verse as justification for the divorce.

“the brother or sister is not under bondage in such cases” (vs. 15)

There is some controversy as to the extent of the freedom that a Christian experiences once a pagan mate leaves. Most commentators recognize that not being “under bondage” at least implies that the believer is freed from the obligation to the dissolved marriage. The verb translated “is not under bondage” is literally “to be enslaved to” and comes from the same root as the noun for “bondservant” or “slave.” It is also expressed in the perfect tense implying that the past action of being freed from bondage has continuing results. In other words, once an unbeliever divorces a believer, the believer is once and for all released from the otherwise binding obligation of that marriage.

The problem arises when the question of remarriage is considered. Does not being under bondage free the believer to be able to be remarried without sinning? There is ample evidence to demonstrate that the believer has the freedom to remarry. The strongest point of evidence is found in the verb “to be enslaved” and the use of a similar verb in I Corinthians 7:39. In that verse, a widow is definitely given the right to remarry. It states, “she is free to be married to whom she wishes.” This freedom is hers because she is no longer “bound” to her husband after he dies. This verb which is translated “is bound” is a verb which means “to bind,” i.e. put under obligation.<sup>53</sup> Both words carry the sense of being bound by obligation, in one case servitude, in the other legally. Both words carry with them the implication that the freedom from binding obligation to the marriage opens the way for a new relationship. This is very straightforwardly demonstrated in Romans 7:1-6. In Romans 7:2-3, Paul tells us that a “married woman is bound (the verb “to put under obligation”) by law to her husband while he is living, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband . . . so that she is not an adulteress, though she is joined to another man.” The thought parallels I Corinthians 7:39. Paul uses the situation of the widow to describe our freedom from the Law to be joined to Christ in verse 4, “. . . you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, that you may be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead.” We can be “remarried” to Christ because our marriage to the Law is broken. Now, verse 6 summarizes the lesson by asserting, “But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound (the verb “to be enslaved to”).” The verbs, “to be put under obligation” and “to be enslaved to,” in Romans

<sup>53</sup> James Henry Thayer, *Greek – English Lexicon of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1974), p. 674.

chapter seven are used to describe the same freedom to pursue a new relationship. Carrying this information back into I Corinthians 7 provides a clear indication that the freedom of the widow to remarry in verse 39 is shared with the divorced Christian in verse 15.

Another important support for this understanding of the freedom to remarry is found in verses 27 and 28 of I Corinthians 7. In the second part of verse 27 Paul inquires, “Are you released from a wife?” The term “released” means “to be loosed from something.” The indication is that you were bound, now you have been released. To this point in Paul’s discussion of marriage there has been only one consideration of a situation of legitimate release, that is, the release of a believer from bondage to an unbeliever who has initiated divorce. He doesn’t consider death as a release until verse 39. This doesn’t preclude the consideration of the death of a mate as being “released” in verse 27, but does definitely include the situation of verse 15. In the case of being released from a wife, Paul’s advice is, “do not seek a wife.” However, recognizing that this is advice and not a command, Paul adds in verse 28, “But if you should marry, you have not sinned.” Paul thus clears the Christian of verse 15 from any sin due to remarriage.

Thus, when Paul says “brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases,” he is indicating that the obligation to the original marriage is broken, opening the way for remarriage.

“but God has called us to peace” (vs. 15)

Leon Morris appropriately states that this closing phrase,

“probably refers to the whole treatment of mixed marriages, and not simply to the last clause. In this whole matter of mixed marriages the line should be followed which conduces to peace. In some cases it will mean living with the heathen partner, in some cases it will mean accepting the heathen partner’s decision that the marriage is at the end. But the underlying concern for peace is the same in both cases.”<sup>54</sup>

Our original call to Christ was “in the sphere of peace.” We are to retain that peace to the extent to which we are able (Romans 12:18, 14:19).

“For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?” (vs. 16)

There are two explanations offered by commentators based on the situation to which they see the words addressed: the pagan mate who wants to stay or the one who wants to leave. In the first case, the words encourage the Christian that by continuing the marriage, the pagan mate may well be saved. In the latter case, the apostle is pulling away a potential argument by the Christian who doesn’t want to let go; the chance of saving an unwilling pagan mate is too slim to sacrifice peace.

<sup>54</sup> Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, March 1979), p. 111.

While it is not possible to be dogmatic between these two views, it seems far more likely that he would be offering encouragement in the former situation to the brother or sister who would remain in a mixed marriage. Since the Corinthians were predisposed towards seeking a divorce to bring about celibacy and thus a greater perceived spirituality, Paul would probably want to bolster them in relation to staying with the marriage in hope that their unbelieving mate would be saved.

### Summary of Contribution

There are a number of very important contributions which this passage makes toward understanding the biblical principles for divorce and remarriage:

- a. There is to be no divorce in a matched, Christian marriage. The context does not consider an immorality-based divorce. (vs. 10-11)
- b. When a Christian is disobedient in seeking a divorce from a Christian mate, there is not to be a subsequent marriage to another person. (vs. 11)
- c. A Christian is not to initiate a divorce from a non-Christian mate. Again, the context does not consider incidents of immorality. (vs. 12-13)
- d. If a non-Christian mate seeks a divorce from a Christian, then the Christian is not to seek to prevent the divorce. (vs. 15)
- e. When a non-Christian divorces a Christian, the Christian is then free to remarry another Christian person. (vs. 15)

## 8. I Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6

### Thesis Statement

The phrase “husband of one wife” is intended to require the complete devotion of a married man to the woman to whom he is married as a basic qualification to serve as an elder.

### Contextual Analysis

In both I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9, Paul outlines the qualifications that should be used in identifying appropriate men to serve as elders/overseers of the Church. (The terms “elder” and “overseer” are used synonymously in the New Testament to speak of the top leadership position in the local assembly. Paul’s use of the terms together in Titus 1:5 and 7 clearly demonstrates this. Of the two terms, “elder” is probably considered as the job title of the position, signifying a spiritually mature person. “Overseer” is probably the job description, meaning one who oversees the activities of others.) The selection of men to serve as elders is based upon spiritual criteria rather than particular skill sets. The reason for the placement of priority on the man’s spiritual qualities as opposed to his secular leadership abilities or experiences has to do with the nature of the leadership process in the Church. What is desired here are men who will allow Christ to lead

them, and therefore be used by Him to lead His Church, rather than men who would lead the Church based upon their own abilities and vision.

Paul provides Timothy and Titus with over twenty different spiritual qualifications between the two passages. (The exact number will be determined by how a student of the passages aligns the specific characteristics as to which are unique qualities and which are synonyms for the same general quality.) The characteristics defined for an elder cover a wide spectrum of areas for spiritual maturity; some identify personal qualities that should characterized the man's individual personality, others are concerned with inter-personal qualities that should be found in the way that an elder interacts with others. Requirements are made concerning the man's standing on the faith, and there are qualifications relating to the relationship of the man and his family.

The specific qualification for examination in this analysis comes from that latter category of qualifications – the family-related qualities. Regarding the relationship of an elder and his wife, should he be married, he must exhibit the quality of being the “husband of one wife.”

#### Detailed Analysis

This phrase, “husband of one wife,” occurs twice in Scripture, in I Timothy 3:2 and in Titus 1:6. Both of these passages deal with the qualifications looked for in a man to be appointed as an elder. The same phrase in the plural, “husbands of one wife,” occurs in I Timothy 3:12 as one of the desired qualities of deacons. A similar phrase, “wife of one husband,” is found in I Timothy 5:9, where Paul describes the qualities of a widow who should be placed on the widows list for church support. Other than in these passages, all in the Pastorals, the phrase is not found in Scripture, and to date no scholar has found the specific phrase used in secular literature in a similar sense. It is instructive to note that in four of the passages listed using this of a similar phrase, each is dealing with the attributes of a person who is to be marked for special service and standing in the Church. To add to its stature further, it can be additionally noted that in both passages dealing with elders it is the second quality identified, preceded only by the general moral quality of being “above reproach” or “blameless.” It is clear that devotion to one's wife/husband is quality of great value and importance.

In attempting to unlock the meaning of the phrase, “husband of one wife,” it is important to note its lexical and grammatical structure. There are three words in the Greek text. The first is the word “one.” It is of feminine gender and is of the same case (genitive) as the word “wife” and therefore clearly qualifies that word. The fact that the word appears in the first position of the phrase places specific emphasis on it.<sup>55</sup> (The relevance of this last point will be seen later.) The second word is “wife.” It is placed in the genitive case, qualifying “husband.” This generates the English prepositional phrase “of one wife.” The word may be interpreted either generally as “woman,” which is its understood meaning, or specifically as “wife,” if the context presses such a meaning. This context does press the meaning. The third word is “husband” and is expressed in the accusative case, in I Timothy, and in the nominative case, in Titus, making it the key term

<sup>55</sup> Homer Kent, *The Pastoral Epistles*, (Moody Press, 1958), pg. 126.)

from which the phrase is built. The word may be interpreted either generally as “man,” or, as with the previous term, can be contextually constrained to the meaning “husband.” Clearly, in this passage the meaning of “husband” is required in this context. Of final note is the observation that the phrase contains no articles before “wife” or “husband.” In Greek grammar this anarthrous usage stresses that the phrase is intended to emphasize a quality or attribute of the man. He has the quality of being a “husband of one wife.” To bring this phrase into a contemporary idiom which carries a similar qualitative weight it could be literally rendered “a one-woman man.”

Historically, there have been two chief interpretations of this phrase, neither of which satisfactorily explains its meaning. The first interpretation is that it forbids an elder from being a polygamist. This proposal may be quickly dispatched on two points:

- a. During the time of the writings of I Timothy and Titus, polygamy was outlawed in the Roman Empire.<sup>56</sup> Although there were apparently some who practiced polygamy despite the law against it, “it was a rare exception.”<sup>57</sup>
- b. The parallel phrase in I Timothy 5:9, requiring that a widow who is to be put on the list be “the wife of one man,” will not allow a reference to polygamy. As Huther explains, “. . . for similarity such a phrase ought to refer to polyandry, which absolutely never occurred.”<sup>58</sup>

A second interpretation requires that the elder have been married only once. By this meaning, a man would be disqualified if he were to remarry following the death of his wife or a divorce. This supposition will not stand up under close scrutiny.

Regarding remarriage after the death of a wife, Kent argues:

“The chief weakness of this view is its lack of harmony with the tenor of Scripture teaching on the subject of marriage. Nowhere in Scripture (including Paul’s epistles) is remarriage after the death of the wife depicted as forbidden or even morally questionable. Paul advises widows to remarry (I Timothy 5:14). If 3:2 prohibits widowers from second marriages if they wish to be overseers, then 5:9 prohibits widows from remarrying if they wish to be enrolled. Would Paul then advise young widows to marry again if such was questionable, or would remove them from the possibility of special aid in their later years (5:14)? It seems most unlikely. Paul’s clear teaching was that death of the partner dissolved the marriage bond, and the remaining partner was free to marry in the Lord (Romans 7:1-3). To cast suspicion upon the holiness of a second marriage is to impugn what Scripture nowhere denies, and reflects the spirit asceticism that arose early in the Church and has plagued her for twenty centuries. The argument of Plummer that a second marriage is a sign of weakness on the part of the minister is unfortunate. The same things could be said of the first marriage.”<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> John Huther, *Meyer’s Commentary on the New Testament, Volume IX: Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Epistles to Timothy and Titus*, (1906; reprint, Alpha Publication, 1979), p. 117.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Homer Kent, p. 128.

Regarding remarriage after a divorce, the emphasis must be placed on the remarriage, not the divorce, if this second interpretation is taken. The issue is not whether the man was divorced from his wife, as such an action does not make him the husband of more than one wife, rather, the question is only raised when he remarries. Here the issue is whether, by remarrying, he becomes the husband of more than one woman. In considering the situation of Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, it is apparent that when a man divorces his wife on the grounds of immorality, he is no longer considered to be her husband. This is evidenced because his remarriage does not result in adultery. Clearly the first marriage is dissolved and upon his remarriage the man is in every sense “the husband of one wife.” The same situation exists in I Corinthians 7:15 where a believer is divorced by an unbeliever, “the brother . . . is not under bondage in such cases.” (Reference the analysis of this passage in this section.) To restrict such a person from serving as an elder cast the same unjustified aspersions on this new marriage as Kent ably refuted in regard to a remarried widower (see above). (It is not necessary to review the question of an unjustified divorce at this time. The fact that remarriage following divorce does not, in all cases, place one in the status of no longer being “the husband of one wife” is adequate to refute this interpretation. As the qualification is stated quite generally it is not tenable that its meaning should be so specific as to refer to only those remarriages which followed unjustified divorces. The status of such a man will be considered as the preferred interpretation is examined.)

There is a third interpretation which may be identified, which better harmonizes with the Scriptural view of marriage, and suits the context far better. Rather than focusing on the number of wives, either in parallel or sequence, the emphasis lies on the quality of the relationship between the man and his wife. The interpretation sees “the husband of one wife” as referring to the total devotion and love of the elder toward his wife, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her (Ephesians 5:25-28). An elder must be a man who fulfills the biblical standard as a Christian husband. In defense of this interpretation the following observations are made:

- a. The qualifications of an elder are directed toward the quality of the man as indicated by his character traits and lifestyle. The fact that a man has only had one wife tells very little about his spiritual maturity. It is entirely possible, and far too common, that a man who has only been married to one woman has not treated her with the love and honor which God requires.
- b. This interpretation is in harmony with the anarthrous construction of the Greek phrase, which stresses the quality aspect of being a “husband of one wife.” A parallel could be suggested with our modern idiom of speaking of a devoted canine as a “one man dog.” The quality stressed is the total dedication of the dog to one person to the exclusion of all others. The same exclusive devotion of the husband to his one wife is stressed in the phrase.
- c. The orientation of the qualifications is to focus on the present standing of the elder, not on his life history. In regard to all the other qualifications it must be allowed that, at some time prior to becoming qualified for the office, each elder has been in violation of one or more of these qualities. Spiritual maturity has brought about growth and correction. It is this present maturity, and not past folly, which determines a man’s

qualification to serve. To deny this would be to require that all elders would have to have been perpetually mature. To interpret this one qualification as being a matter of life history as opposed to present character unjustifiably isolates it from the context of all the others.

As a result of such consideration, it is best to see in this qualification the requirement that an elder demonstrate the quality of marital relationship with his wife which God expects, one of love, honor, and devotion.

In applying this information against the two rejected interpretations, it is clear that the problem areas raised with those interpretations do not cause any problem with this interpretation. A man who has been remarried following the death of his previous wife, or following a biblically justified divorce would not be disqualified if he were living in a godly relationship with his present wife.

- a. An issue worthy of consideration is the question of the situation in which a man has been through a non-biblical divorce. Does such a situation disqualify him from service from that point on? To discuss this issue, various divorce situations must be examined.
- b. In the situation where the husband bears responsibility for the divorce, and is not repentant, he is clearly disqualified. He is not demonstrating biblical devotion to his wife.
- c. If the husband is not responsible for the divorce, and does not marry, he has not violated his responsibility toward his wife. To reject a man under such circumstances would violate the spirit of the qualification.
- d. If the husband remarries following an unjustified divorce, no matter who was responsible, he has committed the sin of adultery (Matthew 19:9). Such a sin is in violation of the requirement that he be “the husband of one wife.” The question which is raised at this point is whether such a man is perpetually disqualified. What if he repents of his previous sin and develops a proper biblical relationship with his new wife? Does God’s grace cleanse in such a situation? Surely it does. Robert Savoy emphasizes this truth in relation to the other qualifications of an elder.

“In I Timothy 3:3, Paul states that an elder is not to be addicted to wine. Does this mean that at no time in his previous life, the prospective elder was ever drunk? The elder furthermore is to be not pugnacious or contentious. Does this mean that he has never in his life been characterized by these two words? Are these characteristics to be interpreted in the sense that they were never a part of the man’s life, or are they to be interpreted that by God’s grace they have been worked out of his life so that they are not now, as he is being examined for eldership a part of his life? The answer appears obvious . . . This does not mean that any person is qualified just because he is the husband of one wife any more than it means that any person is qualified just because he is no longer murdering people, or no longer getting drunk. The sinful characteristic of his life which led to sin in these areas must have been changed by God’s grace. This would take time and would require in some cases long periods of observation and the living of the changed life

before his fellow believers. It must be noticed that this is not simply a negative, technical quality dealing with the legality of one's marital state.”<sup>60</sup>

A final issue for consideration is whether this qualification requires an elder to be married. There are two important reasons why it does not:

- a. Scripture does not place a premium on being married as a superior state. It does not mark out greater spiritual characteristic for marriage than for singleness. In I Corinthians 7, Paul speaks very highly of the merits and freedoms of remaining single, “it is good” (verse 1), “it is a gifting from God” (verse 7), and, “it gives greater opportunity for dedicated service to the Lord” (verses 32 and 33). In light of this, it is highly unlikely that singleness would bar one from service. Rather, as Paul admits in I Corinthians 7, marriage is far and away the norm, and based upon the priority which God places on the quality of the relationship between a man and his wife (Ephesians 5:22-23; I Peter 3:7), it is natural that a qualification be directed towards this.
- b. The emphasis of the phrase is on being “the husband of one wife,” not on being a husband. To stress a requirement of marriage is to abuse the structure of the grammar.

Contribution of I Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:6

The passage does not contribute to an understanding of the biblical teaching on divorce and remarriage.

<sup>60</sup> Extracted from the text of a paper read at the Brethren Ministerium, November 8, 1971, by Dr. Robert L. Savoy, Professor of Theology, Talbot Theological Seminary.