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CHAPTER 2
SCRIPTURAL PERSPECTIVE ON DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

I. Issues Concerning Divorce and Remarriage

A. What our denominational heritage has said about marriage

There has been a general consensus among Reformed believers regarding the nature and purpose of marriage. It is reflected in this statement of the RPCES General Synod Minutes of May 18, 1973:

“Marriage is the unique one-flesh relationship of a man and woman joined together by God in a union that He wills to be both permanent and exclusive, binding the couple to each other in a life-long companionship of common life and conjugal love. (Gen. 2:23-24, Matt. 19:4-8, Rom. 7:2-3).”⁴²

Scripture uses covenantal language to describe marriage: “The Lord has been witness between you and the wife of your youth to whom you have been faithless, although she is your companion and your wife by covenant” (Mal. 2:14; cf. Prov. 2:17). When Scripture says that a man shall “cleave” to his wife (Gen. 2:24), it is using a covenantal term used elsewhere to express the way the Israelites were to cleave with affection and loyalty to the Lord (Deut. 10:20; 11:22; 13:4; 30:20; Josh. 22:5; 23:8). Marriage is often used as an analogy in the Old Testament of God's covenant relation with Israel and in the New Testament of Christ's relationship with the Church. This covenantal relation between man and woman was intended by God to be loving, loyal and permanent.

Consequently, according to those same General Synod minutes: “It is the duty of husband and wife to maintain the unity and integrity of their marriage of cohabitation and coition. (Cf. *Larger Catechism*, Q.138). Should separation occur, reconciliation is to be sought. (1 Cor. 7:10-11).”⁴³

B. What our denominational heritage has said about divorce and remarriage

In light of our view of marriage, it seems incongruous to talk about divorce and remarriage. Nevertheless, most of us would likely agree with most, if not all, of this statement of the General Synod Minutes:

“Divorce is therefore always an abnormality arising out of human sinfulness. It was tolerated in the civil legislation of the Old Testament, but the Mosaic provision was given only 'for the hardness of your hearts.' (Deut. 24:1-4, Matt. 19:3-8). The civil legislation took into account in this matter the insubordination to the will of God characteristic of unbelieving Israel.

“In the New Testament Jesus calls his people to faithfulness to the original will of God for marriage as expressed in the creation ordinance. (Matt. 5:31, 32, 19:3-8). The apostle Paul presses this teaching of our Lord upon the early Christian community, (1 Cor. 7:10-11). The original ideal of marriage is to be maintained by the people of God in this age of the fullness of God's saving blessing.

“This is not to say that divorce is never sanctioned in the New Testament. But it is only sanctioned in circumstances of grave infidelity — adultery and willful, irremediable desertion (Matt. 5:32, 19:9; 1 Cor. 7:15. Cf. *Confession of Faith*, XXIV, v-vi). These are definitive actions that strike the exclusiveness of the marriage bond, malicious desertion its permanence. Both radically affect the one-flesh union and so provide cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage.

⁴² “Report of Study Committee on Divorce and Remarriage,” Documents of Synod: Study Papers and Actions of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod - 1965-1982, Paul R. Gilchrist, ed., New Castle, 1982, p.200.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

“The ‘innocent party’ [i.e., offended party] in such circumstances is free to remarry ... Scripture does not forbid the remarriage of the ‘guilty party’ in such cases. Where there is genuine conversion, evidenced by sincere and heart-felt repentance and faith in Christ, the church, after providing pastoral counseling and instruction in the biblical teaching concerning marriage, may approve remarriage in the Lord.”⁴⁴

C. What views may be found today within the evangelical-reformed community regarding divorce and remarriage

The above paragraphs taken from the RPCES General Synod Minutes of 1973 represent the consensus of our tradition on the questions of divorce and remarriage. However, in our day a variety of views have presented themselves and may be grouped in the following way.

1. No divorce, no remarriage

Some believers argue that there are no legitimate divorces at all and only death dissolves the marriage bond. The exception clause in Matthew is characteristically interpreted in one of two ways.

View #1: It refers to premarital unchastity during betrothal. If the betrothed proved unfaithful during that period or was discovered on the first night of marriage not to be a virgin, then the contract could be broken. (Cf. J. Dwight Pentecost, J.M. Boice).⁴⁵

View #2: It refers to unlawful incestuous marriages, i.e., marriages within the prohibited degrees as proscribed in Leviticus 18:6-18. (Cf. Laney, C.C. Ryrie).⁴⁶

Gordon Wenham holds a slight variation of this view. Jesus’ exception clause permitted divorce in the sense of separation, but marriage is a permanent relationship whether we get a divorce or not. In God’s eyes a divorced person is still married to the former spouse. Thus remarriage following divorce for any reason constitutes adultery. The only option for a divorced person is to be reconciled or to remain single.⁴⁷ Common to all these views is the assumption that remarriage after divorce is not allowed.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 200-201.

⁴⁵ J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, Grand Rapids, 1981, pp. 354-358. J.M. Boice, “The Biblical View of Divorce,” *Eternity*, Dec. 1970, pp.19-21.

⁴⁶ J. Carl Laney, *The Divorce Myth: A Biblical Examination of Divorce and Remarriage*, Minneapolis, 1981, pp. 71-78. C. C. Ryrie, *The Place of Women in the Church*, New York, 1958, pp. 43-48. See also William A. Heth and Gordon J. Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce: The Problem with the Evangelical Consensus*, Nashville, 1984, pp. 154-160.

⁴⁷ Gordon Wenham, *The Biblical View of Marriage and Divorce*, No. 3, *New Testament Teaching, Third Way*, London, Nov. 17, 1977, pp. 7-9.

2. Strictly limited grounds for divorce, and for remarriage

The general consensus among Reformed believers is the view that the Bible neither condones nor commands divorce, but rather permits and regulates divorce due to sin. However, a person can divorce only for adultery and separation of an unbelieving spouse. In the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith: "...nothing but adultery, or such wilful desertion as can no way be remedied by the church or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage" (*WCF* 24:6).⁴⁸

John Stott and John Murray are among those who insist that such permission is given only in negative and reluctant terms. According to Stott:

"Only if a person divorces his partner on the ground of marital unfaithfulness is his remarriage not adulterous. Only if the unbeliever insists on leaving is the believer not bound."⁴⁹

Common to all those who hold this view is the idea that these same limited grounds would be legitimate for remarriage too.

3. Broader grounds for divorce, and for remarriage

Still other believers hold the view that the major verses under question, Matthew 19 and I Corinthians 7, should be interpreted with more latitude.

- a. David Atkinson holds that there are sins other than fornication which may by their gross and persistent nature break the marriage covenant just as much as fornication, and are therefore grounds for divorce.⁵⁰
- b. Greg Bahnsen argues that *porneia* (fornication) in Matthew 19 involves more than sexual immorality; it should be interpreted as including any violations of the essential commitments of the marriage covenant, including spousal abuse or the refusal to provide protection and sustenance necessary for daily living.⁵¹
- c. David Clowney believes that the New Testament writers were not intending to give us an exhaustive list of exceptions for divorce; we should view the texts on divorce as examples of breaking the marriage covenant and seek to apply the examples to particular situations such as persistent physical abuse, attempts on the life of a spouse, and so forth.⁵²

These views differ from the liberal Protestant view of "no fault" divorce, or divorce on merely humanistic grounds such as "incompatibility." As Clowney writes:

⁴⁸ *The Confession of Faith*, Brevard, North Carolina, 1983, p. 69. (Chapter 24.6).

⁴⁹ John Stott, *Involvement, Vol. 2, Social and Sexual Relationships in the Modern World*, Old Tappan, NJ, 1985, p. 177. Cf. John Murray, *Divorce*, Philadelphia, 1961, pp. 20-21.

⁵⁰ David Atkinson, *To Have and To Hold*, Grand Rapids, 1979, Chapter 5, pp. 134 ff.

⁵¹ Greg Bahnsen, "Theses of Divorce and Spousal Abuse," Unpublished paper.

⁵² David Clowney, "An argument for the conclusion that abuse could provide biblically legitimate grounds for divorce," Unpublished paper.

“To seek to multiply such exceptions would be perverse, and precisely contrary to the intention of the Lord and his apostles.”⁵³ Common to these views is the idea that appropriate grounds for divorce would allow for remarriage.

D. Are we to understand that Scripture indeed allows for divorce?

1. Divorce was permitted in Scripture

It must be conceded, writes John Murray, that divorce was practiced. Such practice is found in many passages of Scripture (Ex. 21:10-11; Lev. 21:7, 14; 22:13; Nu. 30:9(10); Deut. 22:19, 29; 24:1-4; cf. Ezra 9-10; Neh. 9:2, 13:23ff; Isa. 50:1; Jer, 3:1; Ez 44:22), and under certain circumstances proves to be “permanently valid and inviolable ... It is also conceded that divorce was permitted or tolerated” and “the penalty of civil or ecclesiastical ostracism was not attached to it.” But it is very necessary to distinguish, continues Murray, “between this sufferance or toleration, on the one hand and divine approval or sanction, on the other ... Permission, sufferance, toleration was granted. But underlying this very notion is the idea of wrong.”⁵⁴

To say that God intended for marriage never to be broken does not mean that the marriage union is unbreakable. In some instances, God breaks it by death. For Paul specifically says that the surviving spouse is free to remarry again (I Cor. 7:39, cf. Rom. 7:2f.). Moreover, younger widows are even encouraged to do so (I Tim. 5:14; cf. I Cor. 7:8-9).

2. Divorce dissolved a marriage in Scripture

That divorce was more than a separation in Scripture is noted by Charles Hodge: “Divorce is not a mere separation ... Divorce annuls the marriage contract so that the parties are no longer man and wife. They stand henceforth to each other in the same relation as they were before marriage.”⁵⁵

A study of the terms for divorce in Scripture support the view that divorce is not merely a separation. The Old Testament term for divorce which occurs in the phrase “bill of divorce” (Deut. 24; Isa. 50:1; Jer. 3:8) means “to cut off, to hew off” (*kerithuth*). Other Old Testament words are used which mean to “expel, put away” (*garash*) or to “dismiss, send away, let go, put away” (*shalach*). The New Testament has similar words in the Greek which mean the same thing: “to set free, release, dismiss, send away” (*apoluo*), “to separate, divide” (*chorizo*), and “to let go, send away” (*aphiemi*). The notion of severance or of being cut off is implied within the contextual use of these terms, and it would be difficult to argue that the terms do not connote a total break in marital obligations.

A strong argument may be made as well from customs in Jesus’ day. Christ allowed for a bill of divorce to be given in the case of *porneia*. The essential text of such a bill of divorce recorded in the Mishnah is, “Lo, thou art free to marry any man.” The Mishnah goes on to record the wording of Rabbi Judah: “Let this be from me thy writ of divorce and letter of dismissal and deed of liberation, that thou mayest marry

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Murray, *Divorce*, pp. 8-9.

⁵⁵ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Vol. III*, London, 1961, p. 391.

whatsoever man thou wilt.”⁵⁶ Whether or not this was the divorce bill text envisioned by Deuteronomy 24:1 is not germane. Christ was commenting on current custom and application of that law. In other words, in Jesus’ day, divorce carried with it the right to remarriage, and that would have been understood in their discussions.

It is clearly God's will that marriage be permanent. But it is obviously possible that marriage can be broken. Loraine Boettner clarifies this for us by providing a delightful illustration apparently written by Dr. Geerhardus Vos:

"We may have on our parlor table a beautiful and costly vase. It ought to be handled carefully. It ought not to be broken. It was not made to be smashed; it was made to exist as a thing of beauty and grace. But it is not impossible to break it. And if a member of the family breaks it through carelessness, or in a fit of temper smashes it deliberately, there is nothing to do but sweep up the broken fragments and dispose of them. We will not say, 'This vase was not intended to be broken; therefore it is impossible to break it; the vase is unbreakable; therefore in spite of the fact that it lies in shattered fragments on the floor, we will not throw it away; we will keep it forever.' No one would say that about a broken vase; yet that is substantially the argument of those who say that the marriage bond is 'indissoluble' and unbreakable' ”⁵⁷

E. Does the evidence that divorce ends marriage mean that God looks favorably at divorce?

Scripture speaks unmistakably about God's repugnance at divorce. One passage is quite clear about this.

Malachi 2:13-16

13) “And this is another thing you do: you cover the altar of the LORD with tears, with weeping and with groaning, because He no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. 14) Yet you say, ‘For what reason?’ Because the LORD has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.

15) But not one has done so who has a remnant of the Spirit. And what did that one do while he was seeking a godly offspring? Take heed then, to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth.

16) ‘For I hate divorce,’ says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘and him who covers his garment with wrong,’ says the LORD of hosts. ‘So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously.’ ”

In this profound passage, Malachi is pointing out one of the reasons why God has withheld His blessing from Israel. Skillfully using a question-and-answer method, Malachi points out that the people were weeping and wailing at God's altar because He was no longer responding to them. Yet the people ask, “Why doesn't God respond?” Malachi is not afraid to point his finger at the cause: “Because the LORD has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously...” (In verses 10-12, Malachi had just accused them of marrying foreign

⁵⁶ Gittin 9:3.

⁵⁷ Loraine Boettner, *Divorce*, Nutley, NJ, 1972, p. 13.

women. Apparently they were doing so by divorcing their wives, a practice not unknown to Christians today.)

Notice how God calls their divorces “dealing treacherously,” a verb which is repeated three times in these four verses. Twice he refers to the divorced woman as “the wife of thy youth,” appealing no doubt to the heart of the husbands. Malachi goes on to refer to the first wife as “your companion and your wife by covenant.” The term companion does not simply refer to a ‘partner’ or ‘associate,’ terms which denote a rather loose relationship. Rather, it is an intense term meaning ‘knit together’ and connotes an unusually close joining or bonding. It fits in beautifully with the picture of Genesis 2:24, and the term “Covenant of Companionship” describes perfectly the marriage covenant.

Malachi then reminds them that what they have done in putting away their wives is contrary to what would be done by the true Israelite who has the remnant of the Spirit. So, “take heed then, to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth.”

Then come those powerful words, “For I hate divorce,” which is the translation of the NASV. There is no doubt that God hates divorce, for the entire context of this passage conveys the truth that the LORD views it as an act of treachery. But there is a major problem of translation with this verse, a problem the NASV is aware of, for a marginal note reads: “Lit., He hates.” A more straightforward translation of the Hebrew, confirmed by the LXX, reads:

“If [anyone] hating [his wife] divorces [her],
Says the LORD God of Israel,
Then violence covers his garment,
Says the LORD of hosts.”

Dr. David C. Jones makes a most compelling case for this translation, based on a careful analysis of both the Hebrew and the Greek LXX. Does this mean that God does not hate divorce? Not at all, for as Dr. Jones points out in his concluding paragraph:

“Finally, so far from weakening the Lord's protest against marital infidelity, the prophetic word against divorce is rendered more forceful by being more definite. Divorce for 'hatred' is a radical breach of fidelity; it is ‘violence’ against the companion to whom one has been joined in marriage. It therefore stands condemned by the God of justice, mercy, and truth.”⁵⁸

II. Consideration of Major Scripture Passages

As we begin our exposition of Scripture, we should remember that every passage becomes a battle ground for every view. Our purpose will be in each passage first to provide a clear explanation of what the passage teaches, and second to show how different views interpret that passage.

A. Deuteronomy 24:1-4

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, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and

⁵⁸ David C. Jones, "Malachi on Divorce," *Presbyterian: Covenant Seminary Review*, 15 (1989), pp.1-6.

sends her out from his house, 2) and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man's wife, 3) and if the latter husband turns against her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her to be his wife, 4) then her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the Lord, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance."

1. Is Moses giving a command to divorce?

Many assume the KJV translation of verse 1, "When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she finds no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: **then** let him write her a bill of divorcement..." This translation makes it sound like Moses is commanding divorce.

However, that is not the best translation. A careful analysis of the intended structure of this lengthy sentence in Hebrew is crucial for a proper understanding. The first three verses are all part of a compound protasis (or conditional part of the sentence), while the fourth verse contains the apodosis (or consequence). In other words, we should understand the passage in this way: "If a man divorces his wife, and if he gives her a certificate, and if she leaves and remarries, and if her second husband divorces her or dies, **then** her first husband may not marry her again." Thus we learn:

Lesson #1: Moses is not instituting divorce in this passage. He deals only indirectly with divorce and remarriage, and his main purpose is to prohibit the reunion of partners after divorce and remarriage has taken place.

Lesson #2: Deuteronomy is in some sense trying to regulate divorce in what appears to be a situation which has gotten out of hand. Divorce appears as an established custom which is neither commanded nor condoned in this passage.

This is in agreement with the rest of Mosaic Law. Mosaic Law takes the custom of divorce for granted (Lev. 21:7, 14; 22:13; Nu. 30:9; Dt. 22:19, 29); it does not institute divorce, but regulates it to limit and preclude its abuse. In two cases in Scripture, the right of divorce for the offended spouse is withheld, viz. where a man slanders his newly-married wife as unchaste, or seduces her before marriage (Dt. 22:19, 29).

2. What does the phrase "some indecency" mean?

Does "some indecency" refer merely to a personal dislike of the husband, or to a biblically shameful act justifying the permission for a divorce? Can a word study give us an exact nuance on which we can all agree?

The Hebrew words are *erwath dabar*. They are translated in the KJV as "some uncleanness," and in the NIV as "something indecent." *Erwath* is commonly translated "nakedness," and is used in Old Testament contexts of shameful exposure, indecency, or improper behavior having to do with sex.⁵⁹ *Dabar* is simply translated as

⁵⁹ F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Oxford, 1962, p. 789.

“something” or “thing” in this context. Hence, the literal translation would be “nakedness of the thing.”

The term *erwath* used alone clearly had a prominent sexual nuance. That illicit sexual sin is intimated in Deut. 24 seems probable due to two Old Testament passages which use Deut. 24:1-4 as a basis. The first passage is Jeremiah 3:1ff:

“God says, If a husband divorces his wife, and she goes from him, and belongs to another man, will he still return to her? Will not that land be completely polluted? But you are a harlot with many lovers; yet you turn to Me, declares the Lord... [Jeremiah 3:8-9 expands]...And I saw that for all the adulteries of faithless Israel, I had sent her away and given her a writ of divorce, yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear; but she went and was a harlot also. And it came about because of the lightness of her harlotry, that she polluted the land and committed adultery with stones and trees.”

The second passage is Isaiah 50:1, where we read:

“Thus says the Lord, Where is the certificate of divorce, by which I have sent your mother away? Or to whom of My creditors did I sell you? Behold, you were sold for your iniquities, and for your transgressions your mother was sent away.” Comparing these passages with Deut. 24, the “indecent” would appear to be a heinous sin, one which would involve sexual immorality.

However, the uses of *erwath* in Scripture are not limited to sexual immorality. It can also refer to perversity (I Sam. 20:30), to a dishonor for authority (Ezra 4:14), and to public shame (Isa. 20:4). The exact phrase *erwath dabar* occurs elsewhere only in Deut. 23:14 where it refers to human excrement left in Israel's camp, an uncleanness that would repulse God.

This broader use of *erwath* introduces us to a major problem in the divorce and remarriage controversy. It is the same problem we face when we attempt to define the Greek term *porneia* in Jesus' exception clause (Matt. 19:9). It is very difficult to come to a consensus on the precise distinction or subtlety of “some indecent.”

It was difficult in Jesus' day. The school of Shammai regarded it as adultery, whereas the school of Hillel saw it as referring to anything that displeased the husband. Likewise, today, some wish to attribute a narrower, and others a more broad, meaning to *erwath dabar*. This divergence of views may be seen by comparing prominent current interpretations of Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

3. Modern interpreters differ

William A. Heth and Gordon J. Wenham in their book, *Jesus and Divorce*, contend that the first three verses are really secondary to the main thrust of the passage which is verse four. Knowing the precise nuances of *erwath dabar* is not that important. The fact that the first husband legally divorced his wife is acknowledged and the second marriage is also considered legal. The crux of the law is that the wife's remarriage to her first husband is forbidden! Why? Because the “one-flesh” bond of their first marriage was never really dissolved by their legal divorce and remarriage. Consequently, were the wife to remarry her first husband, she would have committed a form of incest, which in Lev. 18 we are told is an abomination to the Lord and defiles

the land. Therefore, conclude Heth and Wenham, Deut. 24 does not allow a “dissolution divorce” in which remarriage can take place.⁶⁰

Jay Adams in his book, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible*, holds that Deut. 24:1-3 (the protasis) tells of a wife who finds “no favor” in her husband’s eyes because of “some indecency” he finds in her. So the husband hands her a bill of divorce, going through a genuine divorce proceeding which in effect annulled her marriage obligations to him and set her free to marry another man, which she does. Yet the text goes on to say that she cannot remarry her first husband because she has been “defiled” and it is an abomination to the Lord and would bring sin on the land. Clearly, the judgmental language, used elsewhere in such contexts as Lev. 18, supposes gross sexual sins among the people. She was “defiled” apparently due to her entrance into the second marriage, not wrong in itself, but wrong when following a bad divorce. Why was it a bad divorce? Because “some indecency” was interpreted broadly by the husband and the divorce was not biblically justified.⁶¹

John Murray in his book, *Divorce*, begins his discussion of the meaning of “some indecency” by saying: “It has to be admitted that it is exceedingly difficult if not precarious to be certain as to what the ‘unseemly thing’ really was.” He concludes that there was no evidence to show that in Deut. 24 it refers to adultery or an act of sexual uncleanness. On the other hand, he is not willing to agree with Hillel’s loose interpretation. Murray concludes that it refers to something very shameful: “While falling short of illicit sexual intercourse it may well be that the indecency consisted in some kind of shameful conduct connected with sex life. Or it may have been some other kind of impropriety worthy of censure on the part of the husband.”⁶²

This variety of interpretation reminds us that precious little can be gained from a study of Deut. 24:1-4. It was precisely because of its vagueness that it was being debated in Jesus’ day. In any case, what we have here is the regulation of divorce, not its institution or encouragement. Moreover, the broad weight of the evidence seems to favor a generally sexual connotation for *erwath dabar*, although it is very difficult to conclude with any certainty. We can’t imagine that anyone’s view is going to rest on the interpretation of this particular passage. The real issue centers on an interpretation of the New Testament passages.

Three relevant principles *can* be derived from this passage however. First, it establishes the practice of making divorces official and legal instead of leaving them *de facto*. Second, it expresses God’s desire that a woman be protected from being pulled back and forth by an impulsive husband. Third, it discourages divorce and especially the finalization of divorce *via* remarriage by making it unlawful to return to one’s original spouse after remarriage.

4. Proceeding to the New Testament passages

All three synoptics provide us with Jesus’ own teaching on marriage, divorce and remarriage. The passages vary in precise detail, but they do not present

⁶⁰ Heth and Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce*, pp. 106-111.

⁶¹ Jay E. Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible*, Grand Rapids, 1980, pp. 60-69.

⁶² John Murray, *Divorce*, pp. 9-16.

contradictory views of what Jesus taught. they complement each other, and provide a broader picture of what Jesus taught than if we had only one passage.

We will first examine Matthew 5:31-32, and then Luke 16:18. Matthew 19:3-5 and Mark 10:2-11 will be considered jointly. Once we have looked at all the passages in the Gospels, we will return to consider the exception clauses in Matthew and the meaning of *porneia* (sexual immorality). Then we will proceed on to consider 1 Corinthians 7.

B. Matthew 5:31-32

31) “And it was said, ‘whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of dismissal;’ 32) but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

1. The rabbinic perversion of Deuteronomy 24

Jesus is not quoting Deuteronomy 24 verbatim, but is stating a misleading abbreviation or distortion of that passage in the oral teaching of the Pharisees. This oral teaching gives the impression that divorce was readily permissible; all one had to do was to go through the formality of handing over a certificate of divorce. (Jewish sources confirm that divorce was relatively easy to obtain.)

It seems likely that Jesus is quoting the teaching of the school of Hillel, that school which taught a more lax view of divorce. For them, marriage was viewed as a contract that could be broken. By focusing on the steps taken in obtaining a divorce they had sidestepped the intent of the law, that divorce for unwarranted reasons is wrong.

2. Jesus’ correction of the rabbinic perversion

Jesus responds to the distorted view of the rabbis by first saying that “*everyone who divorces his wife except for the cause of unchastity makes her commit adultery...*” Then he adds, “*and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.*” Concerning his response, we make these observations.

First, there is the presence of an exception clause, “*except for the cause of unchastity.*” Because this clause is at the center of debate, we have reserved for a later section the discussion of what it means and how it is to be applied. However, at present we may point out the obvious, that if a man divorces his wife “for the cause of unchastity,” he is not thereby “making her commit adultery.” For she has already done so and he is free from that charge.

Second, because the verb “to commit adultery” is an aorist passive infinitive some scholars prefer to interpret the clause “stigmatizes her as an adulteress” (ever though it is not so).⁶³ But that view is to be rejected. The NIV “causes her to become an adulteress,” or the NASV “makes her commit adultery” (which we are using) provides a more natural translation. The aorist passive form serves simply to accent the fact that she is the victim.

⁶³ For example, R. C. H. Lenski, *Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, Columbus, 1932, pp. 226 ff. For an extensive analysis of the use of the verb *moicheo* (to commit adultery) in this passage, see John Murray, *Divorce*, p. 21, n. 2.

Third, the question naturally arises, “How is the divorced wife caused to commit adultery?” By divorcing his wife, the man is virtually forcing her to be remarried. The plight of the divorced wife was often desperate in Jesus’ day, and divorce would inevitably lead to remarriage if there was any possibility. But how would that be called adultery? The clear implication is that the wife would be having sexual relations with a person other than the one with whom she ought to be having sex. It would constitute marital unfaithfulness. While the divorce from a human point of view did break the former marital obligations, from God’s point of view it never should have happened. In other words, when there is no biblical warrant to be in a divorced state, those who bring about that divorce are causing their partners to commit adultery.

Fourth, the emphasis of Jesus’ statement, therefore, is on the guilt of the husband who divorces his wife for an unbiblical reason. For he is being held responsible for creating a situation in which she cannot remarry without committing adultery. Some suppose that the real problem was not the divorce itself, but that to which the divorce led, the remarriage of the wife. But this text underlines the husband’s responsibility for the act. He victimizes her, and causes her to be an adulteress. The stigma she bears and the position into which she is placed have been imposed on her by the sin of the husband who initiates and executes the divorce. (Today, wives initiate divorces regularly, and the same principle applies to them as well.)

Fifth, Jesus goes on to say that “*whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.*” Jesus’ words indicate what happens when humans break up a marriage without the warrant of the exception clause. His words are related to that fact alone and do not deal with the status of the divorced woman when her previous husband remarries (see elsewhere in our study).

Sixth, we simply point out that the emphasis in this text should not be on the fact that there is an exception, but rather that there is only one exception. There is only one legitimate reason why the husband may be considered as not sinning by putting away his wife. As John Murray points out, “Preoccupation with the one exception should never be permitted to obscure the force of the negation of all others.”⁶⁴ Nor are we led to believe that a husband is “obliged” to divorce his wife in the case of sexual immorality. All that the text says is that if he does divorce her for that reason, he is not implicated in the sin of causing her to commit adultery.

3. Interpretations influenced by the context of Matthew 5, the Sermon on the Mount

Some have argued that, because of the immediate context of the Sermon on the Mount, our text is a “hard saying” of Jesus, and as such is to be understood as “haggadic argumentation” – a statement intended to shock Jews out of their complacency over divorce, and not as halakic, prescriptive instruction. For example, just prior to this passage in Matt. 5:29, Jesus talks about plucking out the right eye that causes one to sin. That was not meant to be taken as a literal legal prescription, they say, but as a deliberately shocking statement intended to challenge existing attitudes. Then they insist that the same is true of the divorce statement.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ John Murray, *Divorce*, p. 21.

⁶⁵ For example, M. J. Down, “The Sayings of Jesus About Marriage and Divorce,” *Expository Times*, 95.11 (1984), p. 333.

Our response is that although Jesus was concerned about the spirit of the law in Matthew 5, he clearly seems to be setting his own authoritative commentary and guidelines over against the legal prescription of the oral tradition. He obviously desire not just to affect their attitudes, but also to govern their external behavior. He was discouraging divorce in the strongest terms as a specific form of behavior.

Others hold that, since Jesus' statement on divorce occurs in the Sermon on the Mount, we must interpret it as being more stringent than the views of the scribes and Pharisees. For Jesus had said, "... unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:20). They argue that if Jesus were allowing for remarriage after divorce for adultery, then Jesus "would be siding with the conservative school of Shammai which allowed divorce only in the case of adultery," and, if so, then "Jesus' teaching did not rise above that of Shammai and the Pharisees, contrary to His usual pattern ...[as] Christ customarily rebuked the superficiality of the Pharisees with His own more stringent interpretation of the Law."⁶⁶ According to this point of view, therefore, Jesus' teaching was more stringent by not allowing for remarriage.

In response, we would point out that Jesus' statement that their righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees is not necessarily taken to mean that their standards must in every instance be more stringent. As David Jones notes:

"Jesus' interpretation of the Law is not invariably more stringent than that of the Pharisees. Indeed, sometimes the opposite is the case. Responding to the Pharisees' stringent interpretation of the fourth commandment, Jesus twice reproves them for failure to incorporate into their hermeneutic the principle of Hosea 6:6: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice' (Mt. 9:13, 12:7) ... Rigorous standards are not necessarily righteous; it is not godly to be more strict than God."⁶⁷

Moreover, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is not saying that the great concern the Pharisees displayed for the details of observance was okay as far as it went, it just didn't go far enough; therefore they must supplement it by going further. Rather, as John Murray explains in his book *Principles of Conduct*:

"What Jesus is saying is that the righteousness of the scribes, notwithstanding its meticulous adherence to the minutiae, does not begin to qualify for the kingdom of heaven; it has no affinity with the demands of the kingdom of heaven. This is so not because the kingdom of heaven does not demand righteousness, not because it is indifferent to the minutiae of divine prescription, but because the demands of the kingdom of heaven are far greater than anything that ever enters into the conception of the scribes and Pharisees. They have not begun to reckon with the demands of the kingdom of heaven. Paradoxically, it was their concern for detail that led them to miss the whole genius of kingdom righteousness; the detail was not the detail of divine prescription. They made void the law of God by their own traditions."⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Laney, *The Divorce Myth*, pp. 67-68.

⁶⁷ David C. Jones, in his paper submitted to the Eighteenth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America as part of the Ad-Hoc Committee on Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage, entitled, "The Westminster Confession on Divorce and Remarriage," p. 25.

⁶⁸ John Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, Grand Rapids, 1978, pp. 155.

Murray concludes that “the righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees is therefore that of character and behavior,” not that of extending the details.⁶⁹

C. Luke 16:17-18

17) “But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter of the Law to fail. 18) Every one who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and he who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery.”

The context of Luke 16:18 is similar to that of Matthew 5:32. Jesus has just charged the Pharisees with hypocrisy, as those “who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts...” (v. 15). He states that not even one stroke of the Law will fail (v.17), implying this to be the case in spite of their lax attitudes to the Law. Then he applies this to their view of divorce.

The divorce text of Luke 16:18 is quite similar to that of Matt. 5:32, except that whereas the latter passage reads “everyone who divorces his wife except for the cause of unchastity makes her commit adultery,” Luke reads “everyone who divorces his wife and marries another (*heteros*) commits adultery.” Matthew speaks only of a divorce which causes the wife to commit adultery, but Luke speaks of a man divorcing and remarrying thereby himself committing adultery. Also, Luke omits the exception clause.

How do we understand the differences? First, we do not believe Jesus is contradicting himself. Luke 16:18 serves to clarify and reinforce Jesus’ teaching in Matt. 5:32. According to Matt. 5:32, when a man divorces his wife but does not remarry, he is not committing adultery, but he is to be held accountable for causing his wife to commit adultery if she remarries. But in Luke 16:18, if a husband divorces his wife and then remarries, he is committing adultery.

Apparently divorce in Jesus’ day was an act which frequently had as its object the removal of the wife to make room for another woman. This was the problem Moses was facing in Deut. 24 (cf. Ex. 34:11-16; Deut. 7:1-5), Ezra was facing in Ezra 9-10 (cf. Neh. 10:30; 13:23-30), and Malachi was facing in Mal. 2:10-17. It is at the heart of the problem we face today. In divorcing their wives to make room for others, they had made the Law of God void.

But how can Christ’s teachings in Luke and in Matthew be reconciled when Matthew includes the exception clause but Luke does not? This should not be seen as a great difficulty. It is a regular feature of ethical commands or doctrinal pronouncements in the Scripture to be stated in a general form which sounds absolute, taken in and of itself, but which are modified or qualified in some way in another, more detailed, consideration of the same subject. For example, the sixth commandment, “Thou shalt not kill” is qualified in many ways in other places of the law (e.g. the commands concerning capital punishment and war); the fourth commandment prohibiting work on the Sabbath day is also qualified (see Mat. 12:1-5); Jesus’ instruction concerning prayer, “Whatever you ask in My name, I will do it” (John 14:13-14) is qualified elsewhere in several ways (e.g. I John 5:14); Paul’s command not to do anything that might make men stumble (I Cor. 10:32-33) is qualified by Jesus’

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

example with the Pharisees (Mat. 12:1-14; Luke 13:10-17; 14:1-6); the commands to obey parents and civil authorities are qualified as well (Acts 5:29). Thus the fact that Jesus' command is absolute in Luke 16 should not prevent us from admitting the qualifications He places on His instructions when He gives them in Mat. 5 and 19."

D. Matthew 19:3-9 [Mark 10:2-11]

3) "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?'" 4) And He answered and said 'Have you not read, that He who created them from the beginning MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE, 5) 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? 6) Consequently they are no more two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.' 7) They said to Him, 'Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate and divorce her?' 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. 9) And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another commits adultery.' "

There is no need to consider Matthew 19 and Mark 10 separately. The primary phrase in question, "except for immorality," is found in Matt. 19:9 and is omitted in Mark. Other differences between the two passages are secondary and do not demand separate analyses.⁷⁰ Therefore we have chosen simply to consider the exception clause in its Matthean context.

1. The context of Matthew 19:3-8

When the Pharisees asked Jesus, "*Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?*", they were attempting to entrap him.⁷¹ In the process, however, they revealed some assumptions of their own. By beginning with "Is it lawful," they revealed that they viewed marriage and divorce merely as a matter of legislation. By ending their question, "for any cause," they betrayed a lax approach to divorce, an approach more in keeping with the school of Hillel. Josephus, himself a divorcee and a Pharisee, writes:

"He that desires to be divorced from his wife for any cause whatsoever, **(and many such causes happen among men,)** let him in writing give assurance that he never will use her as his wife any more, for this means she may be at liberty to marry another husband, although before this bill of deliverance be given she is not to be permitted to do so."⁷² (Bold print, ours.)

⁷⁰ For a discussion of the differences, cf. David Atkinson, *To Have and To Hold*, pp. 110-111.

⁷¹ The question the Pharisees asked was a bit of rabbinic casuistry. If Jesus sided with Hillel, the Pharisees could charge Jesus with moral laxity. If he sided with Shammai, Jesus could be reproached for his own friendly treatment of sinners, it could be too strict for many of his followers, and his statement could be given to Herod who had imprisoned John the Baptist for the same views. If Jesus should reject both and declare himself as totally against divorce, they could charge him with contradicting the Law of Moses (i.e., Deut. 24).

⁷² Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 4, Chapter 8, as published in *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, trans. W. Whiston, Philadelphia, p. 141. For a discussion of the Jewish schools of thought as to what constituted proper grounds to divorce, see David Atkinson, *To Have and To Hold*, pp. 106-110.

These are the same assumptions we find so prevalent in today's world.

Jesus responded by asking incredulously if they had not read Genesis 1:27 and 2:24. These verses, Jesus said, show that God joined (literally, "yoked together") the two spouses, that they are now one flesh, and therefore no one should be party to their separation lest he be found guilty of rebelling against God.

The Pharisees then challenged him: "*Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate and divorce her?*" If God's best is "no divorce," why did Moses provide for divorce? And if Moses provided for divorce, does that not conflict with what Jesus had just said?

Jesus' reply is of paramount importance as he explains the connection between Moses' concession following the Fall and God's intention for marriage in Creation. "*For the hardness of your heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.*" Two contrasts of view may be discerned in this saying of Jesus.

First, whereas the Pharisees alleged that Moses commanded (*eneteilato*) divorce, Jesus said Moses permitted (*epetrepsen*).⁷³ Permission denotes allowance or sufferance without in the least implying approval or command. The Pharisees chose to view this divine concession as divine approval and a legal basis of divorce. It suited their purposes. But Jesus said, "from the beginning it was not so."

Second, whereas the Pharisees spoke of grounds for divorce, Jesus said the real culprit was their "hardness of heart" (*sklerokardia*). This is a term often used of Israel's stubbornness and rebellion against the will of God (Cf. Dt. 10:16; Jer. 4:40). Whenever Israel failed to believe and obey God, it was due to their hardness of heart. By implication, according to Jesus, this too is the cause behind divorce. When people fail to believe and obey what God has clearly communicated about marriage in Creation, it is their "hardness of heart" that is at fault.

2. **Divorce and remarriage in Matthew 19:9**

Jesus concludes by enjoining that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except for immorality and marries another, commits adultery. Setting aside for the moment the exception clause, if we pull together his teaching from Matthew 5:32; Luke 16:18; and Mark 10:11, we find "all the bases are covered":

Mt. 5:32: a man who divorces his wife makes her to become an adulteress (when she marries again); a man who marries a woman who has been divorced commits adultery

Mt. 19:9: a man who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery;

Mk. 10:11: a man who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and a woman who divorces her husband and marries another commits adultery;

Lk. 16:18: a man who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; a man who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.

⁷³ For an insightful discussion of the supposed discrepancy between Matthew 19:7-8 and Mark 10:3-4 concerning who used the word "permitted," see John Murray, *Divorce*, pp. 43 ff.

The point is, if a divorce takes place which has no sanction from God, then any new union which follows is an adulterous act, being unlawful. Not only is the act of divorce itself sinful, apart from remarriage, but the act of remarriage after an illegitimate divorce is judged contrary to the will of God. As we have stated above, the reason an unbiblical divorce can cause adultery is that God does not honor such a divorce. Following such a divorce, remarriage constitutes marital unfaithfulness. From God's point of view, they should still be married to their original partner.

Concerning the adultery involved in remarriage following an unbiblical divorce, we understand that the consummation of the new union through intercourse is an adulterous act because it is God's intention that the prior marriage not be broken. This adulterous act, while breaking the old union, establishes a new relationship which must now stand on its own.

3. **The exception clause of Matthew 19:9**

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

The presence of the “exception clause” in Matthew 19:9 has caused endless debate among scholars. The discussion has generally centered around three major questions: the authenticity of the clause as the words of Jesus; the scope of the exception clause; and the meaning of the *porneia* (the Greek term translate “immorality” in the NASV). The first two questions can be handled quickly for our purposes, whereas the third question needs more careful consideration.

a. **The authenticity of Jesus' words**

Many commentators try to argue that the exception clause is not original with Jesus, and that Matthew or another editor of the Gospel inserted it at a later time. They contend that Jesus would not have allowed for exceptions and would have branded all divorces as contrary to the will of God. After all, they argue, look at the absolute form of Jesus' statements in Mk. 10:11-12 and Lk. 16:18.

As a denomination that believes in the inerrancy of Scripture, we take the position that if the exception clause belongs to the genuine text of Matthew's gospel (and our textual apparatus strongly confirms this fact),⁷⁴ then it is truly the *logion* of our Lord. Second, its omission by Mark and Luke is not sufficient ground for rejecting it as an authentic saying of Jesus. Their silence could be due to their taking the clause for granted. Both pagan and Jewish culture took adultery as a ground for divorce for granted. It was not in dispute. Third, we reject the notion that God's Word presents us with conflicting views of what Jesus taught, which would be the case if Matthew 19 is set over against Mark 10 and Luke 16. Fourth, the Greek text includes the emphatic “I” (*ego*), “And I say unto you.” What follows would naturally all be attributed to Jesus. This was indeed Matthew's intention, and Matthew was there as an eyewitness. For these reasons, the burden of proof rests on those who with critical presuppositions would take these words from Jesus' lips. The exception clause cannot be sidestepped in this way as unimportant for one's interpretation.

⁷⁴ John Murray, *Divorce*, pp. 47-51, deals in depth with the question of textual evidence for the authenticity of these words of Jesus.

It is also interesting to recall in this connection Jeremiah 3:8, where Yahweh is said to divorce Israel for her spiritual adultery (idolatry): “I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries.” If God himself can properly divorce his bride because of adultery, then, given Christ’s unqualified adherence to the authority of the Old Testament, it seems difficult to conclude that Jesus would not have had similar words on his own lips.

b. The scope of the exception clause

A major debate has revolved around the scope of the exception clause. Does “except for immorality” refer only to divorce, or to both divorce and remarriage in this passage? The Roman Catholic Church, and more recently Heth and Wenham, have held that the phrase refers only to divorce. According to Heth and Wenham:

“The construction of Matthew 19:9 basically indicates that we are dealing with two conditional statements, one that is qualified and one that is unqualified or absolute:

1. A man may not put away his wife **unless** she is guilty of adultery.
2. Whoever marries another after putting away his wife commits adultery. Or, to paraphrase the idea in another way: ‘Putting away for reasons other than unchastity is forbidden; and remarriage after every divorce is adulterous.’⁷⁵

According to John Murray, the sentence cannot be subdivided in that way. There is only one subject (“whoever”), and one main verb (“commits adultery”), and the ruling thought is of the husband committing adultery because he both divorces and remarries another woman. So the unity and coordination of the entire sentence demands that the exception clause relate to both divorce and remarriage.⁷⁶

We agree with John Murray. It is difficult, and indeed strained, to restrict the exceptive clause to divorce (*apoluse*) and not extend it also to remarriage (*gamese alien*). It is questionable grammatically to interpret Matthew 19:9 as two conditional statements, as Wenham does. Moreover, the question is logical, not grammatical. Divorce by definition entailed the right to remarry, as we have noted previously; and Jesus is locating the committing of adultery not simply in the act of remarriage, but in the fact that someone has divorced his wife for an inadequate reason and has then remarried.

⁷⁵ Heth and Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce*, p. 117.

⁷⁶ John Murray, *Divorce*, p. 40. Thomas Edgar provides one of the strongest cases against this view of Heth and Wenham, arguing that their view is both grammatically and logically impossible. Edgar argues his case in his contribution to *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*, ed. H. Wayne House, "Divorce and Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion," Downers Grove, 1990, pp. 156-162.

c. The meaning of *porneia*

The heart of the debate centers around the meaning of *porneia*, often translated fornication. Our first step must be to survey its uses in both the Old and New Testaments.

Porneia and its cognates serve to translate the Hebrew word *zahnah* and its cognates. According to the Arndt and Gingrich *Lexicon*, *porneia* may be translated “prostitution, unchastity, fornication,” and may be used “of every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse.” Examples include the harlotry of a married woman (Hos. 2:2), incest (1 Cor. 5:1), or even homosexuality (Jude 7).⁷⁷

Of particular importance is the fact that *porneia* (fornication) is on occasion used interchangeably with *moicheia* (adultery; its Hebrew equivalent is *nahaph*). Examples of this can be found in the Greek translation of the Old Testament in the parallel clauses of Hosea 2:2, and in Jeremiah 3:1, 2, 6, 8 where a married adulteress is divorced because of her fornication. In Ezekiel 23, God tells the story of two women who committed fornication both before and after marriage; in this extended passage fornication is clearly used to speak both of sexual sin leading to adultery, and of adultery as its effect. That *porneia* can refer to adultery on the part of a married spouse is best seen in a quotation from the apocryphal Sirach 23:22,23: “So it is with a woman who leaves her husband and provides an heir by a stranger (*porneia*).”

However, even though these two terms may be used interchangeably, they are not to be equated. Otherwise, why the two terms, both in Hebrew and Greek? Why would they be carefully distinguished in verses such as Hebrews 13:4b (“...for fornicators and adulterers God will judge”) and Matthew 15:19 (“For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications...)? If the two terms are to be distinguished, how do they differ?

The answer is: whereas adultery refers to the marital unfaithfulness, fornication is broader and can encompass all sexual sin including adultery. As the logicians and linguists would say, ‘adultery’ is not part of the **intention** of *porneia*; it is part of its **extension**. *Porneia* is a class, and within the class you may have a number of specific sins which may be referred to like adultery or homosexuality or prostitution.⁷⁸

Some scholars hold that *porneia* is referring to incest. They argue that this is its meaning in 1 Corinthians 5:1 and in Acts 15:20.⁷⁹ First we should note that not that many commentators agree that Acts 15:20 is referring to incest.⁸⁰ In the particular case of I Cor. 5:1, it seems quite clear that *porneia* is used here as a class (sexual immorality) which includes incest as one of its referents (its extension). Note how the passage

⁷⁷ William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Grand Rapids, 1957, pp. 699-700.

⁷⁸ In the words of David C. Jones (Op. Cit., p. 21), “*Porneia* is the general term for all illicit or immoral sexual intercourse. The specific form may sometimes be indicated by the context. If payment of wages is involved, it is *prostitution*. If it involves close relatives, it is *incest*. If it involves persons of the same sex, it is *homosexuality*. If it involves an unmarried couple, it is *unchastity*. If it involves a married person outside of marriage, it is *adultery*.”

⁷⁹ See above, note 5.

⁸⁰ For an excellent refutation of the view that Acts 15:20 is referring to incest, see Thomas Edgar, “Divorce and Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion,” pp. 177-187.

reads: “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality (*porneia*) among you, and sexual immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife.”

The basic significance of *porneia* in the New Testament may be seen in I Cor 7:2, “But because of immoralities...” (*porneias*); the plural points to various immoral acts. The commands to “flee immorality” (I Cor. 6:18), and “abstain from immorality” (I Thess. 4:3), naturally refer to sexual sin in general. These are clear examples of its basic use. Thus we conclude that *porneia* is a term that refers to sexual immorality in general, and that within this general classification it may refer to a number of specific sins, depending on its context. Moreover, we choose to translate *porneia*, “sexual immorality,” since the term fornication in today's English may refer to sexual sins committed only by the unmarried, and since sexual immorality communicates better the broad nature of this sin.

d. *Is porneia* ever used with an even broader meaning?

We must note that *porneia* has a figurative use as well. In the Old Testament, there are several prophetic passages which use the analogy of *porneia* extensively to picture Israel's marital (or sexual) unfaithfulness to God. These passages picture Israel as Hosea clearly delineates it as an unfaithful wife wandering away from God her husband (cp. for example Hosea 1:2). Jeremiah 3 speaks of how treacherous Israel was in going up “on every high hill and under every green tree, and she played the harlot there” (*porneuo*). Ezekiel 16 and 23 speak of Israel “multiplying her harlotries” and even “paying her lovers” for fornication.

Because *porneia* is used to designate Israel's unfaithfulness to God her husband in acts of idolatry and other sins, therefore by extension other figurative use also designates other acts of sin and unfaithfulness to God (cf. Numbers 14:33; Isaiah 1:21; and Hebrews 12:16), since that covenanted relationship is still in view. Furthermore, this figurative use of *porneia* is extended even further in the New Testament to describe the rebellion of sinful humanity in the defilements and abominations represented by the “Great Harlot” (Rev. 17:4; 19:2).

e. What are the current interpretations of *porneia*?

From our prior discussion, it is clear that *porneia* has a very common literal meaning which is “sexual immorality.” This is its **intensive** sense, and its **extensive** sense can include such sexual sins as adultery, homosexuality, prostitution, and incest. It is also clear that *porneia* is used figuratively in Scripture of spiritual betrayal on the part of God's people.

The issue is, what does *porneia* mean in Matthew 19:9? We may group current interpretations under three headings:

View #1: *porneia* refers to sexual unfaithfulness before marriage

Some scholars hold that *porneia* refers to a sexual sin separate from marital unfaithfulness. They prefer to view Jesus as totally against divorce and remarriage. Therefore, *porneia* in Matthew 19:9 could not refer to adultery or any kind of sexual sin within marriage. One such view identifies *porneia* with premarital unchastity during the Jewish engagement period. Thus Jesus would be allowing divorce if the bride was found unfaithful during that period, and they would never have entered into conjugal

relations. Another such view is to identify *porneia* with incestuous marriages. In this case Jesus would merely be nullifying a marriage which was unlawful to begin with.

How are we to evaluate this view? A number of compelling reasons stand against our accepting this view. First, the context of Matthew 19:9 is about marriage and divorce, not about invalid unions. The Old Testament texts about which Jesus and the Pharisees were speaking (Genesis 1-2, Deut. 24) refer to marriage, not the engagement period. To suppose that Christ would have introduced matters having to do with the engagement period, matters governed by separate legislation and concerning which there was no controversy, when the issue being discussed was marriage and divorce, seems out of place.

Second, *porneia* is never specifically used in Scripture of unchastity during the betrothal period, and is used only once in a context clearly having to do with incest (1 Cor. 5:1). Although *porneia* could be referring to both of these sexual sins, it would not be understood as referring to either one of them unless the context encouraged such an interpretation. No encouragement is seen in the context by this committee.

Third, there are incidents in Scripture of *porneia* being used of adultery. To assume that *porneia* does not have to do with marital unfaithfulness in a passage discussing marriage and divorce is to assume too much.

Finally, the whole strength of this interpretation is drawn from the assumption that divorce with remarriage does not exist in the Bible. This is to beg the argument.

View #2: *porneia* refers to unfaithfulness in marriage, not restricted to sexual sin

This second understanding of *porneia* comes from those who wish to view the term in both its literal and figurative senses. They argue, since the use of *porneia* has not been restricted to sexual sins only, but has also been used in the figurative sense of covenant breaking, neither should the grounds for divorce be restricted to sexual sins alone. Hence, *porneia* may refer to all the ways in which profound unfaithfulness can destroy the covenant of marriage. They also may view "desertion" in I Cor. 7 as included in their definition of *porneia* in Matthew 19. These are sins which undermine the foundations of the marriage covenant.

How may we evaluate this view? It is undeniably true that *porneia* occurs in Scripture in a figurative sense. This view also has the apparent advantage of satisfying the supposed conflict with I Cor. 7:15 by seeing desertion as a subset of *porneia*.

In response, we may first observe that in a passage where *moicheia* (adultery) is used in a literal sense, it would be expected that its corresponding term *porneia* (sexual immorality) would also be used in the same literal way. There would need to be compelling contextual evidence to take it in its figurative use, particularly in a passage that is talking about the literal sexual dimension of being one flesh. Moreover, there is no explicit use of *porneia* in Scripture for sins within the human marriage relation other than sexual.

Second, in Matthew 19, Jesus is speaking against the backdrop of easy divorce. In doing so, he was trying to restrict divorce. That he was successful in being restrictive is clear in the amazement of the disciples to Jesus' words (19:10) and in Jesus' response to them that implies that they have understood his comments correctly (19:11-12). This context suggests a narrower use of *porneia*, that it should not be interpreted in a way that could open it up to all sorts of grounds for divorce.

Third, if desertion were a subset of *porneia*, then in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 Paul would be denying to the divorced spouse what Jesus would be allowing, namely divorce on the grounds of *porneia*.

Fourth, we note that in Scripture Jesus only uses *porneia* in the literal sexual sense. This seems to be the most natural sense of the term in Matthew 19:9. The burden of proof rests clearly with those who would take *porneia* to include the figurative sense in this passage.

View #3: *porneia* refers to sexual unfaithfulness in marriage

The third understanding of *porneia* is the classical view, that it refers to sexual sins committed by one within the marriage relationship. Some prefer to interpret *porneia* as the equivalent of adultery. Others prefer to view it as encompassing any kind of sexual immorality while married. It could cover adultery, prostitution, incest, homosexuality, lesbianism and bestiality, all those vices which would have called for the death penalty in the Old Testament.

How are we to evaluate this view? One might object, “If Jesus meant adultery, why didn't he use the specific term for adultery?” But the strengths of this view vastly outweigh any difficulties that may be raised.

First, the literal sense of *porneia* seems to fit most naturally into the context (see above, first observation under View #2). No wonder this has been the classical interpretation for some 2000 years.

Second, the context of Matthew 19 is the breaking of the marriage covenant, divorce. Since sexual sins violate the “one flesh” principle of marriage, thereby radically breaking the unity and exclusivity of marriage, this understanding of *porneia* as “sexual immorality” fits with Jesus granting it as the one exception for breaking the marriage bond and being free to marry again.

Third, the fact that *porneia* was chosen, and not *moicheia*, suggests that it was meant to cover more than adultery alone in its strictest sense. Sexual sins of a married person such as having sex with an unmarried person, homosexuality, incest, and prostitution would be included.

f. Guidelines for applying the meaning of *porneia*

We agree that *porneia* refers to “sexual immorality.” But sexual immorality could be understood to include all kinds of sexual sins such as inordinate lust, pornography, or masturbation. To be sure, these are sins that impinge against the one-flesh relationship, but they do not necessarily break it.

We ask then, “What does Jesus mean by *porneia* in this passage as a grounds for divorce?” We believe Jesus intended *porneia* to be understood in a more limited way, as referring to those external sexual actions which would clearly break the one-flesh principle of marriage. The whole passage centers on a marriage relationship and the exception focuses on an act that may become the reason for a divorce. Therefore, we must distinguish between those sexual sins that clearly break the one-flesh union and those that don't. Adultery, homosexuality, lesbianism, bestiality, and incest are examples of sexual immorality that break the one-flesh union precisely because they involve sexual union with a being other than one's marriage partner, i.e., they amount to adultery.

Other acts of sexual immorality do not as clearly serve to break the one-flesh relationship. The committee would argue that masturbation and the destructive sin of

pornography *per se* are not grounds for divorce, because they do not unmistakably break the one-flesh relationship; but if a person becomes so obsessed with them that they become a substitute for fulfilling the conjugal rights of the spouse, then they could be understood to break the one-flesh union. Other examples of habitual sexual sin could be cited. But all of these are unclear cases, and judgment will have to rest with the Session in their application of biblical principles.

The guiding principle should be whether the sexual sin does indeed break the one-flesh relationship. Some sexual sins may hurt the marriage union without necessarily breaking it. But when that sexual sin becomes externalized in such a way that it becomes a substitute for the one-flesh relation with one's spouse, then the Session may judge it as being the equivalent of *porneia*.

E. 1 Corinthians 7:10-15

These verses are referring to two distinct groups of persons. Verses 10-11 presuppose both partners are believers, and Paul is applying a saying of Jesus which bears directly on that situation. Verses 12-15 address a mixed marriage situation where one of the spouses has become a Christian, and Paul speaks to this issue himself.

**1. Instruction to spouses both of whom are believers,
Verses 10-11:**

10) "But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband 11) (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."

Paul tells the Christian wife not to "leave" (*chorizo*) her Christian husband, and likewise tells the husband not to "send away" (*aphiemi*) his wife. The critical point here is that Paul is telling them not to "divorce" each other. He uses Greek words which in this context are referring to divorce, not separation as we know it. According to Gordon Fee in his carefully documented commentary:

"Much has been made of the use of the verb 'to separate oneself from' [*chorizo*], in distinction from the verb used in vv. 12-13, 'to divorce' [*aphiemi*]. But that probably reflects our own urgencies for greater precision. Divorce in Greco-Roman culture could be 'legalized' by means of documents; but more often it simply happened. In this culture divorce was divorce, whether established by a document or not. Either the man sent his wife away (= 'divorce' in the sense of v.12), or else either of them 'left' the other ('to separate') ... Ordinarily when the wife 'divorces' she simply leaves her husband ('is separated' from him); the same verb is used in v. 15 of a pagan partner of either sex who leaves, and occurs regularly in the papyri for mutual divorce (agreeing to 'separate from each other'). On the other hand, a man ordinarily 'divorced' his wife ('sent her away'); nonetheless in v.13 the wife can do the same."⁸¹

We tend to interpret verses 10-11 in terms of modern day separation rather than divorce. But the Bible does not deal with the idea of separation as a "half-way house" step as we know it. Perhaps the Biblical writers were so committed to the permanence

⁸¹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Grand Rapids, 1984, pp. 193-194.

of marriage that they did not want to study ways to effect temporary separation. But more likely, it was the fact that separation in first century society was *de facto* divorce. That these verses are clearly referring to divorce is evidenced by the fact that the believing wife is called “unmarried” (*agamos*) in verse 11.

Paul goes on to say that for the two Christian spouses who divorce, there are only two options. They are to remain unmarried, or better still, be reconciled. (This is consistent with Jesus’ prohibition against remarriage within the church [Mt. 5:31, Lk. 16:18].) The change of verb tenses emphasizes the direction of Paul's thinking. The wife is to remain unmarried (present tense, continuous action), or she is to be reconciled (aorist tense, accomplished action) to her husband. The believer must always remain in a position to be reconciled. Marriage to another would preclude reconciliation. Paul then goes on in verse 11 to say what is true of the wife is also true of the husband.

2. Important insights into verses 10-11

Three important points should be noted. First, Paul presents this instruction in the form of a command (*paragello*) and appeals to the authoritative teaching of Jesus. This is one of the rare instances in Paul's writings where he appeals directly to Jesus. We should not suppose that Paul lacks authority, but rather that Paul is seeking to add as much force as possible to his admonition. In other words, this instruction is not just good advice. Married believers should not divorce.

Second, Paul is acknowledging that improper divorces may in fact occur. This is the burden of the Greek construction which may be interpreted, “if for any reason this condition may possibly occur.” Paul is not giving a right to divorce. He is recognizing that divorce may happen, and says that in such cases the wife may not use her present unmarried condition as an opportunity to marry someone else. This is the penalty for a sinful divorce. If she has the desire to get married, it must be to her former husband. It is striking that Paul didn't say, “you have to get back together again.” Paul clearly recognizes that in certain cases the marriage will not be restored.

Third, it is remarkable that Paul should focus on the wife seeking a divorce; his remarks about the husband almost seem like an afterthought. In Jewish culture a woman was generally not allowed to divorce her husband, although in Greek culture women could do so. Why would women believers in Paul's day be seeking divorce from believing husbands? Perhaps it was due to misguided beliefs that ascetic practices or the refusal of sexual relations in those “last days” was a righteous response (cf. 7:1ff, 29ff, etc.). We are not sure of the exact reasons. But whatever the background, the reasons appear to be opposite those given in our own culture. Today women and men often divorce for the express purpose of marrying someone else. But Paul does not allow remarriage in this instance, because this would in effect be adultery, and because the norm of Christians is to be reconciled.

3. Instruction to a spouse married to an unbeliever, Verses 12-15

12) “But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, let him not send her away.

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

14) For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy.

15) Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace.”

These verses presuppose a mixed marriage. Although Paul would not allow an already-professing Christian to marry an unbeliever (7:39; 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1; cf. Ezra 10:10), in these verses he forbids a Christian to initiate a divorce with an unbeliever. The present tense prohibition, *me aphieto*, seems to suggest that some were in the process of doing so, and he wanted it stopped. Perhaps believers were using their spouse's unbelief as an excuse for getting a divorce, or perhaps believers thought that marriage with an unbeliever somehow contaminated them. But Paul argues the opposite here. It is not the believer who is defiled, but the unbeliever who is sanctified, as well as the children of that union. Therefore, if the unbelieving spouse “is well-pleased to dwell together with” the believing spouse, then the believer must not resort to divorce.

The church needs to face squarely the implications of this. Paul does not make self-fulfillment the law of marriage, and is perfectly willing to require someone to remain in a marriage that will be painfully difficult. Here is a woman going to heaven, married to a man going to hell. Here is a woman who prizes above all things the Word and the ways of the kingdom of God, and here is a man who considers those things to be irrelevant, uninteresting, and unimportant. He cannot satisfy or encourage her in any of those areas. In the dimensions of her life which are most precious to her and are most profoundly important to her, her husband is not only positively no help, but very often is an interference, a frustration. And yet, Paul says she must stay.

This accent on “no divorce” is consistent with verses 10-11. However, Paul introduces an exception: “if the unbelieving one leaves.” In that case the believer is to “let him leave.” The verb is a third person present imperative, which carries with it a certain ambiguity. Paul may be viewed here as giving the unbeliever permission to leave, while at the same time confirming to the believer that that course of action is proper. We should note that Paul immediately proceeds to say, “the brother or sister is not bound” and “God has called us to peace.” These three ingredients indicate that Paul is allowing, if not ordering, such a separation.

Again, the verb “leaves” (*chorizo*) is referring to divorce. Herein lies an interesting point. Paul is referring to a situation in which the deserted spouse is the passive victim of the unrighteous termination of a marriage. This suggests that what we have here is not another ground for divorce, but from the perspective of the offended spouse, a *fait accompli*. We are reminded that there are various views attempting to reconcile the desertion of 1 Corinthians 7 with the *porneia* (sexual immorality) of Matthew 19. Some hold that desertion is simply an additional ground for divorce; Jesus was not giving us an exhaustive list. Others hold that desertion is simply a subset of *porneia*, *porneia* being a term which has broader connotations than illicit sexual sins. But it seems reasonable to argue that Paul views desertion as the destruction of the marriage which the Christian spouse was unable to prevent. The question Paul raises is, what should a Christian do if an unbelieving spouse leaves the marriage?

Paul says the believer “is not bound” in such a case. What this means has been disputed. Some think that Paul simply means that the believer is not bound to maintain

the marriage if the partner opts out.⁸² Others maintain that all the bonds of marriage have been removed; the person has been released entirely from every obligation of the former marriage and is free to marry again.⁸³ Support is found in 7:39: “A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married...” To be bound is to remain married to your husband. Not to be bound is to be free to marry (cf. Romans 7:2f.).

This question is made more difficult by the fact that two different Greek verbs are translated “bound” in 7:15 and 7:39. In 7:39 (as in Romans 7:2), the verb *deo* is used. In the context of marriage, it refers to being bound by law and by duty to one's spouse as long as they live. In 7:15, *douleuo* is used in the perfect tense and means “is no longer in a state of bondage.” Some think that since *deo* is not used in 7:15, Paul is not saying that a believer is free to remarry.⁸⁴ Others maintain that *douleuo* is a synonym for *deo* and is a stronger term, and therefore Paul is saying that a believer is clearly no longer bound to the unbeliever by law and is hence free to remarry.⁸⁵ It seems to us that the burden of proof rests firmly on the former interpretation. It is not easy to demonstrate that Paul's language in 7:15 means something less than his language in 7:39.

We conclude that when Paul says, “let him depart, the brother or sister is not bound,” the strong presumption is that he is saying that the believer is not obliged to prevent the divorce and is also free to remarry. In the circumstances of our culture, Paul would say that the believer is not obliged to go to court to attempt to stop the divorce, and may in fact undertake to make *de jure* what is already *de facto* by initiating the legal process of divorce.

Finally, Paul states that “God has called you to peace.” Does he mean, (1) God has called you to peace, so you must now be tranquil in the midst of a bad marital situation; or (2) God has called you to peace, so be at peace as you find yourself free from your former marital obligations? Coming as it does at the end of verse 15, these words appear to wrap up the significance of “not being bound.” Indeed, peace would be impossible if the unbelieving spouse were compelled against his will to live with the believer, or if the believer somehow perpetuated the marriage *de jure* when it no longer existed *de facto*.

4. Applying Paul's instruction about desertion today

Are there other forms of “separation” today that may be considered equivalent to this leaving of the marriage of which Paul speaks? Specifically, what about cases of habitual physical abuse? Has that person deserted his spouse to the extent we may label it *de facto* divorce? We must be careful not to open the floodgate of excuses. On the other hand, we need to recognize the reality of the “separation”. We should allow

⁸² A. Robertson and A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Peter to the Corinthians*, Edinburgh, 1911, p. 143. Heth and Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce*, pp. 94-96, 140-144.

⁸³ R. H. Charles, *The Teaching of the New Testament on Divorce*, London, 1921, p. 58. H. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, Translated by J. R. DeWitt, Grand Rapids, 1975, pp. 308-309, n. 139.

⁸⁴ Heth and Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce*, pp. 94-95, 141-142.

⁸⁵ John Murray, *Divorce*, pp. 74-75. David Atkinson, *To Have and To Hold*, p. 132, n. 18.

Sessions the liberty to discern with much prayer what would be the proper response in particular circumstance.

Several considerations incline us to agree with those of our authorities who have maintained that desertion can occur as well by the imposition of intolerable condition as by departure itself. We are struck by the fact that, taking Matthew 19 and 1 Corinthians 7 together, it appears that the Lord concedes the necessity of the abolition of marriage in certain cases precisely so as to protect a blameless spouse from intolerable conditions. Further, taking into account both the general principles of Biblical ethics and the Scripture's characteristic manner of ethical instruction, *viz.* the statement of commandments in a general form to which is added case law sufficient to indicate the manner of application, it seems to us that those Reformed authorities are correct who have argued that sins which are tantamount in extremity and consequence to actual desertion should be understood to produce similar eventualities (cf. *Larger Catechism*, Q. 99, A. 6).

What is more, a husband's violence, particularly to the degree that it endangers his wife's safety, if unremedied, seems to us, by any application of Biblical norms, to be as much a ruination of the marriage in fact as adultery or actual departure. This is so precisely because his violence separates them, either by her forced withdrawal from the home or by the profound cleavage between them which the violence produces, as surely as would his own departure, and is thus an expression of his unwillingness "to consent" to live with her in marriage (1 Cor. 7:12-13; Eph. 5:28-29). Further, insofar as the "passivity" of the blameless spouse is an important prerequisite in Paul's permission of the dissolution of marriage on account of desertion, it seems right to note that in the case of physical abuse, for example, the blameless spouse is similarly victimized.

Finally, credible alternatives to this point-of-view seem to us to be wholly lacking Scriptural support. It is all very well to recommend separation as a temporal expedient to protect a battered wife, but perpetual separation amounts to a Roman Catholic doctrine of the indissolubility of marriage and could scarcely be justified as a Biblical alternative to divorce.

Indeed, separation of any kind as a means of dealing with marital difficulty and preventing divorce not only is neither recommended nor mentioned in Scripture, but seems to be contrary to a fundamental principle of Biblical spirituality, *viz.* that what ought not to be done, ought not to be approached.

We are quick to add, however, that the list of sins tantamount to desertion cannot be very long. To qualify, a sin must have the same extreme effect as someone's physical abandonment of his spouse. Both *porneia* and desertion are objective acts by which a marital covenant might be broken. The Bible gives no justification for divorce based on merely inward, emotional, and subjective reasons. Even if we find justification for interpreting *porneia* and desertion in a broader sense than some have, they must be broadened only within the boundaries of serious objective acts of sexual immorality or desertion. They must not be interpreted in any way that opens the floodgates to divorces based on subjective reasons, such as "irreconcilable differences," "emotional separation," "loss of affection," or the like. There is often great pain involved in marriage, and God intends for His people to work through the pain and learn to love even when we are not loved by the other. Emotional problems in and of themselves are not Biblical grounds for divorce. And the elders of Christ's Church must not surrender to worldly pressures and allow that which God does not allow. In this and

in many more ways, the Church's health and integrity depends upon her elders' ability, willingness and unwavering courage to provide godly, wise, merciful and severe, and scrupulously Scriptural application of Biblical norms to human situations.

The fact remains that Scripture does not address the circumstance of an abusive husband. As is the case in any other area of Biblical ethics, one cannot extract from Scripture a comprehensive statement of all possible applications of a divine law. Rather, it is left to the church to apply Biblical norms, with the direction provided by the casuistry Scripture does supply, to the untold number of situations which must be faced. It is important to acknowledge that the view that "desertion" in 1 Corinthians 7 cannot be made to refer to anything but actual departure from house and home and the view we have stated above are both extrapolations from the Scriptural statements. No one can appeal to a Biblical statement concerning the duty or the liberty of a battered spouse.

5. Some concluding thoughts about remarriage,

1 Corinthians 7:39:

"A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord."

This verse reminds us that Scripture provides us with guidelines for remarriage. These guidelines begin with the principle given in this verse, though they do not stop there. We may sum up the Scriptural guidelines as follows.

First, Scripture allows for remarriage after the death of one's spouse as seen in this passage (cf. also Romans 7:3b). Remarriage is commended for widows who have difficulty restraining their sexual desire as a means of dealing with that need (1 Cor. 7:8, 9). Scripture even encourages younger widows to remarry due to the temptations and position they could be in were they not to do so (1 Tim. 5:14).

Second, we have observed that a person divorced in accordance with the exception stated in Matthew 19:9 is free to remarry, because the exception relates to the sentence as a whole including both the verb "divorces" and also the verb "marries."

Third, we have seen in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, if two believing spouses divorce, they are to remain unmarried, or else be reconciled. No remarriage to a third party is envisioned in this case. However, in a mixed marriage, according to 1 Cor. 7:12-15, the believing spouse is released ("is not bound") from the marital obligation to the unbelieving spouse when he divorces the believer and the believer is therefore free to remarry.

"But can those involved in an unbiblical divorce ever remarry? Or can the guilty spouse in a Biblical divorce remarry? Jesus was quite clear in saying that those who are involved in a remarriage after an improper divorce commit adultery. By this we understand not that they are in a continual state of adultery, but that they have committed an adulterous act by which they have entered into a new marriage relationship. It is a sinful act and should not be entertained as good or godly. Furthermore, the idea of seeking a divorce with the intention of remarrying someone else is clearly sinful. However, when one of the spouses in the former marriage remarries, we may conclude that the other is freed to remarry, because the former marriage relationship has been permanently broken by that remarriage."

The Church should be careful not to go beyond the Word of God in this matter. Quite often, persons who have been divorced for unbiblical reasons come to the Church with the desire to remarry, declaring they are repentant and desirous of living for God. They want their new union to be sanctified by the Word of God and prayer in a Christian ceremony. The Church must be careful not to sanction unbiblical remarriages. If a person is truly repentant, he or she will have a genuine desire to be reconciled with the estranged spouse. There are circumstances, however, where that has become impossible, for example where the former spouse has already remarried, or where the former spouse refuses reconciliation in such a way that he manifests himself to be an unbeliever. In such cases, remarriage to another person becomes a possibility.

Moreover, the committee believes that in the providence of God, in due time, such matters will resolve themselves. In the meantime, those divorced for unbiblical reasons should find love and counsel in the Church of Jesus Christ. If they are truly repentant, they should find the same treatment the woman taken in adultery received from Jesus.

But what about those cases where people have been in an unbiblical divorce and have already remarried? What should be the Church's response to them? The gentle use of pastoral oversight will ask parties to seek God's gracious forgiveness by repenting of their past sins in marriage and by rededicating their lives to Christ in the confidence of His forgiveness and His acceptance of their present marriage. That assumes, of course, genuine repentance on their part. We must remember that adultery and divorce are not the unforgivable sin, but that they along with other ungodly sins are covered by the blood of Christ.

CHAPTER 3

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE ON DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE⁸⁶

I. PREVENTION OF MARITAL PROBLEMS

A. Statement of prevention rationale

The proper nurturing of the couple in the life of the congregation before and during marriage is a part of supporting biblical faithfulness in marriage. The prevention of divorce is not only possible, but probable when the problems which lead to divorce are addressed and resolved in a biblical manner at early stages of development. Since it is the developed problem that does severe damage to the marriage, prevention of problem development is essential. Putting out the spark before it becomes a forest fire is both achievable and wise. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the church to do all it can to

⁸⁶ The Committee encourages a Biblical approach to counseling. The following listing of resources is not intended to be an endorsement by the PCA. Certain of the resources may have statements of doctrine which are not in conformity with the Reformed position. These resources are provided, however, as aids in ministry (i.e., not as doctrinal treatises or positions). The reader should apply Biblical discernment and evaluation while using them. Also, the Committee affirms that no one person's method of counseling is being promoted through these guidelines and resources.