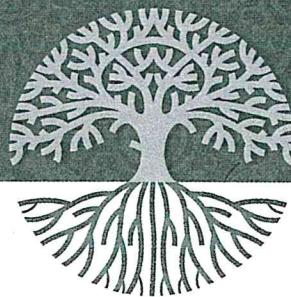


GOD,  
MARRIAGE,  
*AND* FAMILY



Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation

SECOND EDITION

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*Practical Implications*

But what are the practical implications of the Bible's unified witness against homosexuality? At the outset, we must be clear that the visible church ought to continue to oppose this distortion of the Creator's biblical/traditional model of marriage and family. Denominations that have departed from Christendom's historically orthodox position on homosexuality (either by openly endorsing homosexuality or by remaining silent on the issue) are certainly not in step with Judeo-Christian tradition nor, more importantly, with the Word of God.

Yet, for those who are within churches that oppose homosexuality or for Christians who are just personally convinced of the sinfulness of this practice, a more personal dilemma may surface. For example, what do you do if a friend or family member is involved in homosexuality, or if you are homosexual yourself? While this may seem like a daunting problem, especially for those directly involved, it must be remembered that, as for virtually every other transgression mentioned in the Bible, 1 John 1:9 applies: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Furthermore, as mentioned above, although Paul clearly condemned homosexuality in several of his letters, when writing to the Corinthians he noted, "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. *And such were some of you.* But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:9-11).

Clearly, then, homosexuality is a sin that can be overcome. Fortunately, a number of ministries and other resources are available for those who are trying to break away from homosexuality.<sup>88</sup>

# SEPARATING WHAT GOD HAS JOINED TOGETHER:

## Divorce and Remarriage

While the beauty of God's plan for marriage is plainly laid out in Scripture and many long to experience the kind of intimacy and love found only in biblical marriage, the sad reality is that marriage relationships are often broken and fall short of the biblical ideal. This is recognized in the Mosaic stipulations regarding divorce in the Old Testament (Deut. 24:1-4) and acknowledged also in the New Testament. While both Jesus and Paul strongly upheld the biblical ideal of a lifelong, monogamous marriage relationship, both also addressed the issue of divorce and remarriage. As will be seen below, however, while there is consensus that lifelong monogamous marriage is the ideal, there is no universal agreement among Bible-believing Christians on whether Scripture permits divorce and remarriage in certain circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

## DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Before investigating the New Testament teaching on divorce and remarriage, it will be helpful to look briefly at the topic of divorce in the Old Testament, as it forms the foundation upon which much of the New Testament discussion rests. Arguably, the most important text in the discussion of divorce and remarriage is Genesis 2:24, for this verse both



records the institution of marriage and is the passage that Jesus invoked when asked to address the morality of divorce and remarriage (Matt. 19:5; Mark 10:8; see also Paul's citation of Gen. 2:24 in 1 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 5:31). Yet since Genesis 2:24 was thoroughly covered in chapter 2, we will begin our discussion of divorce and remarriage with the Mosaic teaching on the topic in Deuteronomy 24:1–4.

#### Deuteronomy 24:1–4

Deuteronomy 24:1–4 is a passage that, as will be seen below, featured prominently in Jesus' debate with the Pharisees on the subject of divorce and remarriage.<sup>2</sup> As Jesus made clear in Matthew 19:8 and Mark 10:5, this passage should not be construed as a divine endorsement of the practice of divorce and remarriage but rather represents an effort to regulate and mitigate existing practices.<sup>3</sup> The critical phrase in the Deuteronomic stipulations that led to extensive rabbinic debate is the expression *'ėruwat dābār*, which is commonly translated “some indecency” or “something indecent” (NIV; Deut. 24:1).

In Jesus' day, rabbinic schools lined up behind two major interpretive traditions. The conservative school of Shammai (c. 50 BC–AD 30) understood *'ėruwat dābār* to be a synonym of *d'ėbar 'ėruwāh*, “a matter of nakedness,” and therefore interpreted the phrase to be a reference to immodest behavior or sexual immorality (whether before or after marriage). The more moderate school of Hillel (c. 110–10 BC), however, separated *'ėruwat*, “nakedness,” and *dābār*, “something” (cf. LXX: *aschēmōn pragma*, “shameful thing”), and, focusing on the earlier words in Deuteronomy 24:1, “finds no favor in his eyes,” maintained that divorce was allowed in any instance where a wife had done something displeasing to her husband.<sup>4</sup> This more permissive interpretation seems to have held sway among most of Jesus' contemporaries (see Matt. 19:3), which is perhaps not surprising given that Gamaliel, the most influential rabbi of Jesus' day (Acts 5:34; 22:3), was the grandson and theological heir of rabbi Hillel.

While there is debate over the meaning of *'ėruwat dābār*, both in biblical times and in the present, one thing that is clear is that in its original context, the phrase was not needed or meant to address the issue of divorce in the case of adultery, for, according to the Pentateuch, adultery was punishable by death, not divorce (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22).<sup>5</sup> At the same time, however, since marriage was held in high esteem in ancient Israel, the offense was surely not merely trivial but substantial. Possibly, what was in view is a variety of things a husband might have found objection-

able, perhaps barrenness of the womb; some birth defect;<sup>6</sup> lewd, immoral behavior such as lesbianism; sexual misconduct short of intercourse;<sup>7</sup> or menstrual irregularity.<sup>8</sup> Again, Moses' stipulations must not be construed as condoning such divorces but merely as regulating them. The thrust of Deuteronomy 24:1–4 is therefore *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive*, and this seems to be one thing Jesus' contemporaries had misconstrued.<sup>9</sup>

As the passage continues, if a man chooses to divorce his wife and she remarries, he may not take her back in the event of the woman's second divorce or her second husband's death (Deut. 24:2–4). This would be “an abomination before the LORD” (Deut. 24:4). The stipulation serves as a warning to the husband not to divorce too quickly. If he does, and the woman remains unmarried, he can still have her back (cf. Hosea 3). Once the woman remarries, however, this option is no longer available. Beyond this, the stipulation may serve to protect the woman's husband from entering into his former wife's sinful pattern of immorality. Perhaps dowry-related issues were involved as well, but this is uncertain.<sup>10</sup>

#### Other Old Testament References to Divorce and Remarriage

While the topic of divorce and remarriage is mentioned elsewhere in the Pentateuch (Lev. 21:7, 13–14; Deut. 22:13–29), in the historical books (Ezra 10:3), and in the prophetic writings (Isa. 50:1; Jer. 3:1–14; Ezek. 44:22; Mal. 2:16), these scattered citations are, for the most part, passing references and not expressly didactic in nature. Not surprisingly, a reading of these passages—all of which portray divorce in a negative light—reveals a continued espousal of the creation ideal of marriage given in Genesis 2:24, persistent divine opposition to divorce (since it undermines creation ideals), and, in a topic that we will revisit in chapter 12 below, a concern for marital purity in the lives of those in positions of spiritual leadership.

## DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Given the pressing nature of divorce and remarriage in the modern context, it is perhaps surprising for many contemporary readers to learn that the topic does not dominate the pages of the New Testament. Indeed, the subject of divorce and remarriage is completely absent from the writings of such key New Testament figures as the apostles John and Peter as well as the books authored by Jesus' half-brothers, James and Jude. In fact, the body of material on divorce and remarriage in the New Testament is



limited to just two places: some fairly brief pronouncements of Jesus that are recorded in the Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 5:31–32; 19:3–10; Mark 10:2–12; Luke 16:18) and two occasions in Paul's letters (Rom. 7:1–4; 1 Cor. 7:10–16, 39).

### *Jesus' Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage*

As was discussed above, despite the fact that the Mosaic law included provisions regulating divorce, the Old Testament makes it clear that divorce falls short of God's ideal (Mal. 2:16).<sup>11</sup> It is not surprising, then, that when asked about divorce and remarriage, Jesus took his listeners all the way back to the beginning, reminding them that God created humanity as male and female (Gen. 1:27) and stipulated that the man, upon marriage, was to leave his father and mother and to be united to his wife (Gen. 2:24) in a one-flesh union before God that people ought not to break: "So they are no longer *two* but *one* flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate" (Matt. 19:4–6; Mark 10:6–9).<sup>12</sup>

The response of Jesus' audience makes clear that they thought the Mosaic stipulations had in effect superseded God's original purposes at creation. After all, given the theological milieu of the day, in their thinking, why else would divorce have been regulated in the Deuteronomic law code (Deut. 24:1–4)? According to Jesus, however, the Mosaic statutes were interposed not to replace the Creator's original intent but merely in recognition of the reality of human hardness of heart (Matt. 19:7–8; Mark 10:5; cf. 5:31–32). In fact, marriage was *intended as a lifelong, faithful union of a man and a woman*.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Disciples' Reaction**

Recognizing the high standard set by Jesus, his original followers respond, finding his view unduly restrictive, "If such is the case . . . it is better not to marry" (Matt. 19:10).<sup>14</sup> Jesus, brushing aside their objection,<sup>15</sup> replies that while a few may indeed have the gift of celibacy (19:11–12), God's original ideal for marriage still stands. Some argue that the disciples' response proves that Jesus' standard must have been extremely high—that is, no divorce or remarriage once the marriage has been consummated.<sup>16</sup> If Jesus aligned himself simply with the more conservative branch of Judaism of his day, why would his followers have been surprised? No, it is argued, Jesus' standard must have been even stricter than Shammai's "divorce on the grounds of adultery" view; the disciples' reaction proves

that Jesus advocated a "no divorce once the marriage has been consummated" position.

Yet the above arguments remain largely inconclusive, especially since the disciples' reaction was surely influenced by their context and presuppositions. Like many of their Jewish contemporaries,<sup>17</sup> Jesus' followers may have assumed a somewhat more lenient standard—perhaps they even assumed that Jesus' standard was more lenient based upon his compassionate treatment of the adulterous woman mentioned in John 7:53–8:11 (assuming the historicity of the account)—and consequently were reacting against Jesus' severe-sounding pronouncement.<sup>18</sup> Also, while contemporary Judaism *required* divorce in the case of sexual immorality (cf. *m. Soṭah* 5:1), the text seems to indicate that Jesus merely *permitted* it (thus implying the need for forgiveness). The fact that Jesus' standard regarding divorce was higher even than that of the conservative school of Shammai may therefore adequately account for the disciples' horrified reaction to Jesus' teaching in Matthew 19.<sup>19</sup>

### **The "Exception Clause"**

Much discussion has centered on the one ostensible exception made by Jesus in which case divorce may be permissible. This exception, mentioned in both Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 (though the Greek words are slightly different: *parektos logou porneias* and *mē epi porneia*), stipulates that divorce is illegitimate "except for marital unfaithfulness" (NIV) or "sexual immorality" (ESV; ISV; NKJV; HCSB; TNIV; Greek: *porneia*).<sup>20</sup> The Synoptic parallels in Mark 10:11–12 and Luke 16:18 do not mention the exception, which has led some to argue that Jesus never actually made the exception but that Matthew (or someone else) added it at a later point.<sup>21</sup> Even if this were the case, however (which is unlikely), the "exception clause" would still be part of inerrant, inspired Scripture and thus authoritative for Christians today.<sup>22</sup>

Of those who maintain that Jesus did utter the exception, some endeavor to bring the Matthean exception clause into conformity with the absolute statements in Mark, Luke, and Paul by contending that those passages, rather than Matthew, ought to be the ultimate point of reference. Others are reluctant to subsume the Matthean exception clause too quickly under the absolute statement found in Mark, Luke, and Paul and argue that both sets of passages ought to be studied in their own right to appreciate Jesus' teaching on the issue at hand.



**"Except for *Porneia*"**

The incident recorded in Matthew 19:3–12 takes its point of departure from the Pharisees' question, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife *for any cause*?" (NIV: "for any and every reason"; Matt. 19:3; cf. Matt. 5:31).<sup>23</sup> As at other occasions, Jesus' opponents seek to involve him in contradiction or otherwise present him with the apparent dilemma of choosing between opposing viewpoints. Indeed, it seems that the phrase "tested him" in Matthew 19:3 (cf. Mark 10:2) indicates that the religious leaders were trying to get Jesus to choose between competing theological schools as well as to put Jesus in jeopardy with Herod Antipas, just as John the Baptist had suffered for his denunciation of Herod's illicit union with Herodias, his brother Philip's wife (cf. Matt. 4:12; 11:2–3; 14:3–4; Mark 6:14–29).<sup>24</sup>

The Pharisees' question, then, brings into play the views held by the different rabbinic schools in Jesus' day, as discussed above. Though not compiled until around AD 200, the Mishnah provides pertinent information about the respective positions on divorce in first-century Judaism:

The School of Shammai say: A man may not divorce his wife unless he has found unchastity in her, for it is written, "Because he has found in her indecency in anything" (Deut. 24:1). And the School of Hillel say: [He may divorce her] even if she spoiled a dish for him, for it is written, "Because he has found in her indecency in anything" (*m. Git.* 9:10).<sup>25</sup>

Assuming that Jesus himself uttered the "exception clause" (or at least that the Matthean insertion of it captures the sense of what Jesus actually said at this occasion),<sup>26</sup> how does Jesus align himself with or differ from the rabbinic schools of his day? Clearly, Jesus' view was infinitely stricter than that advocated by the school of Hillel, which held that divorce was permissible "for any cause" (cf. Matt. 19:3). On the surface at least, Jesus' view is much closer to that of the school of Shammai, which restricted legitimate divorce (with the possibility of remarriage) to marital unfaithfulness.<sup>27</sup> However, as was previously discussed in conjunction with the disciples' reaction to Jesus' teaching, in contrast to Shammai, it seems that Jesus only *permitted* divorce in case of *porneia* while first-century Judaism *required* it.<sup>28</sup>

What is more, in a very important sense, Jesus' reply transcends the legalistic squabbles between those two rabbinic schools and goes to the very heart of the matter. Essentially, Jesus, in good rabbinic style, shifts the Old Testament warrant from one given passage (Deut. 24:1–4) to an ear-

lier set of passages (Gen. 1:27; 2:24) and hence relativizes the (chronologically) later reference as merely a concession that in no way mitigates the abiding principle established by the foundational texts.<sup>29</sup> Thus, by focusing on the original design of marriage in God's plan, Jesus teaches his followers the true meaning of marriage.<sup>30</sup> Not only does he stress the permanence of marriage as a divine rather than merely human institution, but he contends that divorce is fundamentally at odds with God's purpose in creation.

In fact, Jesus' application of the same standard regarding divorce and remarriage to *both men and women* (see esp. Mark 10:11) is nothing less than revolutionary. Despite regulations in the Mosaic law that stipulated equal treatment of men and women with regard to divorce (Lev. 20:10–12), in Old Testament times a double standard prevailed according to which women were required to be faithful to their husbands (or to which women were required to be faithful to their husbands (or punishment ensued) while the standards for men were considerably more lenient. In Jesus' teaching, however, conjugal rights were set on an equal footing. Thus Jesus taught that lust for other women in a man's heart already constituted adultery (Matt. 5:28), which implies that extramarital affairs are equally wrong for men and women.<sup>31</sup>

### Differences of Views between the Schools of Shammai and Hillel and Jesus Concerning Divorce

Differences of Views	SHAMMAI	HILLEL	JESUS
OT background texts for marriage	Deut. 24:1–4	Deut. 24:1–4	Gen. 1:27; 2:24
Meaning of <i>porneia</i>	Immodest behavior or sexual immorality	Any instance where a wife did something displeasing to her husband	Immoral behavior on the part of the wife, including but not restricted to, adultery (majority view)
Divorce for <i>porneia</i>	Required	Required	Permitted
The application of the standard for divorce and remarriage	Men only	Men only	Both men and women

### Competing Views

In light of the above discussion, it becomes evident that the key issue in understanding Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage is the meaning of term *porneia*, for this is the pivotal term in the "exception clause" uttered by Jesus. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, there is no universal agreement among Bible-believing Christians as to the exact



meaning of *porneia*, yet the suggestions offered by scholars can easily be grouped into one of three competing views, which are detailed below.

The first view understands *porneia* to be a reference to adultery/sexual immorality and espouses the biblical legitimacy of divorce and remarriage for the innocent party of a spouse's adultery/sexual immorality ("divorce and remarriage"). This is sometimes labeled the "Erasmian view" (though other descriptions are used as well),<sup>32</sup> since the well-known Reformers Erasmus of Rotterdam held this position and popularized it in Protestant circles. This position, which is found also in the Westminster Confession of Faith, represents the majority view among Protestant evangelicals today. Craig Blomberg, D. A. Carson, John and Paul Feinberg, Gordon Hugenberger, David Clyde Jones, John MacArthur Jr., John Murray, Robert Stein, John Stott, and William Heth are among its best-known proponents.<sup>33</sup>

The second view understands *porneia* to be a reference to some type of sexual sin such as adultery yet holds that while Jesus allowed for divorce on account of sexual sin, he did not permit remarriage ("divorce, but no remarriage"). This view, which was the nearly unanimous view of the church from its inception until the sixteenth century, focuses upon the placement of the exception clause within Jesus' teaching, noting that *porneia* is followed by the phrase "and marries another." Therefore, it is only when remarriage takes place (after a divorce because of *porneia*) that sin actually occurs. While not as widely held today, this view has more recently been embraced by scholars such as Gordon Wenham, Robert Gundry, Warren Carter, Andrew Cornes, and the French writer Jacques Dupont, among others.<sup>34</sup>

A third view of the exception clause allows for neither divorce nor remarriage in the modern context ("no divorce, no remarriage"). Scholars who hold this position understand *porneia* to be a reference to some type of sexual sin that would have made marriage unlawful under Jewish civil law. Suggestions as to the identity of the sexual sin in view, which would have been applicable to the recipients of Matthew's Gospel, include: premarital (betrothal period) intercourse, incest, Jew/Gentile mixed spiritual marriage, or a combination of the above. Advocates of this view include scholars such as F. F. Bruce, James Montgomery Boice, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Abel Isaksson, J. Carl Laney, Dwight Pentecost, John Piper, and Charles Ryrie, among others.<sup>35</sup> As is the case with the other two views mentioned above, there are many nuances and variations within this position.

### Suggested Parameters

While it would be possible to list arguments and counterargument for each of the above views, along with their variants and hybrids (see this volume's appendix), given the introductory nature of this volume, as well as the fact that there are erudite, spiritual, well-intentioned proponents of each of the aforementioned interpretations of the "exception clause," rather than championing a particular position in this chapter, we would like to suggest several parameters for shaping one's view of Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage.

First, as is indicated by every major Greek lexicon, the word *porneia* is a general term for sexual sin.<sup>36</sup> The exact meaning of *porneia* is always informed by the context in which the word occurs; yet the term *porneia* always refers to specific sexual sin. We draw attention to this fact in order to make the point that one cannot derive a doctrine of nonsexual "no-fault" divorce from Jesus' use of the word *porneia*. Perhaps being driven more by a desire to be relevant or acceptable to the culture, some contemporary scholars have attempted to broaden the scope of *porneia* to include nonsexual sins, while others have argued that *porneia* may refer merely to a person's heart condition apart from specific sexual acts. While the apostle Paul does acknowledge divorce on account of abandonment by an unbelieving spouse (see the discussion below), one cannot arrive at a "no-fault" view of divorce and remarriage from Jesus' teaching in the Synoptic Gospels.

Second, given the divine design of the institution of marriage, the Old Testament teaching on divorce and remarriage, and the unambiguous portions of Jesus' teaching on the topic, whatever one's view of the "exception clause" may be, it must encourage the sacredness of the marriage bond. That is to say, even if one arrives at an understanding of *porneia* that allows for divorce and remarriage on account of sexual sin (such as adultery, which is the majority view of the modern church), divorce must still be viewed as a regrettable failure of God's creation design. Indeed, for those who allow for the dissolution of marriage, divorce must be understood to be the result of sin, at least on the part of the guilty party. Conversely, those who do not hold a view of the exception clause that allows for the dissolution of marriage in the modern context ought not to charge those who do allow for divorce with having a low view of marriage. This is especially true of those who permit divorce, yet clearly communicate the fact that they understand the dissolution of marriage to be a tragedy.



Third, in the development of one's understanding of the "exception clause" one must be careful to form a view based on an unbiased reading of the corpus of biblical material on divorce and remarriage. As with all debated biblical doctrines, it is all too easy to craft one's view of divorce and remarriage in light of past experiences, personal emotions, or with pragmatic intentions. Given the pressing nature of divorce and remarriage in contemporary culture, believers ought to take special care to make sure that their respective views are shaped by the biblical text, seeking to avoid common errors such as confusing stringency with holiness or permissiveness with grace. Moreover, in light of the disagreement among orthodox believers over this subject, we encourage all to hold their views of divorce and remarriage charitably, yet with conviction, being open to honest dialogue with those who espouse differing positions.

*Paul's Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage*

As mentioned above, apart from Jesus' teachings on divorce and remarriage in the Synoptic Gospels, the only other material on the topic in the New Testament appears in the apostle Paul's letters (Rom. 7:1-4; 1 Cor. 15:10-16, 39). Moreover, as will be seen below, Paul's appeal to divorce and remarriage in his letter to the Romans is largely illustrative, and his comments on the topic in writing to the Corinthians appear to be in response to inquiries posed to him by the Corinthian church (see 1 Cor. 7:1: "Now concerning the matters about which you wrote . . .").

**Romans 7:1-4**

In the book of Romans, after demonstrating that all people are condemned (Rom. 1:1-3:20) and explaining the provision of God's righteousness for believers (Rom. 3:21-5:21), beginning in Romans 6:1 and running through Romans 8:39 Paul systematically explains the doctrine of sanctification. Perhaps surprisingly, this section of Paul's epistle to the Romans contains one of the most often overlooked passages on divorce and remarriage in the New Testament. In exhorting his readers to sanctification, Paul uses the eminently practical example of marriage to illustrate the necessity and implications of the death of Christ for the sins of mankind. After identifying the atonement as a rationale for sanctification, the apostle writes in Romans 7:1-4:

Or do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives? For

a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress. Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to [KJV, NKJV: "be married to"] another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God.

The apostle's point, then, in appealing to marriage is clear: just as the death of a spouse frees one from the bonds of marriage, so the death of Christ frees one from the bonds of sin. Or, more practically speaking, as it relates to sanctification, just as the death of a spouse frees one to marry another, so the death of Christ unites one to Jesus "in order that [one] may bear fruit for God" (Rom. 7:4).

Such teaching about sanctification by way of an analogy with marriage would have been readily understood by Paul's Jewish and Hellenistic readers, who the apostle says "know the law" (Rom. 7:1), presumably including the creation narrative. While this is true, however, it is important to remember that Paul's point in Romans 7:1-4 was not to give an exhaustive discourse on the morality of divorce and remarriage but rather to illustrate a deeper truth regarding the necessity and implications of the atonement.

**1 Corinthians 7:10-16, 39**

The final passage on the subject of divorce and remarriage in the New Testament is found in 1 Corinthians 7:10-16, 39. In verses 10-11, Paul draws on Jesus' teaching as follows: "To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife." As do Mark and Luke, Paul casts his statement in absolute terms, which makes Matthew the only New Testament document to include the "exception clause" regarding divorce for *porneia*. Husbands or wives should not divorce their spouses, the apostle writes, yet if they do, they must not remarry. While 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 reads well under the assumption of a "no divorce, no remarriage" view, 1 Corinthians 7:12-16 complicates the discussion somewhat.

In 1 Corinthians 7:12-16, Paul addresses the same issue in a slightly different context, that of a believer's desertion by an unbelieving spouse.<sup>37</sup>



Since Jesus had not dealt with this specific question, Paul must adjudicate the situation himself (“I, not the Lord,” 1 Cor. 7:12), which in no way diminishes the authoritative nature of Paul’s apostolic pronouncement. According to Paul, a mixed marriage (i.e., one spouse is a believer while the other is not) is preferable to divorce (cf. 1 Pet. 3:1–2), because it provides a Christian environment for the children of this marital union (1 Cor. 7:14).<sup>38</sup> Yet if the unbelieving spouse insists on leaving, the believer is not to hold him or her back, because God’s desire is for peace, and there is no guarantee that the unbeliever will eventually be saved (1 Cor. 7:15–16).<sup>39</sup>

In this passage Paul concludes, “But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved [NIV: ‘not bound’]” (1 Cor. 7:15; the Greek word for *bound* is *douloō*). What is meant by “not bound” here? The parallel in 1 Corinthians 7:39 may help to shed some light on this question. There Paul writes, “A wife is *bound* [Greek *deō*] to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is *free to be married* to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.” The question at hand, then, is: Does Paul allow for marriage partners who have divorced on account of abandonment by an unbelieving spouse to remarry? As with the interpretation of the “exception clause” in Matthew 5:32; 19:9, interpreters differ in their answer to this question.

#### Competing Views

With regard to 1 Corinthians 7:15, a majority of evangelical scholars (i.e., those who hold to a “divorce and remarriage” view as described above) interpret the passage in conjunction with 1 Corinthians 7:39 as teaching that the innocent party is free to remarry. Advocates of this view contend that the Greek words *douloō* and *deō* are related and can be used interchangeably.<sup>40</sup> In accord with 1 Corinthians 7:39, then, abandonment, it is argued, results in a state in which the departing party is “dead” to the innocent spouse. Moreover, it is argued that Paul’s phrase “free to be married” in the latter passage resembles the Jewish divorce formula: “You are free to marry any man” (*m. Git.* 9:3). According to this view, then, that to which the abandoned party is not bound is his or her *positional standing* in the marriage itself. In other words, according to this interpretation, abandonment by an unbelieving spouse dissolves the bonds of marriage and frees one to remarry another.

A minority of interpreters (i.e., those who hold to a “divorce, but no remarriage” or to a “no divorce, no remarriage” view as described

above), however, assert that while in 1 Corinthians 7:15 Paul recognizes that acceptance of the gospel may result in abandonment by an unbelieving spouse (just as Jesus alluded to; see Luke 14:26–27; 18:29–30), he does not teach that this results in the dissolution of the bonds of marriage, nor does it yield the right to remarry. Advocates of this position note that Paul specifically prohibits remarriage in 1 Corinthians 7:10–11 and point out that when the apostle does explicitly refer to the possibility of remarriage in his writings, it is always in the context of the actual death of one of the marriage partners (Rom. 7:2; 1 Cor. 7:39). According to this view, then, that to which the abandoned party is not bound is a *relational obligation* to contest an unbelieving spouse’s desire to depart. Indeed, it is argued, that doing so would be un-Christlike (cf. Jer. 3:8, 14) and possibly even hinder the prospect of reconciliation (1 Cor. 7:16).<sup>41</sup>

#### Suggested Parameters

As with the competing views of the “exception clause” in Matthew’s Gospel, we could list arguments and counterarguments for the divergent interpretations of 1 Corinthians 7:15 (see appendix).<sup>42</sup> Yet, recognizing that there is no “silver bullet” argument that will solve the debate over whether or not Paul allowed for remarriage after abandonment by an unbelieving spouse, we offer the following parameters for readers to consider in dealing with real-life situations and in the formation of their own views.

First, it should be noted that all orthodox views of 1 Corinthians 7:10–16, 39 recognize that in 1 Corinthians 7:15 Paul acknowledges that a divorce may occur if it is initiated by an unbelieving spouse. The debate related to this passage is not over whether such as divorce is permissible, but rather over that to which a believing party is bound—either to the marriage itself or to a relational obligation toward the departing spouse. This is admitted even by those who hold to a so-called “no divorce, no remarriage” view. Therefore, in 1 Corinthians 7:15 Paul is not giving a casuistic reason for divorce; rather, like Moses, he is recognizing that divorces do occur in a fallen world and giving directions to govern such situations. In light of Paul’s teaching, then, when such a divorce does occur, the abandoned party ought not to be ostracized or looked down upon by the community of faith. It must be remembered that the abandoned party in such cases did not seek a divorce but rather was the victim of abandonment.

Second, for those who do arrive at a view that allows for remar-



riage after abandonment by an unbelieving spouse (which is the majority view of the modern church), such remarriages ought only to occur after prolonged attempts at reconciliation with the unbelieving spouse. After all, if reconciliation is explicitly held up by Paul as the ideal for believing spouses who divorce (1 Cor. 7:11), the standard for unbelieving spouses certainly should not be lower. Indeed, whether successful or not, attempts at reconciliation reflect the creational ideal of a lifelong, monogamous marriage relationship.

Third, those who honestly arrive at an interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:15 that permits remarriage, and yet find reconciliation to the unbelieving spouse to be impossible, ought to feel free to remarry without guilt or censure by the church. Those with divergent interpretations of 1 Corinthians 7:15 should remember that those who do have freedom to remarry are not espousing a low view of marriage, nor are they acting contrary to the biblical text. Rather, they are acting in accord with their understanding of Scripture. To marginalize those who have remarried after a divorce because of abandonment, then, would seem to be acting contrary to the very ideal of peace within the body of Christ that Paul is attempting to uphold in 1 Corinthians 7:15–16.

## CONCLUSION

After surveying the biblical materials on divorce and remarriage, it is possible to conclude that the creation narrative upholds, and Moses, Jesus, and Paul reaffirm, God's ordinance of marriage as a lifelong union between one man and one woman. God's ideal holds true even in a fallen world where sin is an ever-present reality and where divorce does occur. Because of the inevitability of divorce in our sin-tainted world, however, the biblical authors found it necessary to give regulations to govern divorce, although, as was explored above, there is debate as to the exact meaning of the possible exception(s) for which divorce and remarriage may take place.

### *The Contemporary Debate*

The debate over the morality of and/or reasons for divorce and remarriage in the modern church continues.<sup>43</sup> While heated at times, a survey of modern literature reveals that for the most part the discussion over this important topic has been civil. In this same spirit, and before leaving the topic, we conclude with four parting principles that we trust will help

those who are struggling with (or perhaps through) divorce and remarriage and will aid the contemporary debate.

First, regardless of one's view of divorce and remarriage, we encourage all believers to bear in mind the fact that while divorce and remarriage are life-altering events, even if one were to divorce and remarry sinfully, such action is not to be equated with the unpardonable sin. Scripture does, of course, identify an unpardonable sin (cf. Matt. 12:31; Mark 3:28–29); yet the sin which is unforgivable is the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, not divorce and remarriage. Therefore, while a sinful divorce and remarriage may result in lifelong consequences, the act itself is certainly pardonable upon confession of one's sin (1 John 1:9).

Second, while some Christians may be tempted to avoid the entire discussion of divorce and remarriage—because of either the emotionally charged nature of the topic or the lack of scholarly consensus on the issue—we encourage all believers to carefully work through the biblical materials on divorce and remarriage (see also the helpful resources on divorce and remarriage listed in the “For Further Study” section of this volume). Divorce and remarriage are pressing issues in the contemporary culture, and responsible Christians will labor in order to be able to address this topic, “being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15). As this chapter has shown, the scriptural material on divorce and remarriage is not overly extensive. The effort of working through the relevant passages will pay dividends for both the diligent student and the church at large.

Third, while the majority of modern evangelicals do hold a view of divorce and remarriage that allows for the dissolution of marriage (and possibly remarriage) on account of sexual sins such as adultery, this still invites the question of what to do in cases of other nonsexual sins such as physical abuse.<sup>44</sup> In such cases, we encourage believers to remember that separation (e.g., to preserve the life of a battered wife) is not equivalent to divorce. In fact, in cases where one's life is being endangered by the actions of a sinning spouse, we conclude that separation is not only permissible but *morally required*. In such cases, we believe that it is the duty of the church to step in and minister to the sinned-against party (e.g., by helping secure physical protection or by meeting financial needs). Moreover, such separation usually produces one of two results: (1) the offending party, if regenerate, will repent and seek reconciliation; (2) if the offending party is unregenerate, after a time, he or she will likely depart. This, in turn, is a situation addressed by 1 Corinthians 7:15, as discussed above.



Finally, one's views on divorce and remarriage have important ramifications not only in cases where regular church members are affected but particularly when it comes to church leadership. Are there any circumstances under which a pastor or elder or deacon who has been divorced can legitimately and biblically be entrusted with this office? Or does Scripture bar such men from all church offices? While this issue is clearly related to the above discussion of the biblical teaching on divorce and remarriage in general, several other texts are brought into play here so that we will defer discussion until the following chapter.

# FAITHFUL HUSBANDS:

## Qualifications for Church Leadership

The qualifications for church leadership stipulated in the Pastoral Letters give prominent coverage to an applicant's marriage and family life.<sup>1</sup> In 1 Timothy 3:1–13, the primary passage on the subject, it is required that both overseers and deacons be “faithful husbands” (*mias gynaiikas andra*, 1 Tim. 3:2, 12; cf. Titus 1:6; see further below); that overseers keep their children under control with all dignity (1 Tim. 3:4; cf. Titus 1:6); and that they manage their own household well (1 Tim. 3:4). For, according to Pauline logic, “if anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?” (1 Tim. 3:5 NIV). Indeed, as the apostle makes clear later in the same chapter, the church is “God's household” (1 Tim 3:15 NIV).<sup>2</sup> There is thus a close relationship between church and family; and Christian maturity in the fulfillment of one's duties as husband and father becomes one of the most essential requirements for those aspiring to the office of pastor or elder.<sup>3</sup>

### THE REQUIREMENT OF MARITAL FAITHFULNESS

#### *The Meaning of the Phrase Mias Gynaiikas Andra*

English translations as well as commentators differ considerably regarding the meaning of the phrase *mias gynaiikas andra* in 1 Timothy 3:2 and 12.<sup>4</sup> (1) Does Paul here require church leaders to be married (excluding unmarried officeholders)? (2) Is he seeking to prohibit applicants who are divorced? (3) Does the requirement bar widowers who remarried from holding ecclesiastical office (NRSV)? (4) Does the apostle speak out