

***Divorce, Remarriage,  
and the Christian Counselor***

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## ***DIVORCE, REMARRIAGE, AND THE CHRISTIAN COUNSELOR***

**T**he question of divorce is an inescapable one for the Christian counselor: the number of couples touched by the pain and heartache of broken marriages continues at a rate of one divorce for every two marriages, a level at which it has stayed for the last twenty years. Some persons who divorce attempt a second marriage, hoping that things will be better with a different partner, but the divorce rate for second marriages—60 percent—is even higher than for first marriages. Clearly everyone who works in the mental health field will be touched by couples who are considering or leaning toward a divorce, and how we respond may make a difference on whether they move toward divorce or try to work on their marriage.

Sometimes, if these counselees are Christians, they will ask: “Is it biblically permissible for me to get a divorce?” At other times a couple will come in where one or both persons have decided they want a divorce, but as the counselor listens to their problems, he or she concludes that their marriage could be healed if they were willing to work on it. Should he or she encourage them to try marriage counseling before divorce?

Professional counselors have been trained not to impose their beliefs on clients. However, there is now a recognition by many in the mental health field that there is no such thing as value-free counseling. All counselors have certain beliefs that do influence how they counsel, and even though they do not impose those beliefs, those beliefs inevitably affect the counseling process. For example, the counselor who believes that marriage is a relationship of convenience that can be discarded whenever either of the spouses grows tired of it will respond differently to a couple, in a whole host of ways, than someone who believes that divorce often has many damaging effects on the spouses and children involved, and that it is better to help couples make their marriages better whenever possible, rather than discard them. Counselors’ beliefs influence whether they simply accept one person’s desire to end the marriage and proceed to help both people accept the upcoming divorce, or encourage the couple to try marriage counseling before proceeding with a divorce. Those beliefs can influence the counseling process in many ways, some of which the counselor may not even be aware of. For example, the counselor’s beliefs about the value of preserving marriages versus discarding them can affect:

1. the kinds of questions the counselor asks,
2. whether the counselor focuses primarily on problems in the relationship or tries to have a balance of minimizing problematic behavior and increasing positive behavior,
3. whether the counselor encourages the dissatisfied person to consider only his or her own present feelings in making a decision, or encourages the client(s) to consider short-term and long-term results, personal feelings as well as the feelings of others who will be affected by a divorce decision, and
4. whether the counselor encourages the client(s) to consider only feelings in making decisions, or whether the issue to fulfilling commitments as well as paying attention to one’s feelings are brought into the decision-making process, and so on.

Because all counselors have beliefs about the value of preserving or discarding marriages, —and because the counseling processes they intentionally or unconsciously produce are affected by those beliefs,— all counselors do value-informed counseling rather than value-free counseling. The belief that marriage can be discarded in the same way one discards a car one no longer wants is as much a value as the belief that marriages should be worked on and improved rather than discarded.

Those beliefs derive from one of two sources. One source is what the marriage counselor believes is the wisest thing to do based on his or her *education and personal experience*. The second source,

primarily used by those who identify themselves as Christian counselors, is what God has told us in his Word is the wisest thing to do.

There is no such thing as a universal set of beliefs to which everyone who calls themselves a Christian counselor subscribes. However, many within this group would agree with the following premises: (1) God's principles (his rules for living) are set up with our best interests in mind (sometimes called theonomous law.<sup>1</sup> (2) God has a great deal more wisdom than we do. He often sees long-term consequences of which we may be unaware.

If God's laws are set up with our best interests in mind, and if he is much wiser than we, we as Christian counselors want to make sure our counseling is biblically informed. That does not mean we try to impose our beliefs on unwilling clients; but when we have clients who want to know what God's will is, we need to know what that is. We want to fulfill the biblical mandate found in 2 Timothy 2:15, which says: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (NIV).<sup>2</sup>

There is another passage of Scripture that has relevance for counselors who identify themselves as Christians. It occurs within the Matthew 19 passage where Jesus is answering the Pharisees' questions regarding whether it was allowable to divorce one's spouse for any reason that seems sufficient to one of the parties. Included is a quote from highly respected biblical scholar Colin Brown:

Jesus' reply might be best translated: "What therefore God joined together let man not separate." It is, as Derrett (1970, 383) points out, "a veritable judgment of Portia." For the separating or putting asunder applies not only to the husband who sends his wife away with a certificate of divorce in her hand; it touches on the action of either partner *or third party* that causes the break up of the marriage. It thus includes any action which contributes to the breakdown of the relationship which God intended (1978, 3:539) (italics mine).

There is an exception clause in the Matthew 19 passage that we will discuss later in the paper. However, unless the marital situation is related to that exceptional situation, Jesus tells us that we are not, *as third parties*, to encourage the breakup of marriages. Counselors often have a great deal of influence in the decision making of clients. When clients come to counseling in the midst of marital frustrations, if the counselor affirms that they would probably be better off with a divorce, or simply encourages the clients to do whatever their feelings tell them to do, we may be contributing to the breakdown of the marriage.

### ***Three Basic Biblical Positions on Divorce and Remarriage***

**T**hroughout Old and New Testament history and up to the present time, there have been three basic positions regarding divorce and remarriage. The first of these is that divorce and remarriage are acceptable whenever either or both of the partners no longer wishes to remain in the marriage. Examples of this position, as we shall review more thoroughly in the next section, included some of the Jews coming out of Egypt in Moses' time, some of the Jews coming back from Babylonian exile, the rabbinic school of Hillel in Jesus' day, many of the early Christians who had come

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<sup>1</sup> Theonomous law is to be distinguished from the concept of theonomy. Theonomous law is the concept that God designs his laws with our best interests in mind. Theonomy was a Christian movement that attracted some attention a few years ago, which argued that Old Testament laws should be imposed upon the country. I am a believer in theonomous law. I do not support the concept of theonomy.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION, Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

out of secular Greek or Roman environments, and some Christians through to the present day. One contemporary example, whose arguments we shall review in some detail later, is Dwight Small, author of the book *The Right to Remarry* (1975).

The second position is the opposite of the above. Those who take this position believe that marriage is a permanent commitment and cannot be dissolved under any circumstances. Contemporary examples of speakers and writers who take this position include Bill Gothard (1979), Carl Laney (1981), and Heth and Wenham (1984).

A third position is somewhere between the two positions mentioned above. Advocates of this position believe that although marriage should be considered a lifelong commitment, it may be dissolved in a strictly limited number of situations. The Reformers (Luther and Calvin) strongly affirmed the permanence of marriage but believed there were three legitimate grounds for biblical divorce—adultery, desertion, and cruelty. This is probably the majority opinion among conservative evangelicals today, including writers such as Guy Duty (1967), John Stott (1971), John Murray (1975), Stanley Ellisen (1977), Colin Brown (1978) Jay Adams (1980), Jim Hurley (1981), and Edward Dobson (1986), to name just a few.

If we identify ourselves as Christian counselors, we need to guard against two things: First, saying something is permissible when God says it is sinful, and second, saying something is sinful when God says it is permissible. With regard to divorce and remarriage, this would mean that we would not want to tell counselees that a certain divorce and remarriage would be acceptable in God's sight if it were not, and we would not want to tell counselees that a divorce and remarriage would be unacceptable in God's sight if indeed there was evidence in God's Word that such an action is permissible in his eyes.

Since there are such a diversity of opinions, we probably will not be a great deal of help to our clients in making a decision unless we have read the relevant biblical texts ourselves and thought through the various arguments and counterarguments. The purpose of this paper is to examine each of the relevant biblical texts, discuss the various interpretations that have been made, and help give you the data to decide on a position for yourself. You will become aware of the author's viewpoint eventually, but also have enough data to decide whether or not you agree with that viewpoint.

## *The Biblical Data*

### **Genesis 2:15–25**

The motif of marital love is a recurrent theme throughout Scripture. As Ellisen (1977, 27) in his excellent book on marriage and divorce notes, the Bible begins and ends with a marriage ceremony, with God in attendance at both. Whole books, such as Esther, Ruth and the Song of Solomon, are given over to stories of romance and marital love. Some of the most beautiful metaphors in Scripture have as their focus marital fidelity, joy and commitment (e.g., Prov. 5:15–19). The continuing and all-surpassing love story of human history—that of God's love for his children, is typified in the symbolism of marriage in both the Old and New Testaments. Clearly, marital love, fidelity and commitment are a central theme throughout Scripture.

The Bible's discussion of marriage of and the purposes of marriage are found in Genesis 2:15–25, which reads:

15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. 16 And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; 17 but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die." 18 The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." 19 Now the LORD God had

formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. 20 So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. 21 So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. 22 Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. 23 The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." 24 For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. 25 The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

The primary reason given in the biblical account for marriage (mentioned twice, vv. 18 and 20) is friendship or companionship. Marriage was designed by God to overcome loneliness. It is to be a context for personal and spiritual growth, for the mutual fulfilling of needs, for supporting one another's work and achievements, to give and receive love, to cherish and be cherished, to protect and be protected, to give and receive the enjoyment of sexual love, to enjoy the fulfillment of creating and raising children together, and to feel security and a lifelong commitment to and from another person,

In some ways verse 24 summarizes the biblical paradigm for marriage. Well-known expositor John Stott (1971) describes the teaching implicit in verse 24: "Genesis 2:24 implies that the marriage union is exclusive ('a man . . . his wife. . .'), publicly recognized ('leaves his parents'), permanent ('cleaves to his wife') and consummated by sexual intercourse ('become one flesh')" (5–6). Verse 25 goes on to say that Adam and Eve were both naked, and they felt no shame. There was a complete openness, transparency, and vulnerability between them.

Placing these thoughts together with later Scriptures, we can conceptualize marriage as a covenant of companionship—a man and a woman covenant before God to be companions and supporters of each other as long as they both live (Adams 1980, 15). There is to be an openness and transparency in their relationship. Marriage, as intended by God, should be a place where we can be completely open and vulnerable to each other. Whenever a couple comes in for marriage counseling, sometimes in dissatisfaction, disillusionment, depression, or anger, it usually can be traced to the fact that there has been a breakdown in that covenant of companionship.

#### **Deuteronomy 24:1–4**

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

This Hebrew text has often been misunderstood. Outside Israel at the time divorce was common and easily obtained (Thompson 1974, 244). The Hebrews had probably picked up the custom of easy divorce while in Egypt. *In the surrounding Arab nations of the time* men could orally divorce their wives by simply saying "I divorce my wife," or saying to his wife, "You are no longer my wife." The divorce was final and she had no recourse. She was not entitled to any of her husband's property—she only had a legal right to the clothes on her back (Laney 1981, 29; Wight 1953, 125). Although Moses apparently could not

end the custom (Jesus says “because of the hardness of your hearts”—Matt. 19:8), he could at least regulate some of its more destructive aspects.

The “indecenty” spoken of in these verses (*‘ervat-dabar*) has been much debated. It literally means “the indecenty of a thing” or “the nakedness of a thing.” It is unlikely to have meant fornication or adultery, since the death penalty was prescribed for most sins of this kind. However, the word does refer to some sort of gross indecenty, and not simply a minor transgression. A moderating viewpoint is that it was a significant transgression that filled the husband with revulsion and made him feel that it would be impossible to continue to live with her. Two well-respected commentators have suggested that it may have referred to sexual misconduct that fell short of actual intercourse (Carson 1985, 413; Dobson 1985, 36).<sup>3</sup>

These verses neither command divorce nor place God’s stamp of approval on it nor establish it as a right (Keil and Delitzsch 1985, vol. 2, pt. 3, 416–17; Murray 1975, 6–7; Stott 1971, 6). They are not making divorce mandatory in that situation nor even encouraging or advising men to put their wives away in such a case. It should be noted that the whole passage hangs on a series of “if” clauses. What this passage does say is that *if* a husband divorces his wife and *if* she then marries another man, her first husband cannot, under any circumstances, take her back. It is a negative restriction, not a positive command.

This statement would in several ways restrict the more destructive aspects of divorce present in that time and culture. First, it would act as a deterrent against husbands divorcing their wives in a moment of impulsive anger because (a) he must write out a divorce decree, and (b) if she were to remarry, he could never take her back to be his wife again. Second, Moses’s command also protects her financially, for at the time of the divorce the husband must return her dowry (the ancient Hebrew analogue of property rights for the wife), and he was expected within the Jewish tradition to add an amount from his own property equal to the amount of her dowry, meaning she left the marriage with twice the amount with which she entered it (Dobson 1985, 38–39). Third, this command protected the wife’s reputation to some extent. The certificate of divorce signified that she was not guilty of adultery or fornication, since the punishment for these acts was stoning (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:13–29). Fourth, it serves to protect the second marriage to some degree, because even if the first husband eventually realizes he made a mistake in divorcing her, he cannot try to remove her from her new husband (Thompson 1974, 244).

In summary then, marriage was a God-given institution: God desires that it be a lifelong commitment. Divorce was initiated because of human beings’ sinfulness. Deuteronomy 24 neither *commands* divorce nor places God’s stamp of approval upon it. This passage is an attempt to regulate the more destructive aspects of divorce, a concession made not because God desired it, but because of the hardness of human hearts.

## **Hosea**

The book of Hosea contains one of the most poignant love stories in the Bible. It is, in a sense, an acted-out allegory, for there are multiple points of correspondence between the actions God commands Hosea to take toward his wife and the feelings and actions God takes toward his bride, the nation of Israel.

After Solomon’s death the nation of Israel divided into a northern kingdom (Israel), and the southern kingdom, (Judah). The northern kingdom plunged almost immediately into rampant idolatry, including the worship of Baal and other Canaanite deities. The southern kingdom was more faithful to God initially, but eventually became quite idolatrous as well.

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<sup>3</sup>Please note that exegetical comments usually come from *Edward* Dobson, not *James* Dobson. APA style unfortunately does not allow, within the text, differentiation of two persons with the same surnames.

Hosea is a prophet to the northern kingdom. He prophesied around the mid 700s BC. At the beginnings of his life the northern kingdom was at one of its most successful points militarily and economically under Jeroboam II, but it was soon to experience rapid decline, military defeat, and slavery because of its unwillingness to turn from idolatry (Wood 1985, 161–82).

The first three chapters deal primarily with Hosea's life, while the remainder of the book is an application to the life of Israel. In chapter 1 God commands Hosea, a prophet (one who speaks to the people for God) to marry a woman, Gomer, with the awareness that she will eventually become unfaithful to him. Hosea marries Gomer, she bears three children, and Hosea gives each of them a name that symbolizes an important aspect of the painful relationship between God and his children during that period in history. In chapter 2 Gomer becomes unfaithful to him and eventually leaves him. The latter part of the chapter describes how the northern kingdom (Israel), has also become spiritually adulterous in a pattern paralleling what Gomer has done.

In chapter 3 we find Gomer in the slave market, about to be sold by her former lover for whatever price she can bring. Hosea, at the direction of God, goes to the slave market, where she was probably standing naked before the crowd, as was the custom of that time. He buys her back and tenderly asks her to come home with him and be faithful to him as her husband. In the remainder of the book God repeatedly implores Israel to come back to him, predicting hardship if she does not, and promising blessing and loving restoration if she does. Unfortunately, as we see from other biblical writers, she does not respond to God's appeal, and eventually suffers cruel slavery and devastation at the hands of the Babylonians as a result.

### **Isaiah and Jeremiah**

Both Isaiah and Jeremiah recount many of the Lord's requests to Judah (the southern kingdom) to return to him, and Judah's refusal to do so. Hence reluctantly, in both these books, God says that he wrote out a divorce decree. The following is the specific verse in Isaiah where this occurs (written approx. 700 BC), and then a more extended passage from Jeremiah that reveals God's pain in having to do so (approx. 600 BC).

Isaiah 50:1 This is what the LORD says: "Where is your mother's *certificate of divorce with which I sent her away*? Or to which of my creditors did I sell you? Because of your sins you were sold; because of your transgressions your mother was sent away [italics added].

Jeremiah 3:1 "If a man divorces his wife and she leaves him and marries another man, should he return to her again? Would not the land be completely defiled? But you have lived as a prostitute with many lovers—would you now return to me?" declares the LORD. 2 "Look up to the barren heights and see. Is there any place where you have not been ravished? By the roadside you sat waiting for lovers, sat like a nomad in the desert. You have defiled the land with your prostitution and wickedness. 3 Therefore the showers have been withheld, and no spring rains have fallen. Yet you have the brazen look of a prostitute; you refuse to blush with shame. 4 Have you not just called to me: 'My Father, my friend from my youth, 5 will you always be angry? Will your wrath continue forever?' This is how you talk, but you do all the evil you can."

6 During the reign of King Josiah, the LORD said to me, "Have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up on every high hill and under every spreading tree and has committed adultery there. 7 I thought that after she had done all this she would return to me but she did not, and her unfaithful sister Judah saw it. 8 *I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries.* Yet I saw that her unfaithful sister Judah had no fear; she also went out and committed

adultery. 9 Because Israel's immorality mattered so little to her, she defiled the land and committed adultery with stone and wood. 10 In spite of all this, her unfaithful sister Judah did not return to me with all her heart, but only in pretense," declares the LORD.

11 The LORD said to me, "Faithless Israel is more righteous than unfaithful Judah. 12 Go, proclaim this message toward the north: "'Return, faithless Israel,' declares the LORD, 'I will frown on you no longer, for I am merciful,' declares the LORD, 'I will not be angry forever. 13 Only acknowledge your guilt—you have rebelled against the LORD your God, you have scattered your favors to foreign gods under every spreading tree, and have not obeyed me,'" declares the LORD.

14 "Return, faithless people," declares the LORD, "for I am your husband. I will choose you—one from a town and two from a clan— and bring you to Zion. 15 Then I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding. 16 In those days, when your numbers have increased greatly in the land," declares the LORD, "men will no longer say, 'The ark of the covenant of the LORD.' It will never enter their minds or be remembered; it will not be missed, nor will another one be made. 17 At that time they will call Jerusalem The Throne of the LORD, and all nations will gather in Jerusalem to honor the name of the LORD. No longer will they follow the stubbornness of their evil hearts. 18 In those days the house of Judah will join the house of Israel, and together they will come from a northern land to the land I gave your forefathers as an inheritance.

19 "I myself said, 'How gladly would I treat you like sons and give you a desirable land, the most beautiful inheritance of any nation.' I thought you would call me 'Father' and not turn away from following me. 20 But like a woman unfaithful to her husband, so you have been unfaithful to me, O house of Israel," declares the LORD. [Italics added.]

Biblical scholars debate whether God ever divorced the southern kingdom (Judah), or whether she simply went through a period of estrangement and judgment by God. But as is clear from these two passages, the northern kingdom's spiritual adultery was so great that God said he wrote it a certificate of divorce and sent it away. It seems that he needed to clearly state that their continuing adultery was unacceptable, and that they had broken the covenant relationship that had begun with Abraham and been ratified on Mt. Sinai. However, as this passage shows, even at the point where he needed to clearly state the unacceptability of continued adultery and terminate the marriage, he also urged them to come back to him—emphasizing that he would wait for them—and that he desired to be reconciled to them again.

### **Malachi 2:13–16**

Another well-known Old Testament passage on divorce is found in Malachi 2, and reads as follows:

13 Another thing you do: You flood the LORD's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. 14 You ask, "Why?" It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. 15 Has not [the LORD] made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. 16 "I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment," says the LORD Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.

The historical setting for this passage was the fifth century (approx. 420 BC). The Israelites had returned from the Persian captivity but were experiencing hard times because of drought, famine and blight. Malachi asserts that the reason for the lack of God's blessing was their apostasy and sin. A major part of this sin had been the divorcing of their wives for the purpose of marrying other women (vv. 11ff.). Such divorce is considered a breach of covenant, an act of treachery, which God "hates" (vv. 14–16).

This passage has sometimes been misunderstood in at least two important ways. First, it has sometimes been interpreted as a blanket prohibition against *all* divorces; but as we have seen in the previous sections, God does not prohibit all divorces for *he himself* eventually initiated a divorce against adulterous Israel. What God is prohibiting here is a *specific kind of divorce*, a divorce initiated by Jewish men who, tiring of their present wives, were divorcing them so they could marry other women. God asserts that by doing so they were breaching a sacred promise they had made, and he says that they will not experience his blessing if they continue to do so.

A second misunderstanding of this passage is that God hates *divorcees*. That is certainly not the case. God understands the pain of a person who has had to divorce a partner because of chronic infidelities, even as he had to do. God also understands the pain of a divorcee who has been abandoned for another, for as we have seen, he experienced that throughout Old Testament history, and continues to today. Therefore he clearly has compassion with those who have had to initiate a divorce because of repeated infidelity or who have been the unwilling *recipients* of a divorce.

However, it would similarly be a mistake to say that he hates those who are the *initiators* of unbiblical divorces. He hates *the pain* that divorce causes, and that is why he hates breaches of the marital covenant. However, Scripture teaches that God loves *sinner*s, even while he hates sin and the pain that sin causes. Therefore the person who has, in the past, initiated an unbiblical divorce and has repented of it can be assured that God loves, rather than hates, him or her.

### **Matthew 5:31–32**

It has been said, "Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce."  
But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to commit adultery, and anyone who marries a woman so divorced commits adultery.

The context of this statement is the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus is speaking to his followers, giving them guidelines for living. (The question of whether or not these guidelines *apply* to believers during the church age will be discussed in the section regarding Dwight Small's interpretation of this passage. At this point the discussion will focus on the *meaning* of Jesus' statement.)

Jewish men at this time were able to secure divorces quite easily by giving their wives a certificate of divorce, after which both parties were assumed to be free to remarry. Jesus changes this, saying there is only one legitimate ground for divorce and subsequent remarriage, namely, marital unfaithfulness. The emphasis in his statement is not on the exceptive clause (except for the case of unchastity), but on the idea that a husband should not divorce his wife. The only legitimate grounds, in God's eyes, for doing so, would be *porneia*, a Greek word that refers to any illicit sexual intercourse (Arndt and Gingrich 1952, 699; Boettner 1976, 9; Brown 1975, 497; Carson 1984, 414; Heth and Wenham 1985, 176.). This can include incest (1 Cor. 5:1), premarital intercourse (1 Cor. 7:1–2), homosexuality (Jude 7), adultery (Jer. 3:8–9), or bestiality (Lev. 18:23; 20:16).

However, it should be noted that a husband is not obligated to put away his wife, even in this case. It only says that if he does so, he is not involved in the sin mentioned, that of making her commit adultery. This raises the question "Why would divorcing his wife cause her to commit adultery?"

In that time and culture it was nearly impossible for a formerly married single woman to survive socially or economically (Ellisen 1977, 64). By divorcing her illegitimately, her husband was thus

virtually forcing her to remarry in order to live, causing both her and her new husband to be involved in adultery in God's eyes.

Jesus makes two modifications to the Deuteronomic law code—one relaxation and one intensification. The relaxation is that he substitutes divorce for the death penalty as the punishment for adultery. The intensification involves the grounds on which one might sue for divorce. The passage in Deuteronomy 24 permitted divorce on the grounds of *ervat-dabar* (some gross indecency as perceived by the husband), the meaning of which had been significantly liberalized by centuries of male rabbis. Jesus circumscribes this legislation, saying that the only legitimate ground for divorce in God's eyes is sexual immorality. The reasons are given in Jesus' fuller treatment of the marriage and divorce issue found in Matthew 19.

### **Matthew 19:3–12**

3 Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” 4 “Haven't you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ 5 and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? 6 So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”

7 “Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?” 8 Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. 9 I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

10 The disciples said to him, “If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.” 11 Jesus replied, “Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. 12 For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.”

There were two predominant schools of rabbinical thought at this time regarding what constituted legitimate grounds for divorce and remarriage. The school of Shammai was stricter, allowing divorce only on the grounds of adultery. The school of Hillel was quite permissive, allowing divorce for any perceived incompatibility, cessation of romantic interest, or even something as minor as an improperly cooked meal. The Hillelite Rabbi Akiba went so far as to permit divorce if a man had a roving eye for prettier women (Carson 1984, 411).

The Pharisees attempted to ensnare Jesus on this issue. If Jesus took a permissive stance, they hoped to damage his reputation by making it appear he was contradicting the Law. If he took a strong stance, they could hope that he would run afoul of Herod Antipas and Herodias<sup>4</sup> and meet the same fate as John the Baptist (Matt. 14:3–12).

In response to their question “Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?” Jesus teaches the principle that from the time of creation God intended marriage to be a lifelong union, and that what God has joined together, men should not divide (vv. 4–6).

To this the Pharisees, probably of the Hillel school, retort: “Why then did Moses *command* divorce?” Jesus very significantly changes their wording (vv. 7–8): “Moses *permitted* divorce because of the hardness of your hearts, but this was not the way God had intended marriage to be from the beginning”

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<sup>4</sup>Herod Antipas had divorced his own wife and married Herodias, the wife of his half-brother, Philip.

(Vincent n.d., 65). Jesus then teaches that if a man divorces his wife except on the grounds of unchastity (*porneia*) and marries another, *he* commits adultery (a significant point, not included in the Matthew 5 narrative). To this they reply “If that is the only basis on which one can divorce his wife, it’s better not to get married” (v. 10). Jesus closes this interaction by saying that not everyone can receive this teaching, but only those to whom it is given (vv. 11–12), perhaps recognizing that unbelievers would not be willing to accept such a strong command on the permanence of marriage.<sup>5</sup>

The focal teaching of this passage is found in verse 6 (*What God has joined together, let man not separate*). Evangelical theologians have for centuries understood this to mean that marriage cannot be dissolved at the mere wish or will of either of the contracting parties, nor by any voluntary act of repudiation, nor does the church or state have authority to dissolve a marriage (Boettner 1976, 11).

Some denominational groups, and Heth and Wenham in their book *Jesus and Divorce* (1985), have taken the stance that the exceptive clause allows the innocent partner of an adulterous spouse to divorce their spouse but not to remarry. Four considerations argue strongly against this interpretation:

First, both Jesus and his audience understood the right of divorce to automatically include the right to remarry. The Jewish bill of divorce, which had been used for many centuries prior to the time of Christ and was in use during his time, read as follows:

On \_\_\_ day of the week \_\_\_ day of the month \_\_\_ in the year \_\_\_ I who am also called son of \_\_\_ of the city of \_\_\_ by the river of \_\_\_ do hereby consent with my own will, being under no restraint, and do hereby release, send away, and put aside thee, my wife \_\_\_ who is also called daughter of \_\_\_ who is this day in the city of \_\_\_ by the river of \_\_\_, who have been my wife for some time past. And thus I do release thee, and send thee away and put thee aside that thou mayest have permission and control over thyself to go to be married to any man that thou mayest desire; and that no man shall hinder thee from this day forward, and thou art permitted to any man, and this shall be unto thee from me a bill of dismissal, a document or release, and a letter of freedom, according to the law of Moses and Israel.

\_\_\_\_\_ the son of \_\_\_\_\_ Witness  
 \_\_\_\_\_ the son of \_\_\_\_\_ Witness

(*Jewish Encyclopedias*, cited in Duty 1967, 34–35)

As can be seen, this bill explicitly spelled out the assumption that the right to divorce carried with it the right to remarry. In the Jewish, Greek and Roman culture of this time, the right to divorce automatically implied the right to remarry (see Duty 1967, 17, 18, 23, 24, 32, 34–44, 69, 130, 132, for a thorough historical and grammatical substantiation). A primary canon of hermeneutics is that we must understand these words as the author intended, rather than through the lens of our own culture.

Second, Murray (1975, 39–43) and Duty (1967, 45–51) show that grammatically the exceptive clause refers both to the right to divorce and to remarry. Heth and Wenham (1984) disagree, but the majority of Greek scholars appear to agree that the exception clause refers both to the right to divorce and to remarry. Third, at the time of Christ, and for many centuries prior, the Greek word *apoluo* (put away) had the meaning of complete dissolution, of causing all obligation and responsibility to cease (Abbott-Smith n.d.; Vine 1948; Liddell and Scott 1940; Moulton and Milligan 1949).

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<sup>5</sup>It is possible that in the phrase “Not everyone can receive this teaching,” the “this teaching” refers to the idea of not getting married at all, rather than the idea that marriage is a lifelong commitment that should not be severed by divorce. If this interpretation is correct, Jesus’ statement would mean “Not everyone can remain single throughout their lifetime.” Evidence for this latter understanding of the verse is the fact that in verse 12 Jesus describes three groups of people who, with God’s help, do manage to remain celibate throughout their lives.

Fourth, as can be seen from the above, when Jesus talked about divorce in these passages, he and his hearers automatically understood this to imply the subsequent right to remarry. If Jesus had intended that marital unfaithfulness allowed the innocent spouse to divorce the guilty spouse but not to remarry, he would certainly have clarified this in either in Matthew 5 or in this passage, but he does not.

We should always remember that the *main thrust* of this passage is not the legitimacy of divorce for sexual immorality, but the illegitimacy of divorce for any other reason (Murray 1975, 99). In our teaching about marriage we always need to emphasize that God intended the marriage commitment to be permanent, and this is his primary teaching. However, both the historical and grammatical data indicate that Jesus' *secondary teaching* in these verses is that if one's spouse is involved in sexual immorality, divorce and subsequent remarriage by the innocent party are legitimate. As we can see from the books of Hosea and the passages in Jeremiah and Isaiah quoted above, God's example to us is that even if a spouse is unfaithful, God wants us to consider extending forgiveness and reconciliation.

### ***Alternative Interpretations of Porneia as Used in the Exception Clause in Matthew 5 and 19***

**T**here have been at least three alternative views of what *porneia* refers to in these two passages. Let us briefly review those views and the arguments for and against them.

*Porneia as sexual unfaithfulness during the betrothal period:* The most authoritative defense of this view was given by Isaksson (1965). In Israel at that time, formal marriage was preceded by a betrothal period, usually lasting twelve to fifteen months. During this time the couple was considered legally married to each other even though they did not live together or consummate their relationship physically until after the actual marriage ceremony. (When Mary became pregnant with the baby Jesus during her betrothal period, Joseph considered divorcing her—terminating the betrothal quietly—because he believed she had been unfaithful to him [Matt. 1:18–20].)

The argument is that since Mark 10, Luke 16 and Romans 7 considered marriage permanent with no exceptions, we must interpret the exception clause such that it does not really constitute an exception. One way of interpreting *porneia* is as a reference to premarital intercourse (e.g., 1 Cor. 7:1–2). If we were to interpret *porneia* as meaning that divorce could be granted if the person was unfaithful during the betrothal period, since the marriage had not been officially consummated this would give us a way of understanding Jesus' exception clauses but still be able to affirm that when marriage has been fully entered into there is no biblical justification for divorce on any grounds.

Although this is a possible way of reconciling these verses, there are several exegetical problems with this interpretation. First, *porneia* is a general term that refers to a variety of forms of sexual immorality. Hermeneutically, many words have a general meaning (technically called a *denotation*), and then several additional specific meanings (other denotations) that are occasionally used. One can observe this in any standard English dictionary. The most common denotation is given first, preceded by a number 1, and then other denotations follow, preceded by numbers 2, 3, 4, and so on. The normal hermeneutical principle in all languages, including Greek and Hebrew, is that we should interpret a word using the general denotation, unless there is something in the context that indicates that one of the more specific denotations was the one intended by the speaker or writer. There is nothing in the context of either Matthew 5 or 19 to indicate that Jesus was talking about the betrothal period.

Second, the Pharisees here were asking Jesus what the grounds were under which divorce was permissible for *married couples*, not engaged couples. Third, the two passages that Jesus turns to in his response (Gen. 2 and Deut. 24) both refer to marriage, not to the engagement period. For these three reasons the *porneia* referred to in Matthew 5 and 19 should probably not be limited only to sexual

infidelity that occurs during the engagement period (Brown 1978, 538; Dobson 1985, 64–66; Heth and Wenham 1985, 176.).

*Porneia in reference to marriages discovered to be incestuous*, that is, between close relatives as otherwise prohibited in Leviticus 18:6–18. Here, too, the purpose —is to reconcile the exception phrases in Matthew 5 and 19 with Jesus’ teaching in Mark and Luke and Paul’s teaching in Romans 7, where marriage is described as permanent with no exceptions.

Several exegetical problems attend this interpretation similar to those given for the interpretation using the engagement or betrothal denotation. First, as mentioned above, *porneia* is a general term that refers to a variety of forms of sexual immorality. Nothing in the context indicates Jesus was restricting its meaning here to the rare denotation of marriage within prohibited family lines.

Second, if Jesus were referring to marriage to someone within the prohibited family lines, he certainly would have referred to the Leviticus 18 passage. Instead he uses the general marriage passages of Genesis 2 and Deuteronomy 24. Third, the Jews were exceptionally careful to remember family lines and relationships. The likelihood of many of the marriages prohibited in Leviticus 18 being consummated was low. Jesus would have been talking about a very rare phenomenon. In the historical context he was instead responding to the *very general question* of the grounds on which Hebrew men could divorce their wives. There seems to be inadequate hermeneutical justification for saying that the only grounds Jesus was allowing here for divorce was when a couple had become married and later discovered that they were closely related.

*Porneia refers only to adultery: Porneia* can refer to adultery (intercourse with someone who is also married as opposed to intercourse with someone who is not married, which is fornication). However, there is another Greek word—*moicheia*—that has the specific sense meaning adultery only. Matthew was aware of this word, having used it in a preceding passage (Matthew 15:19). The fact that he uses *porneia* rather than *moicheia* to translate Jesus’ statement here suggests that Jesus was saying that the sexual immorality of any kind (fornication, adultery, incest, homosexuality) was biblical grounds for divorce and remarriage (Carson 1985, 8:417).

### **Mark 10:2–12**

This passage is essentially parallel to the passage in Matthew 19 with two differences. First, it does not include the exception clause. Second, it does include one important additional point—found in verse 12: “And if she (the wife) divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.”

### **Luke 16:18**

Luke contains only a brief summary statement that reads: “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.”

## ***A Harmonization of the Synoptic Passages***

It is likely that in the actual discussion which these passages record, Jesus began with the principle that in God’s sight marriage was to be a lifelong commitment. He probably also included the exception clause found in the Matthean accounts along with the idea that if either partner initiated an illegitimate divorce and then remarried, they committed adultery and caused both their first and second spouses to do likewise.

Each Evangelist selected those parts of the address that he deemed most appropriate for his audience and purpose. Mark and Luke give the general principle regarding the permanence of marriage; Matthew gives both the general principle and the exception (there is no question about the manuscript authenticity of the exception clauses: see Duty 1967, 73–76 or Tasker 1977, 69, 182). Matthew, writing to Jews,

includes only the particulars regarding men initiating divorces, since only men initiated divorces in Israel at that time. Mark, writing to persons in Rome, includes particulars about both men and women initiating divorce, since this was happening in Rome.<sup>6</sup>

Thus there is no inherent contradiction in the various Synoptic passages, and together they present a more complete picture than any one does by itself. The words of R. C. Trench (1948) are well worth repeating here: “We are not to expect, in every place, the whole circle of Christian doctrine to be fully stated . . . no conclusion may be drawn from the absence of a doctrine in one passage which is clearly stated in others” (17–18).

### **1 Corinthians 7:10–15**

This passage is found in the middle section of a letter the apostle Paul wrote to the Christian believers at Corinth, probably around AD 55. In this section (one and one-half chapters, starting in chapter 6, verse 13, and continuing through chapter 7, verse 40), Paul, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, provides a fairly comprehensive discussion of various aspects of Christian marriage, divorce, singleness, asceticism, widowhood and chastity. The passage most applicable to our study of divorce and remarriage can be broken into two general topic areas. In verses 10 and 11 Paul is speaking to couples where both spouses are believers and says:

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

Paul says he is repeating commands given by our Lord (cf. Matt. 19:3–9 and Mark. 10:2–12). The word translated “separate” (*chorizo*) used in the sentence “A wife must not separate” meant divorce (Thayer 1977, 674; Arndt and Gingrich 1957, 898; Abbott-Smith n.d., 486), and thus the two phrases are parallel: wives are not to divorce their husbands, nor are husbands to divorce their wives.

The Greek culture of Corinth was similar to our own with regard to divorce: it was relatively easy to obtain a divorce decree. Paul says, though, that if both partners are Christians, neither one is to initiate a divorce. If they have already divorced or truly feel they cannot live together, they have two acceptable options as believers—either to remain single, or else to work toward reconciliation (vs. 11).

In verses 12 through 16 Paul directs his attention to another related problem, the situation in which two unbelievers had married, and one had subsequently become a believer.

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

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<sup>6</sup> The Greek word used here (*apoluo*) can refer to divorce or separation. Roman women could either divorce or separate from their husbands. In Israel women could and sometimes did separate from their husbands, though they could not legally divorce them. Thus an alternate rendering of Jesus’ statement here could be that men should not divorce their wives and wives should not separate from their husbands.

Paul's opening statement "I say this (I, not the Lord)" is not meant to contrast authoritative with nonauthoritative teaching, but to distinguish those commands of Christ which he was repeating (vv. 10–11) from those which he received directly from the Holy Spirit (vv. 12ff.). These latter commands were considered to be as authoritative as the former (vs. 17, 25, 40; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21).

Whereas in the Old Testament Israelites who had intermarried with non-Israelites were expected to divorce them (see Ezra 9–10), the Apostle Paul records a change in how New Testament believers were to handle this situation. Believers are not to marry unbelievers (1 Cor. 7:39b; 2 Cor. 6:14–18). However, if marriage had already occurred, or if two unbelievers married and then one became a believer, the believer is not to divorce the unbeliever on the basis of his or her unbelief. The unbeliever is not saved by being married to a believer, but he or she (and the children) are sanctified in the sense that they are "set apart" to be exposed regularly to the gospel and the Holy Spirit's influence through daily association with the believer. Marriage is not to be entered into with an unbeliever in the hope of evangelizing him or her, but if it has already been entered into, the marriage should not be terminated. However, if the unbeliever separates (*chorizo*), the believer is not to coerce him or her to stay, but should allow the spouse to leave.

There has been much discussion about the meaning of the phrase "the believer is not bound." The primary difference of opinion has been between those who believe it means (1) the believer is not bound to maintain the marriage, but is not free to remarry, and (2) the believer is no longer bound by the marriage contract, and thus is free to remarry.

It is not possible to be dogmatic about the meaning of the Greek word *douloo* (bondage, slavery) in this context, but the majority of lexicographers and expositors have understood it to mean that the believer is no longer bound by the marriage contract, and is thus free to remarry (e.g., Alford n.d., 1014; Dobson 1986, 79–81; Harrison 1960, 28; Moffat 1926, in loco; Nicoll 1956, in loco; Stott 1971, 15–16; Vincent n.d., 772). Additional support for this interpretation can be found in a word study focusing on the word "loosed," which Paul contrasts with the word "bound" ("Are you bound to a wife? Seek not to be loosed," v. 27). Duty (1967, 107ff.) provides a full description of the meaning of the word "loosed," and his study further strengthens the argument that the phrase "the believer is not bound" should be interpreted to mean that the believer is not under bondage to the former marriage contract and thus is free to remarry.

Probably the strongest Biblical objection that has been raised against the above understanding of this passage is that allowing remarriage would conflict with Christ's statements in Matthew which say that there is only one legitimate ground upon which a believer may initiate divorce proceedings,— namely, unchastity. However, a closer inspection of the two passages reveals no inherent conflict. Christ in Matthew 5 and 19 said there was only one legitimate ground on which *a believer* could initiate divorce against their spouse. Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 is not talking about a believer initiating divorce proceedings against their spouse (having just forbade this in the preceding verses), but is speaking to the instance in which *an unbeliever* deserts or initiates divorce proceedings against a believing spouse. In such a case the believer, though reluctant, should accept the unbelieving spouse's decision without bitterness or legal strife, "for God has called us to peace."

Further support that the believer who has been deserted by an unbeliever may remarry is found in verses 25–28, where Paul is talking about two groups of people—virgins who have never been married, and Christians who have become unmarried (*agamos*)—apparently by the action of an unbelieving spouse.

25 Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. 26 Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are. 27 Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife. 28 But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned.

Because of the persecution that Paul foresaw was soon to fall on Christians, he encouraged both virgins and those who had become unmarried to remain single (v. 26), especially if they had the gift of celibacy. However, if they do not have that gift, it is acceptable that virgins marry, and that those who had become unmarried remarry (v. 28). Earlier in this section Paul goes even further than this, saying that if someone who has become unmarried or who is a widow (presumably this also goes for widowers) does not have the gift of celibacy, it is *preferable* that they marry rather than burn with unfulfilled passion and risk the danger of slipping into sexual immorality. Those verses (1 Cor. 7:7–9) read:

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

The books of Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah all would seem to encourage believers that, if they are deserted by an unbelieving spouse, they give that spouse time to reconsider and come back to the marriage as well as come to the Lord. However, if the unbeliever marries someone else, or after a reasonable amount of time shows no inclination to return to the marriage, and if the believer does not have the gift of celibacy, the above biblical passages suggest that the believer who has been abandoned may remarry.

#### **Romans 7:1–4**

Do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to men who know the law—that the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives? 2 For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. 3 So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man. 4 So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God.

The first thing to note in discussing this passage is that it is not primarily a dissertation on marriage and divorce: Paul is using marriage as an illustration for another theological point he was making. For this reason we shouldn't try to make it say more than Paul was trying to make it say, though neither however, should we make it say less (Murray 1975, 79).

To recapitulate Paul's argument, he states that a woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive. If she lives with another man while he is alive, she shall be called an adulteress. However, if her husband dies, she is free to marry another. So likewise, we are free from the condemnation of the Law, having died to that condemning marriage (with the law) through the vicarious atoning death of Christ.

The important point is that Paul accepts the continuing validity of this principle regarding marriage; otherwise the illustration would lose its force. Paul says that if a woman divorces her husband (presumably on illegitimate grounds, since Paul was well aware of Jesus' teaching on divorce) and marries another while her first husband is still living, she commits adultery. This is a *present-tense* statement, not to Old Testament Jewish believers, but to the Jewish and gentile New Testament church well within the dispensation of grace. The likely conclusion to be drawn from Paul's statements in 1 Corinthians 7 and Romans 7 is that Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage continue to apply to the church age.

## *Scriptures Bearing on the Subject of Marital Separation*

Jay Adams (1980), has the following to say about marital separation:

The modern view of separation is an antibiblical substitution for the biblical requirement of reconciliation or (in some cases) divorce. These two options alone are given by God. Modern separation settles nothing; it amounts to a refusal to face issues and set them to rest. The world may have no way of solving problems—and so opts for an uneasy cease-fire—but the church does, if she will only avail herself of the biblical means. Of all things, separation (in its modern form) tends most to disrupt the peace that God enjoins (1 Cor. 7:15c). It keeps all parties involved on the end of the line, playing them like a fish in the water dancing on its tail. . . . Can separation provide for a “cooling off period” as some claim? Hardly, since it constitutes disobedience to God’s commands. (33)

I believe God *does* at times recommend marital separation, and gives us some guidance on what those situations are. The most extensive passages discussing situations relating to marital separation are found in 1 Corinthians 5: 1–13. Paul, beginning with a discussion of a man who claimed to be a Christian but who was sexually involved with his stepmother, objects that the church body should have done something to confront such sin in their midst. Paul then goes on to list six categories of sin which, if a person who calls himself or herself a Christian engages in, are to be confronted by the church. The passage reads:

1 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father’s wife. 2 And you are proud! Shouldn’t you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? 3 Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. 4 When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, 5 hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord. 6 Your boasting is not good. Don’t you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? 7 Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast— as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. 8 Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth. 9 I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—10 not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. 11 But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. 12 What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? 13 God will judge those outside. “Expel the wicked man from among you.”

Before discussing the implications of this for marital counseling, let us define more clearly what these six categories of sin are. Each of these are in a noun form, suggesting that the people involved are engaging in the sins mentioned in a chronic way (as opposed to an inadvertent, one-time sin of which someone immediately repents). They include:

1. **The sexually immoral:**  *pornos* is from the same word group as  *porneia* and refers to a person who engages in extramarital sexual activity, whether that be prostitution, fornication, adultery, homosexuality, pedophilia, or bestiality (H. Reisser 1975, 497–99) .
2. **The greedy person:**  *pleonektes* refers to a person who does not seek his fulfillment in God, but through acquisitions and possessions. Because of this, coveting becomes a way of life and replaces his desire to serve God or find fulfillment in him (Selter 1975, 137–38).
3. **The idolater:**  *eidolatreis* refers to a person who worships idols and false gods. This is more dangerous than might initially seem, because although the idol has no life in itself, demonic powers are behind the idol who is being worshiped (Mundie 1976, 284–86).
4. **The slanderer:**  *loidoros* comes from the verb  *loidoreo*, which means to insult, abuse, revile, or slander. Therefore a  *loidoros* is one who chronically insults, abuses, reviles, or slanders another (Wahrlich 1978, 346–47). In a marital situation, it would refer to a person who regularly verbally abuses one’s spouse or children .
5. **The alcohol abuser:**  *methusos* refers to a drunkard, someone who is regularly intoxicated (Budd 1975, 513–15). In today’s culture, it could probably be legitimately extended to those who abuse drugs as well as alcohol.
6. **The swindler:** the English word swindler is actually too weak to convey the meaning of this word. The Greek word is  *harpax* and refers to someone who steals forcibly, who plunders or confiscates (Brown 1978, 601–4).

The context of Matthew 18 suggests that the goal of church discipline is reconciliation (see vv. 10–14 and 21–35), and so our purpose is always to try to restore relationships between God and man and between man and man. Jesus describes the three steps in church discipline in the following way:

15 “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. 16 But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”

For a marital situation such as chronic verbal abuse, alcohol or drug abuse, sexual infidelity, illegal or unethical business activities, or seriously misplaced spiritual values, the steps would be for the partner to first talk with the spouse privately about the concern. If this did not result in a change, include one or two others in the conversation (perhaps a pastor or counselor), and if this did not result in change, then bring it to the church. In our day of very large churches, the equivalent might be bringing it to a  *representative group* of the church (such as the elder body), who might try to intervene and  *lovingly* confront.

Galatians 6:1–2: Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. 2 Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

The phrase “treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (in Matthew 18) is parallel in 1 Corinthians 5 to the phrase “not to associate with” and “With such a man do not even eat.” The purpose of such strong treatment is that, if loving persuasion does not work (the first two steps), it is important to take action that clearly makes the offender realize that what he or she is doing is outside God’s will and is unacceptable. In today’s language it means “loving confrontation” as opposed to codependent behavior and enabling. As we have seen from methods such as the Johnson Intervention, a strong message said in a caring manner is often the most effective and loving course of action to take in marriage counseling.

Obviously such action will be most effective if the church body (or representatives) can take it simultaneously with family members. The question arises about what action to take if one is a member of a church that is unwilling to be involved in the church discipline described by Jesus and Paul. If the church is unwilling to support the family in taking action, it will certainly be important to understand the reasons for the church’s unwillingness. If it turns out that objective people do not see enough evidence to

convince them that the situation fits one of those described by Paul, then it may be worthwhile for those family members to reevaluate the seriousness of their grievance. If there is clear evidence of a serious problem, and the church is unwilling to take action because of fear, then the family will have to decide whether the situation is serious enough, and their resolve strong enough, for them to take action on their own. However, I do believe, unlike Jay Adams, that 1 Corinthians 5 does provide a biblical model for marital separation under conditions such as verbal abuse (which often precedes or is accompanied by physical abuse), or alcohol or drug abuse. Continued sexual infidelity does seem to be grounds for divorce. The other five issues seem to be grounds for marital separation. If the separation is done in love, but also with firmness, it may promote eventual repentance. If it does not, the unrepentant person is likely to eventually initiate a divorce themselves, and the person fits the situation described in 1 Corinthians 7 (*agamos*—unmarried).

### ***Reconciliation of the Passages That Seem to Affirm No Divorce With Matthew 5, Matthew 19, and 1 Corinthians 7***

Mark 10:2–12, Luke 16:18, and Romans 7:1–4 seem to teach that marriage is a permanent state, and there are no exceptions (except death) under which it may be terminated and a biblical second marriage initiated. Commentators who begin with these passages often interpret the other passages in light of these seemingly permanent and complete bans on second marriages. For example, Heth and Wenham interpret the exception clauses found in Matthew 5 and 19 as meaning that infidelity is the only legitimate biblical reason a person may obtain a divorce, but even in those circumstances they cannot marry anyone else: they either must remain unmarried or be reconciled. They would also argue that if a Christian or non-Christian spouse deserts a Christian (1 Cor. 7), that deserted person must either hope and wait for them to return and be reconciled, or must remain single for the rest of his or her life.

The other alternative to reconciling these seemingly discrepant passages is to say that it is not uncommon for Scripture to state a general principle without immediately giving every exception. For example, Paul states in Romans 3:23 that “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” without stating the obvious exception of Jesus. Exodus 20:13 states “Thou shalt not murder” without stating all of the biblical exceptions, such as in the wars God commanded, or when someone has murdered someone else (Gen. 9:6), or for the many sexual and religious offenses in which he required the death penalty. James 3:8 says that “No man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison” and yet we know that at least one person, Jesus, did so, since he was our sinless atonement. 1 John 1:9 indicates the general principle that if we confess our sins, God is faithful to forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. However, in Mark 3:28–29 Jesus states an exception to this general principle when he says: “I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin.”

As mentioned earlier, the highly regarded Bible expositor R. C. Trench once stated: “We are not to expect in every place the whole circle of Christian truth to be fully stated . . . . Nothing is proved by the absence of a doctrine from one passage [when it is] clearly stated in others . . . . For all things are not taught in every place (1948, 41).” Since there is no question (among conservative evangelicals) about the authenticity of either Matthew 5, Matthew 19, or 1 Corinthians 7, the most biblically sound method is to affirm the validity of both the general principle (marriage is intended by God to be a lifelong commitment) but also to affirm that there are God-given exceptions to this general principle, including the death of one of the partners, sexual infidelity, and desertion. There are other situations, particularly those mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5, where God gives permission to separate from an abusive spouse. Since both the general principle and the exceptions are taught in Scripture, we as counselors seeking to inform our counseling stance from God’s Word also need to affirm both, that is, the principles *and* the

exceptions. It would be as much a denial of the totality of God's truth to deny the exceptions as to deny the general principle.

### ***The No-Divorce Position***

Of the various writers who have taken a no-divorce, no-remarriage position, probably the best-known *popular writer* (as opposed to theologian) is Bill Gothard. What follows are excerpts of his booklet (1979), distributed to the alumni of the Institute of Basic Youth Conflicts. The first section presents a true-life situation and is reproduced verbatim (permission from Bill Gothard received). Following that is a review of Gothard's reasons why remarriage should not be allowed, together with some responses from this author.

#### ***The Wedding That Was Reconsidered the Day Before It Was to Take Place!***

One summer night after a seminar I was confronted with an unexpected question: "Bill, is it true that you are encouraging a young man to marry a divorced woman?"

"No," I said. "I would not encourage that."

"But there is a young man who is telling people that he has your full blessing on his marriage, and he is marrying a divorced woman."

"How could that be?" I asked.

"Well, he sent you an invitation to his wedding and you sent him a congratulatory card. So he is telling his friends that he has your approval for his wedding!"

I had met the young man, but I was not aware that he was marrying a divorced woman who was the mother of two children.

When I returned home, a letter was waiting for me. It was from a close friend of the young man, who was urgently pleading with me to call the prospective bridegroom and clarify my position on divorce and remarriage.

Friday afternoon I called the young man and began by saying, "I want you to know that I am calling as a friend. I am calling because I want the very best for you. When I sent you a wedding card, I was not aware that you were marrying a divorced woman. I feel it is my responsibility to let you know that I am not able to give encouragement for such a wedding. I say this for your sake and for her sake. Therefore, would you kindly disregard my card?"

He was very gracious and said, "Well, Bill, I appreciate your calling, but I would like to know why you think we shouldn't get married." I asked him when the wedding was to take place. He replied, "Tomorrow morning at 10 o'clock."

"Your wedding is less than twenty-four hours away! It would be unfair for me to give you reason why you shouldn't go through with it. I'm sure you're looking forward to it." He agreed. The plans were all set. Relatives had already flown in for the rehearsal, which was to take place in a few hours.

"But," he said, "I really want to know your reasons. We have studied this in Scripture. We have talked to our pastor. We have read many books on the subject of divorce and remarriage. We believe that what we are doing is scripturally right. If you feel we shouldn't do it, I would want to know your reasons from Scripture."

After I gave him ten consequences that result from remarriages, he said, "Bill, an hour and a half ago I was sure that it was God's will for me to marry this woman. Now I am even more sure that it is not God's will. Would you explain to her what you have just explained to me?"

I agreed to talk to his fiancée on one condition—he must arrange a conference call so that the three of us could talk together. About an hour later, the operator called and had both of them on the line. The bride-to-be was at her home getting ready for the rehearsal. Her house was filled with relatives and friends. The prospective bridegroom was at his home, and I was in my office realizing the awesomeness of the situation in which we were all involved.

Before I repeated these ten consequences of remarriage to his fiancée, I asked her, “When you first began your friendship, did you question whether it was right to enter into a dating relationship?”

She said, “Yes, I did. In fact, at first I didn’t believe it was right to get remarried. That is why we went to talk to our pastor and began reading books on the subject. Everyone assured us that we were right in pursuing a marriage.”

**THE FACTORS BEHIND THIS PROPOSED MARRIAGE:**

The woman had been married previously and was the mother of two children. Several years ago she became a Christian. Her former husband was not a Christian. He initiated the divorce, and after it was granted by the courts, he remarried.

Now she planned to marry a man who had never been married. He was a Christian and active in his church. Both of them wanted God’s best in their lives.

Based on the biblical exegesis given in the previous section, I believe this couple could have remarried biblically. The reasons are twofold. First, her situation was described in 1 Corinthians 7, where an unbelieving husband deserted and divorced her. She is now in the state of *agamos*—unmarried. Based on verses 8 and 9 and verses 27 and 28, I believe she has Paul’s permission (actually and more importantly *God’s* permission) to remarry.

Second, even if the former husband’s divorce did not free her to remarry, his marriage to another woman makes it impossible for them ever to be husband and wife again, for he has dissolved their marriage and is someone else’s husband. If Deuteronomy 24 continues to apply to today, she could not take him back as her husband even if they both desired.

Let’s look at the reasons Gothard said this couple should not remarry. (Gothard’s reason and a brief explanation are given first, followed by this author’s thoughts.)

1. **You will break a sacred vow.** Since it is important to keep any vows we make (Eccles. 5:4–6), and marriage vows are made both to the other person and to God, it is especially important to keep one’s marriage vows, regardless of the behavior of the other person.

*Response:* Vows are covenants between two human beings, or between a human being and God. Covenants can be categorized as unconditional (they stay in force no matter what the behavior of the other party), or conditional (their continuance is based on both parties maintaining certain commitments). God made an unconditional covenant with Abraham, which he kept. He also made conditional covenants with Israel in which his blessing and protection of Israel were contingent on Israel’s faithfulness to him. Because Israel was repeatedly unfaithful, God eventually divorced her. If sexual infidelity or desertion can break the covenant, marriage should be understood as a conditional covenant. Therefore if the other person chooses to break it, it is broken. We as believers should not break the covenant, but neither are we to coerce an unbeliever to stay in a covenant against their will (1 Cor. 7:15).

2. **You will get a reproach to your name.** Gothard’s argument here is twofold. Other believers tend to shun divorcees, and second, you bring reproach on your name by committing adultery.

*Response:* Let's take these arguments in reverse order. Her husband committed adultery against her by divorcing her without adequate grounds and marrying someone else. He was an adulterer in God's eyes by consummating his second marriage. Because he has broken the marriage covenant in two ways—through divorce and adultery, she has biblical grounds for considering the marriage dissolved. She is not committing adultery by remarriage because she has biblical grounds for considering her marriage ended.

It is true that she may feel shunned by certain Christians who make no distinctions between biblical divorces and unbiblical ones. As long as legalism is alive in Christian circles, there will be those who do not approve of our behavior, whether it be this behavior or something totally different. The important question is not whether every legalist approves of us, but whether God does.

- 3. You will damage the marriages of others.** Gothard states that if this couple were to marry and be happy, other Christians who are unhappy in their marriages would be encouraged to seek divorces also. He says that God cannot bless their marriage, for by doing so he would only be weakening the marriages of others.

*Response:* God does not bless those who “sin with a high hand,” that is, those who sin with a defiant spirit. But this couple is definitely committed to obedience to God. They consulted with their pastor, read several books on what the Bible says about divorce and remarriage, and are even willing to call off their wedding after all the guests are there. They clearly don't fit the description of someone who is in rebellion against God. The crucial question is whether they are breaking God's principles by remarriage, and if the previous exegesis is correct, they are not. They *can* marry with God's blessing.

This argument is also based on the fear that Christians cannot make distinctions between divorces that are biblically approved and those that are not. If they cannot, allowing *any* divorces may open the floodgates so that everyone will want them. This position probably underestimates the intelligence of most Christians. Christians can and do make distinctions in many areas. For example, they can recognize that it is wrong *for them* to imprison someone, but that God has given government the right and authority to do so. It is wrong to have promiscuous sex, but within the context of marriage sex is good and right. Most Christians realize that divorce includes incredible amounts of pain, and many people who divorce never have an opportunity to remarry. Therefore it is unlikely that acceptance of an occasional biblical divorce will cause a mad rush on the divorce courts. And if Christians cannot make the distinction between biblically approved divorces and unapproved ones, the way to correct this is not by prohibiting what God allows, but by better biblical instruction of the difference between these two categories of divorce.

- 4. You will increase her guilt.** Gothard argues that because all divorced people feel guilty about their divorce, for this young woman to remarry would add another sin to those she has already committed, and thereby increase her guilt even more.

*Response:* People feel guilty because they believe they are guilty. If the arguments given in the introduction to this section are correct, this Christian woman does not need to feel guilty about being deserted by her non-Christian ex-husband unless she did some horrendous things that caused him to leave, which does not seem consistent with her character as we know it. Based on 1 Corinthians 7:8–9 and 27–28, she has God's approval to remarry. If this fact can be shown to her scripturally, her guilt will not be increased by remarriage.

- 5. You will damage her future security and ministry.** Gothard says that for a widow to be honored and supported by the church she must be “the wife of one man (1 Tim. 5:9).

*Response:* During the time of the early church there were several criteria widows had to meet if they were to receive financial support from the church. The Greek here is very difficult but probably does not mean only married once, since younger widows were encouraged to remarry (v. 14), and this was a biblically approved second marriage (Rom. 7:4). The most likely meaning is that in order to be enrolled on this widows' list a widow must have been faithful to her husband while he was living (Earle 1978,

378). Entering into a biblically approved second marriage after her husband had dissolved the first one and married someone else says nothing about her faithfulness to her husband, since he was no longer her husband either in the eyes of the state or the eyes of God.

6. **You will accept the mentality of the Pharisees.** Gothard describes the “mentality of the Pharisees” as believing in the possibility of divorce after remarriage. He compares this with the “mentality of Jesus,” which he describes as meaning the permanency of marriage *without exceptions*. Gothard says that the exception clauses in Matthew 5 and 19 refer to infidelity during the betrothal period. If discovered, the innocent partner could fail to consummate the marriage, but this is not truly a divorce, since the couple was never fully married. Regarding the possibility of remarriage following desertion (1 Cor. 7), Gothard says that “the very spirit of 1 Corinthians 7 is to encourage singleness, not remarriage” (p. 7).

*Response:* As we have seen, there are several arguments against the “betrothal” explanation of the exception clauses, many of which have been articulated even by those who believe in the permanency of marriage with no exceptions (e.g., Heth and Wenham 1985). This theory has not gained general acceptance among more than a small minority of conservative evangelical Bible scholars. The vast majority believe *porneia* refers to any kind of sexual infidelity during the betrothal period and *after* the marriage has been established. Therefore Jesus did not prohibit divorce and remarriage under any circumstances.

It is true, as Gothard asserts, that the very spirit of 1 Corinthians 7 is to encourage singleness, not remarriage. Paul gives two reasons for this: (1) the upcoming persecution of Christians which he knew was going to happen shortly would be easier for them if they were not married, and (2) because the unmarried person with the gift of celibacy can devote their energies more completely to serving God. However, he also said that if the unmarried person did not have the gift of celibacy, it was better to remarry than to burn with unfulfilled passion (v. 9), and that there was no sin in remarriage (v. 28).

On the basis of the above Scriptures it may be well to revisit Gothard’s definitions of “the mentality of the Pharisees” and “the mentality of Jesus.” There is not a single description of “the mentality of the Pharisees,” since there was a wide divergence of views between the very permissive views of the school of Hillel and the very conservative views of the school of Shammei. It would be better to contrast “the mentality of the Hillelites” with “the mentality of Jesus.” The “mentality of the Hillelites” believed that *any excuse* was an adequate justification for a husband to divorce his wife. The “mentality of Jesus” emphasized that humans were to consider marriage a lifelong covenant between two people, rather than constantly looking for justifications for ending it. While Jesus did give one reason for which a person could divorce and remarry, the emphasis was on preserving the covenant rather than finding reasons for ending it.

7. **You will violate the wishes of your parents.** Gothard asked the man if his parents were fully in favor of the marriage. The young man responded that initially one parent was not, but now both were in favor of the marriage. Gothard believes that children are to honor and obey their parents *up until the point they marry*, based on Exodus 20:12 (“Honor your father and mother”) and Ephesians 6:1 (“Children, obey your parents”).

*Response:* The command to honor our parents is a lifelong command. However, the word for “children” in Ephesians 6:1 (“Children, obey your parents”) is *teknon*, which means a child who has not reached the age of adulthood. While offspring are still children, they are commanded to obey their parents. This verse does not teach that adult children are to obey their parents until they are married. They should certainly honor them by listening to their thoughts and wishes, but parents are not infallible, and they sometimes could prohibit a child from making a wise decision because of their own limited information, misinformation, or personal desires. While the majority of parents probably would not intentionally misdirect an adult child for any of these reasons, it is not a scriptural requirement that adult unmarried children make no decisions without their parents approval. This situation also does not explain

why Gothard said the couple should not be married now, since one parent has *always* been in favor of the marriage, and both *now* are.

- 8. You will lower God's standards for the children.** Gothard's argument here is that divorce and remarriage provides a poor model for children, giving them the idea that if their first marriage becomes unhappy, they can simply find another partner and remarry.

*Response:* It is certainly true that divorces that are casually entered into *can* leave children with this impression, and this is an important argument against "self-actualizing divorces," that is, divorces entered into not because of abuse or severe problems that could not be resolved, but because one or both partners wished to actualize themselves by being "free" or by marrying someone else.

However, children whose parents divorce usually suffer a great deal emotionally, and the majority rebel against the "casual divorce" approach to marriage because they have personally experienced how much pain it causes children. In addition, this couple did not approach divorce and remarriage with a casual attitude. The woman was the *recipient* of a divorce, not the initiator of one, so she clearly did not model a flippant attitude toward divorce as an easy out when someone becomes dissatisfied with their marriage.

- 9. You will experience leanness in your soul.** Gothard says: "One of the most sobering verses in Scripture is Psalm 106:15, 'And he gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul.' For this reason it is never wise to ask God for something that He has already said we should not have" (p. 10).

*Response:* I have two objections to Gothard's application of this principle to this couple's anticipated marriage. The first is his use of Psalm 106:15. In context, verse 15 is a reference to Exodus 16:1–3. The point of this passage was not that the Israelites were asking for something they should not have (they were asking for food), but the *attitude* with which they were asking (they were asking in a bitter, complaining way), and this attitude was why God punished them. Certainly the couple Gothard is counseling is displaying none of the attitude being referred to in Psalm 106:15 and Exodus 16:1–3.

Second, Gothard says it is never wise to ask for something we should not have. God has said that it is not good for humans to be alone (Gen. 2:18), and that is why he designed marriage—as a relationship where two people covenant to meet each other's needs for companionship. As we have seen, Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 appears to give permission to people who have become unmarried to marry again "in the Lord." Therefore neither person in this couple is asking God for something God has told them they should not have.

- 10. You will establish a relationship of conflict.** Continuing the quote from Gothard: "The obvious fact is that if a husband or wife leaves his or her first marriage and violates the vow 'til death do us part,' he or she could do it again. This possibility will certainly produce a sense of insecurity in the one who marries a divorced person. It will also produce insecurity and conflict in the children.

"Many divorced people seek to be remarried without ever understanding what grieved the former partner in the first marriage. The result is that the same offenses are repeated in the new marriage.

"The children become insecure because they are never certain of the new parent's concern and love for them. (Also, new problems of rivalry and rejection often arise when a parent and a stepparent have children of their own.)" (p. 10).

*Response:* These are all valid points. However, the first one applies primarily to the spouse who deserted the marriage. We have no indication that the young mother in this situation takes that attitude toward marriage.

The points made in the second and third paragraphs are good ones. However, these points do not necessarily lead to the conclusion that unmarried people should never remarry. Another possible conclusion is that they should have good premarital counseling to help them understand and change any

thought and behavioral patterns they have that may have contributed to the failure of the first marriage, and also counseling to help them become a successfully blended family.

*Conclusion:* The couple with whom Bill Gothard spoke cancelled their wedding because they believed they must do so in order to be obedient to God’s Word. Gothard’s arguments, and some possible alternative ways of understanding those arguments, have been presented here in order to provide a starting point for you to be able to think through these points for yourself.

### ***The Permissive Divorce Position***

**T**he conclusion most conservative evangelical expositors have drawn from Jesus’ statements in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and Paul’s statements in 1 Corinthians 7 and Romans 7 is that Jesus’ teaching on divorce and remarriage continue to apply to the church age, and that there are basically only two reasons for biblical divorce and remarriage (immorality and desertion), with physical abuse being a possible third legitimate reason for divorce or separation. However, since some evangelical Christian teachers and counselors have developed alternative interpretations of the biblical data, let us look at one of the best-known of these alternatives—that of Dwight Small in his book *The Right to Remarry* (1975).

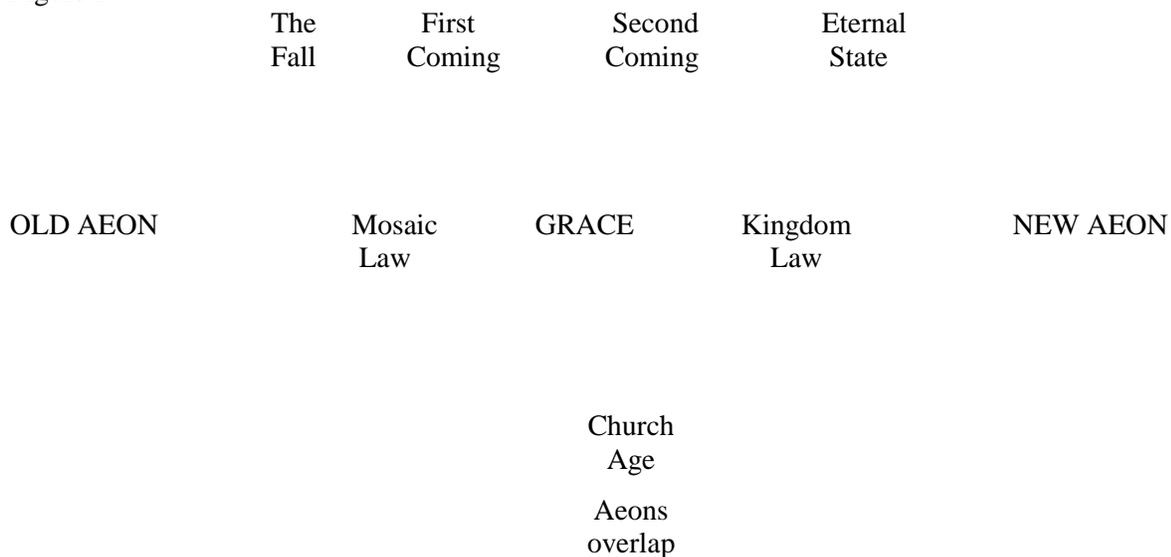
#### **A Summary of Small’s Thesis**

Small contends that biblical discussions of divorce and remarriage up to this point have been weakened by their failure to distinguish the various ethical contexts in which the passages were spoken (pp. 45–46). On his view, two broad ethical contexts overlap to form a third (fig. 1, from Small 1975, 108, modified slightly at his request; personal communication, 1978).

In the first broad context, covering primarily the Mosaic period, God exercised his will, but not fully, because of the hardness of men’s hearts and the absence of the Holy Spirit’s indwelling. The second broad context, the kingdom, is still in the future, and will represent a perfect fulfillment of God’s will through kingdom law.

The third context, the church age in which we presently live, overlaps these other two contexts. We are in an interim period, and there is an accompanying interim ethic. We are no longer under Mosaic law, nor are we yet under kingdom law; kingdom law, however, does serve as an ideal toward which to strive.

Figure 1



During this present age, kingdom law should not be applied too rigorously. Failure to live up to the ideals of kingdom law should be met with understanding and forgiveness, the ability to make a fresh start, and no church discipline for failure to follow kingdom standards.

Ethical commands must be interpreted within the ethical context in which they were given. Jesus taught kingdom law, and Small characterizes his teachings as “totally rigid and unbending” when compared with the Epistles, which preach grace. The salvation Jesus preached in the synoptics was works-righteousness; believers today are saved by grace, and therefore operate under a new system of standards (p. 18).

Ethical commands given at the transition periods should not be applied rigidly. While Scripture gives us only two exceptions to the absolute commands regarding the permanence of marriage, Small suggests that these are indicative that there may also be other exceptions, for example, whenever one person is deeply committed to leaving the marriage.

According to Small, Jesus’ synoptic commands regarding divorce and remarriage are not to be applied fully until the kingdom age. The book of Acts is largely a transition book. The Epistles are suggestive, but not comprehensive guidelines for life in the church age, and should always be interpreted from the larger perspective of grace, and with the realization that they were written during or closely following a transition period. Dr. Small concludes that

while divorce and remarriage are not allowed within the law of Christ’s kingdom save for the single cause of adultery, they are permitted by the grace of Christ, the Lord of the church. While not specifically taught in the direct words of Jesus, the order of necessity is recognized in the larger ethical context of the New Testament. . . . There must be a positive affirmation that divorce and remarriage are sometimes redemptive means, fully within the present will of God. (pp. 187)

### **An Analysis of Small’s Thesis**

Dr. Small is to be commended on several points. First, he has attempted to deal carefully and thoroughly with the biblical texts in developing his framework for Christian counseling on the subject of divorce and remarriage. Second, he has rightly asserted the importance of understanding the context of any scriptural passage as a precondition for rightly interpreting its meaning. Third, he has in all his exegetical discussions remained sensitive to the emotional grief of those persons who are or have been in painful marital situations.

Space does not allow for a complete review of all Dr. Small’s arguments. I will instead make a few observations and then discuss in depth one of the major premises on which his theory rests.

Dr. Small’s theory regarding two ethical contexts which overlap to form a third is an inference made from Scripture without scriptural support. All the verses used to support his inference can be understood, and usually are, as saying something very different than that which he is saying.

If it is true that there are three ethical systems in Scripture which significantly affect the understanding and application of every command given to Old and New Testament believers, it seems strange that God has not clearly articulated this somewhere in Scripture. Jesus, considered the Master Teacher, would certainly have clearly spelled out the difference between interim and kingdom ethics to his disciples, particularly after it became very clear that he was going to be rejected by the nation of Israel. Yet Jesus often combined and intertwined kingdom and interim ethics within the same discussion—according to their cataloguing by Dr. Small—certainly something he would not do if he wanted his followers to properly apply his teaching in the early church. There is no indication after Matthew 13 (when Jesus allegedly became aware he was not going to set up his kingdom during his first advent) that he ever distinguished interim and kingdom ethics or told his followers that interim ethics should be applied to the church, or that kingdom ethics would not be applied fully until he came back to set up his millennial kingdom.

Nor does Dr. Small's theory explain why it is necessary for him, in order to justify his conclusions, to discount the clear and primary application of every biblical passage that bears on the subject of divorce and remarriage because none of them fit with his conclusions.

Perhaps the most telling argument against Dr. Small's hypothesis is that its basic assumptions are based on a misunderstanding of the nature of law and grace in Scripture. He states in many places that Old Testament believers were saved by legalistic works-righteousness (e.g., pp. 18, 50). Small asserts that the religion which Jesus preached was a religion of works-righteousness far different from the system of grace under which we are presently saved (e.g., "There is a gulf . . . between Jesus and Paul that no art of theological exegesis can bridge," pp. 123).

However, this theoretical formulation, which is the framework upon which his entire theory is built, is directly contradicted by Scripture's teaching. Paul teaches that "by works of the law shall no one be justified" (Gal. 2:16). He also states "it is evident that no man is justified before God by the law" (Gal. 3:11). He shows that the Old Testament saints, such as Abraham and David, were saved, not by works-righteousness, but by faith (Gal. 3: 6–9, Rom. 4:1–6). It only takes a moment's reflection to recognize that if the blood of bulls and goats could never take away sins (Heb. 10:4), and if all have sinned (Rom. 3:23), then everyone who has ever been saved has been saved by grace rather than by works-righteousness.

What, then, were the reasons for the Law and the ceremonial sacrifices? Scripture gives us several purposes (Virkler 1981). Galatians 3:19 teaches that it was given "because of transgressions" or, as the NEB translates it, "to make wrongdoing a legal offense." Thus one primary purpose of the law was to make humanity aware of the distinction between good and evil, right and wrong.

A related reason is found in 1 Timothy 1:8ff., which teaches that "the law is good if one uses it lawfully." From the context it becomes evident that a "lawful use of the law" was the restraint of evil-doing. Thus by making humanity aware that some actions are morally wrong, the Law serves at least to some degree to inhibit evil-doing.

A third purpose of the Law is to act as a custodian to bring human beings to Christ (Gal. 3:22–24). By showing men their sinfulness, the Law served as a guide or tutor, showing them that the only hope for justification was through Christ.

A fourth purpose of the Law is to serve as a guideline for godly living. The original context of the giving of the Law immediately followed the Israelite's commitment to be faithful to the true God. The Law gave them a guide revealing how they might remain true to the commitment while surrounded by idolatrous and grossly immoral nations on every side.

In the New Testament likewise, obedience to God's principles is never considered an optional part of the believer's life. Jesus said, "If you love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). In John 15:10 he is quoted as saying, "If you keep my commandments, you shall abide in my love." First John 3:9 teaches that a true believer does not make sin the practice of his life, and the entire book of James is devoted to teaching that true faith will result in godly behavior. The motive for obedience is love rather than fear (1 John 4:16–19), but salvation by grace in no way obviates the fact that obedience to God's moral law is an intrinsic result of true saving faith.

With this distinction between the aspects and purposes of the Law in mind, we find that Paul's writings on the Law become clearer. Paul argues in the book of Galatians not against the Law, but against legalism—that perversion of the Law which says that salvation can be obtained by keeping the Law. The Judaizers were attempting to persuade the Galatian believers to mix salvation by grace with salvation by Law (legalism)—two mutually incompatible systems. He traces Israel's history, showing that believers from Abraham on had been saved by faith, and that no one could be saved by keeping the Law, since the Law was not meant to bring salvation.

On the other hand, Paul just as forcefully supports the right use of Law—as an indicator of God's moral standards, as a restraint against evil-doing, as a custodian to bring us to Christ by showing us our inability to meet God's moral standards, and as the believer's guide to godly living. The New Testament

believer is not “under Law” in three senses: (1) he is not under the ceremonial law since this has been fulfilled in Christ, (2) he is not under Jewish civil law since this was not intended for him, and (3) he is not under the condemnation of the Law because his identification with the vicarious atoning death of Christ frees him from this condemnation.

In summary, then, when properly understood the Law continues to perform the same functions within the New Testament covenant as it was originally intended to perform within the Old Testament. The misunderstanding that Law was actually a second means of salvation is based on the fact that some of the Israelites themselves misunderstood the Law similarly, turning the Law from its proper purpose into legalism—the attempt to earn salvation by keeping it.

Even as it seems unwise to confine the primary application of God’s principles (law) to certain eras of biblical history as Dr. Small does, it also seems inconsistent with the teaching of Scripture to suggest that God’s grace is focused primarily on one era of biblical history. For example, one word occurs in the Old Testament some two-hundred fifty times for which the RSV translators were unable to find a suitable English equivalent. The Hebrew word is *hesed*, which the RSV translators translated as “loving kindness,” as in the oft-repeated phrase “for his loving kindness endureth forever.”

The RSV translators were not satisfied that even this phrase adequately translates the richness and depth of God’s *hesed* for his people. After finishing their translation, they were still struggling to find a word to characterize the *hesed* of God in the Old Testament toward His people. They finally settled on “steadfast love” because this phrase emphasized the *loyal* love of God to his covenantal promise. In addition to *hesed* there is a wide variety of other words in the Old Testament referring to God’s abundant mercy, goodness and long suffering (Kaiser 1973, 22–23).

For those who believe in a dispensational view of Scripture, evidence of God’s grace inheres in every dispensation. When Adam and Eve sinned, God graciously intervened, promised a redeemer, and made immediate provision for their acceptance before him in their sinful condition.

Similarly, in the dispensation of conscience Noah found grace in the sight of God (Gen. 6:8); God graciously intervened, saving Noah and his family. In the dispensation of civil government man rebelled by building the Tower of Babel. God did not destroy the rebellious creation, but continued to work in the hearts of men like Abraham and Melchizedek, extending a gracious promise to bless the whole world through Abraham.

In the dispensation of Mosaic law God continued to deal graciously with Israel despite her many and continued periods of backsliding, and in the dispensation of grace and the millennial kingdom he continues to deal graciously with humanity.

Other evidence similarly demonstrates that the God of the Old Testament is a God of grace. Psalms 32 and 51 remind us that an adulterer and even a murderer can find forgiveness with God. Psalm 103 sings of God’s mercy and steadfast love in words unparalleled in all Scripture. Thus God’s grace and principles are not two unintegrated parts of his nature of which he shows one part to Moses, another to the church, and then another in the kingdom age. His grace and principles are continuously manifest throughout the Old and New Testament eras in his relationship with humanity, each complementing the other.

In Matthew 5:19 Jesus said: “*Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven.*” My concern is that if we base a philosophy of counseling on the theory that God’s principles applied to an earlier era (the Mosaic period) and will apply to a future era (the kingdom period) but do not apply to our own, without explicit biblical evidence that this is indeed God’s intention, is to bring oneself dangerously close to the warning Christ gave to his followers in Matthew 5:19 above.

## *The Effect of Changing Times and Cultures on the Application of Biblical Principles*

Even if we reach a conclusion regarding what Scripture says about divorce and remarriage, however, a second important question confronts us, namely, how we should apply the biblical commands within our own very different time and culture? Since sociological trends and psychological expectations regarding the permanence of marriage have changed so rapidly in the last sixty years alone, how are we to understand the relevance of these commands for contemporary believers?

One assumption frequently implicit in discussions of this nature is that the conservative views regarding divorce which predominated in the 1930s were consistent with the views held during biblical times. Since these expectations have radically changed in the last sixty years, so must our method of applying scriptural principles.

However, as we look at the cultural expectations regarding marriage and divorce which were present at the time the various biblical commands were given, we find that they more closely approximate those of our contemporary time and culture than those of the 1930s. At the time of both Moses and Malachi divorce was a culturally accepted phenomenon (Keil and Delitzsch, vol. 1, pt. 3, 417; Malachi 2:11–14). Christ's statements regarding divorce were spoken at a time when liberal divorce was a commonly accepted practice in Israel (Farley 1975, 150; Edersheim 1971, 2:332–33). Paul's statements to the gentile churches were spoken at a time when liberal divorce regulations were in effect in both Greek and Roman cultures.

Thus the biblical commands prohibiting divorce were given in times and cultures when divorce was largely accepted as a legitimate means of escape from a difficult or less-than-exciting marriage, a situation very similar to that of our own time. Yet the unanimous command of God is that we are not to divorce, but to look to his grace as a means of healing a broken relationship. Thus it would seem that the biblical commands regarding divorce possess as much relevance for believers today as they did for the peoples of Biblical times.

### *Applying God's Principles and Grace in Marriage Counseling*

If we conclude that a Christian approach to marriage counseling must manifest both God's principles and his grace, how are we to accomplish this integration? The following section attempts to provide — a starting point.

#### **Ways of Demonstrating God's Grace in Marriage Counseling**

When couples come in for marriage counseling, they are often in a great deal of pain and often feel hopeless. One way to minister God's grace is to show empathy for this pain and hopelessness. God tells us in Romans 12:15 to "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn." The starting point for connecting with those in pain is the use of empathy to let them know we understand and care.

Another way of providing grace is to give both persons an opportunity to share their pain in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Most marital problems can be summarized as a breakdown in the covenant of companionship, but it takes careful listening to understand how *this particular couple's covenant* has broken down. Careful listening shows God's grace in a number of ways: (1) it demonstrates that you care, (2) it demonstrates that here is a place where both parties can be honest about their pain, and (3) it is the first step in developing an action plan that specifically addresses the unmet covenantal needs of these two individuals.

A third way of demonstrating God's grace is to recognize that knowledge of Biblical principles regarding marriage and divorce is not something the counselor automatically shares with a client, particularly initially. Although knowledge of scriptural principles may serve more to inform the *counselor's* goals, methodology, and timing, probably the last thing the couple in pain need to be told is "You can't get a divorce." If they feel hopeless, being told there is no way out may only increase their hopelessness. The counselor can help the couple work toward a biblical goal (restoring the marriage) without engaging biblical commands at a time when doing so might be countertherapeutic.

Another way of ministering God's grace during the initial session is to ask the couple to spend a few minutes (after identifying the problem areas) remembering when they met and the qualities that drew them to each other. It can also be helpful to ask them to remember one or more times when their relationship was good, and remember the feelings associated with those times. Taking time for such recollections can remind the couple that there have been times when their relationship has been enjoyable and has fulfilled their personal needs.

Another way of ministering God's grace is to use a solution-focused approach, asking the couple what they would like to have happening in their relationship again and asking them to identify what initial steps might bring that about. Often it is not necessary to have the couple explicitly repudiate any thoughts of divorce as they first begin marriage counseling; all that is necessary is to ask if they would be willing to work for a few weeks to see if their marriage can be improved before making a final decision one way or the other. Sometimes one person is extremely set on leaving the marriage because they believe they have someone waiting for them. They sometimes may be persuaded to reconsider, at least temporarily, with a question such as "How will you prevent that new relationship from self-destructing as well if you don't take the time to learn what has gone wrong in this one?"

### **Ways of Demonstrating God's Principles in Marriage Counseling**

The theonomous stance constituting the basis for this paper is based on the assumption that (1) God's principles are set up with our best interests in mind, and (2) that God will provide the necessary grace to carry out his principles if we commit ourselves to his guidance and ability to empower us to do such. Such a commitment may not always be easy, and may sometimes be directly antithetic to the desires of our carnal nature, but we have the promise of 1 Corinthians 10:13 that God will always make it possible.

On this view, the task of the Christian counselor in working with Christian clients is to (1) help them see that God's principles are in their best interests, and (2) guide and help them use both psychological and spiritual resources to carry out those principles in their daily living. Part of knowing what God's principles are is an awareness of relevant biblical passages that touch on the issue of divorce and remarriage, which this paper has provided.

By focusing on a more modest goal such as the one discussed three paragraphs above, a counselor need compromise neither God's standards nor his own. In focusing on a more modest plan, the initial therapeutic contract assumes that since God's principles are set up with humanity's best interests in mind, God's principle of fidelity, commitment and permanence will likely become self-reinforcing as the couple starts to experience more joy in their relationship, and the therapeutic contract can then be much more easily renegotiated, either explicitly or implicitly, at a later time.

A second working assumption of the theonomous stance is that most Christians, most of the time, do want to be obedient to God's will. Present circumstances, such as deeply entrenched marital pain, may be causing them to feel that it is impossible both to meet their emotional needs and to be obedient simultaneously. However, if they had had no feelings about disobedience to God, they probably would have gone to a secular counselor, who may have been more open to a decision to divorce, than come to a Christian counselor.

Thus a Christian counselor may begin therapy with the assumption that the person *does* want to be an obedient Christian, and may thus work from an advocate position. In contrast, the underlying assumption

of some biblical counseling models is that often the person does *not* want to be obedient, and the counselor adopts what is often perceived by the client to be an adversarial position.

In reality, the glass is probably half full: the client probably has some desire to be obedient and also some reluctance. The question therapeutically is, the “Can I be more helpful to a client by focusing on their wish to be obedient, affirming and being an advocate for that part, or by focusing on their reluctance to be obedient, confronting and being an adversary to that part.” Little’s (1966) comment that “more flies are caught with honey than with vinegar” is perhaps relevant here.

Third, it may also be helpful to view marriage from a spiritual perspective. Ellisen (1977) suggests that the primary purpose of marriage is not monotonous bliss and continuous need-fulfillment, but personal and spiritual growth. Christians are “diamonds in the rough.” Part of the purpose of marriage is that through feedback and mutual submission the rough edges of our personalities will be honed away. That personal hope is made possible by the Christian graces God makes available. The Christian marriage counselor can work with the couple on identifying blind spots, unrealistic expectations, or other aspects that need to be developed so each person can become the healthiest person he or she can be.

Fourth, Christians can be reminded of the biblical principle that throughout biblical history God has been, and continues to be, the restorer of broken relationships, both between himself and humanity and also between persons. Books like *Second Chance* (Van Wade 1975), provide powerful testimonies that God can reunite even the most broken families. Enrichment weekends, such as Marriage Encounter or Retrouvaille, can help a couple personally experience God’s ability to bring reconciliation as they begin marriage counseling.

In conjunction with God’s ability to intervene and restore broken marriages, we can now legitimately assure couples that we have more ability than ever to help people improve their marriages. We now know many of the specific causes of marital difficulty (e.g., selective attention, misinterpretations of each other’s behavior, unrealistic expectations, unhealthy self-talk, lack of communication or conflict resolution skills, low levels of reinforcing behaviors, unhealthy family rules, etc.), and we have specific tools to help couples whose difficulties derive from these areas. We now can have more hope that unhappy marriages can be transformed than we have ever had before.

While it is always preferable to motivate people with positive incentives, there may occasionally be times when it is necessary to remind people of negative reasons not to divorce. People considering divorce often attend to the pain in their relationship and block out awareness that there may be even greater pain—for themselves, for their spouse, for their children, and for their parents—if they divorce. Diane Medved’s book *The Case Against Divorce* (1989) is an excellent secular book that can help individuals become aware that divorce sometimes produces more pain than it removes, and can often motivate a person or couple to try marriage counseling before divorce.

## ***SOME PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS***

This section will deal with some of the more common practical situations and issues that arise regarding divorce and remarriage, and asks the question “What does Scripture inform me what my goals as a Christian therapist should be?” The illustrations, most of which are drawn from actual clinical situations, start with the simple and relatively straightforward and move to the more complex. This discussion deals with the scriptural goals of therapy, not the process of therapy, which will be discussed in a subsequent section.

### **Situation 1**

Mrs. Joyce (a fictitious name) became a Christian about two years ago. Her husband, an unbeliever, subsequently left her. Since that time Mrs. Joyce has tried from time to time to effect a reconciliation, but Mr. Joyce refuses to consider it. Mrs. Joyce is very lonely, wants to share her life with someone else, and yet doesn't want to go against Scripture. She asks: "Does Scripture teach that I cannot remarry without committing adultery?"

Based on the above information, 1 Corinthians 7:12–16 would apply to Mrs. Joyce's situation, and I believe it is scripturally acceptable that she remarry. Some denominations continue to refuse to marry such persons but will give their implicit consent if Mrs. Joyce remarries in another church sanctuary. If we accept the conclusion that either sexual immorality or desertion by an unbelieving spouse is a legitimate basis for biblical divorce and remarriage, it seems that such persons should be allowed the benefit of a wedding within and acceptance by their own church.

### **Situation 2**

Mr. and Mrs. Caldwell, both of whom claim to be Christians, come for counseling after twenty years of marriage, citing many irreconcilable differences. Neither has been unfaithful to the other, but both claim that they have been divorced emotionally for the last five years. It becomes clear that they are essentially asking for your blessing on the dissolution of their marriage.

The scriptural passage most relevant here, if one accepts the premise that the Epistles are in general normative for believers today, would be 1 Corinthians 7:10–11. If the Caldwells are determined to separate and also wish to remain within the guidelines of Scripture, then they have two options available to them: (1) to remain single, or, preferably, (2) to work toward a reconciliation.

### **Situation 3**

Mr. Smith divorced his wife (both were Christians) on illegitimate grounds and has since remarried. His former wife has remained unmarried. He has recently become convinced that what he did was wrong and is concerned about whether Jesus' teachings in the Gospels indicate that he is living in a continuous state of adultery every time he has sexual relations with his second wife.

There are obvious therapeutic issues a counselor would want to deal with in this situation (as in all the others) quite apart from the immediate question at hand. Confining our discussion to this question, however, two major points may be considered.

The Greek word translated "to commit adultery" in Mark 10, verses 11 and 12, is *moichetai*, the third person singular present indicative of *moichaomai*. In Greek the primary importance of tense is not to denote time, but to denote progress, or kind of action (Dana and Mantey 1955, 178). The primary meaning of the present indicative is to denote continuing action. Applied to the word *moichetai* in the Synoptic passages, it indicates that Mr. Smith would be involved in a continuing state of adultery if he continues his present sexual relationship with his second wife.

However, the grammatical issue is not that clear cut. This passage (the identical word is also used in Matthew 5 and 19) may be an example of an *aorist usage of the present tense*. Dana and Mantey explain:

Since the indicative has no distinctive tense for expressing the idea of a present fact without reference to progress, that is, punctiliar (point) action in present time, the present tense must be used to perform this function. The aorist indicative is used to convey this idea with reference to past time. The aorist present sets forth an event as now occurring. (184)

The implication for our present counseling situation is that grammatically it is impossible to say whether the passages in Matthew and Mark are using the present indicative in its normal sense, which would mean that Mr. Smith is involved in continuing adultery, or whether this is an example of an aorist

usage of the present tense, which would indicate that his first sexual relationship with his second wife was adulterous, but that once the previous marital relationship was dissolved, subsequent sexual relationships with his second wife no longer continue to be.

The question then becomes “What constitutes a legitimate dissolution of the first marriage in God’s eyes?” Generally two factors are considered necessary: (1) a legitimate reason for the divorce—either unchastity or desertion, and (2) a legal decree testifying that such dissolution has occurred.

Mr. Smith’s actions with regard to his first wife supply both elements enabling his wife to divorce him, albeit in the reverse of the biblical order. If she wishes to consider him divorced, she may.

If she wishes to retain the marriage, and he had, during this time, only been living with another woman without a formal marriage decree, then his behavior would be considered an act of adultery rather than a second marriage (John 4:18 suggests that the act of sexual intercourse does not, in and of itself, constitute a marital relationship), and he should return to her.

If he has remarried a second time, he cannot avoid sinning against either his first or second wife, probably both. His second marriage is *de facto* existent, even if *de jure* illegitimate. To divorce his second wife would also be to commit the same sin against her that he has committed against his first wife. To refuse to have sexual relations with her would constitute withholding her marital rights from her (1 Cor. 7:1–5). The proper Biblical recourse would be to (1) encourage Mr. Smith to confess his wrongdoings to both God and his former wife, asking their forgiveness, and (2) make sure that his former wife is adequately provided for financially and in whatever other ways are possible, and (3) recognize that his second marriage, while consummated illegitimately, now exists as a full marriage in God’s eyes, and that he should commit himself fully to that marriage.

#### **Situation 4**

Mrs. Ritchie comes for an initial session, appearing quite anxious and upset, and relates the following: “Before I became a Christian, I divorced and remarried on grounds of incompatibility. Now, my first and second husbands and I have all become Christians, and my first husband wants me to remarry him. I’ve talked this over with my second husband, and although we both feel we have a good marriage, he wants me to do whatever God’s will is.”

“I’m terribly confused about what to do. I love them both now, and I want to do God’s will, but I don’t know what that is. I can’t sleep at night, and I think I’m about to go crazy because of being pulled both ways. What should I do?”

Two lines of Biblical thought are relevant here, both of which point to the same conclusion. The first is Deuteronomy 24:1–4, which would indicate that she should remain with her second husband and should not, even if her second husband dies, ever return to her first husband, since this action would represent “an abomination before the Lord.”

However, some have questioned the legitimacy of applying this passage in the Christian era. Murray (1975, 113) argues, for example, that since the permission of verses 1 through 3 has been removed by Christ, then the prohibition of verse 4, which is based on this permission, should also not apply. The counterargument is that Mrs. Ritchie exercised the permission of verses 1–3 even though she should not have, and therefore the prohibition of verse 4 applies. Since this first line of reasoning can be disputed, a second line of Biblical thought may be more definitive.

This second line of argument rests on the same reasoning found in situation 3 (above). Although her second marriage was *de jure* illegitimate at its initiation, it is now *de facto* existent, and a second divorce in order to reconstitute the first marriage would compound rather than lessen the sin. Thus the proper Biblical recourse would be to ask forgiveness for the previous divorce and try to dedicate the present marriage as completely as possible to God.

## Situation 5

Although Mr. and Mrs. Gordon were divorced before they became Christians, since that time both have been converted. Mr. Gordon has fallen in love with another Christian woman and doesn't want to go back to Mrs. Gordon, nor does she want him back. However, Mr. Gordon feels uneasy about remarriage and comes wanting to know what is the scriptural action he should take.

Some Christians feel that, since this marital union was consummated and broken before both were Christians, this faulty union is forgiven at the time of salvation and should no longer be of concern to the two parties.

But this perspective fails to distinguish two important points. Christ's atonement removes the *condemnation* for not having fulfilled our past commitments; it does not remove the responsibility for fulfilling our past promises. The non-Christian who has failed to fulfill a financial commitment is not absolved of that commitment at the moment of his conversion: he is expected to honor that contract, even though it was made while he was a non-Christian. Why should a marriage commitment, which usually involves a promise before God to remain true to one's spouse as long as both shall live, be considered less valid than a financial contract?

If we do accept that Mr. and Mrs. Gordon should try to reconcile the broken relationship if possible, then the most relevant scriptural paradigm for reconciling offenses between two brothers (in this case a brother and a sister) would be Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18. It should be noted that the theme of this section of Scripture is reconciliation, not an attitude of "I've done my part" (see surrounding context – vv. 12–14 and 22–23).

Since reconciliation, if possible, is the goal, the Christian counselor should help Mr. Gordon resolve his resentments and unforgiveness until he genuinely does want reconciliation. At this point he might go to Mrs. Gordon alone and attempt to convince her to work toward reconciliation (v. 15). If this does not prove effective, he should take with him one or two mutual Christian friends, again with the aim of reconciliation (v. 16). If this proves ineffective, Scripture says to take the matter before the church (v. 17a). (A few denominations and individual churches are using this method of attempting to reconcile angry marital partners today.) In our day of huge suburban churches, a cultural equivalent might be to invite the couple to meet before representatives of the church body, such as the deacon board, in a final attempt to encourage the couple to work toward reconciliation.

If this final effort is unsuccessful, Scripture says "let him be to you as an unbeliever or a tax-collector" (v. 17b). Since this person is unwilling to make any attempts toward reconciliation, the unreconciled partner should desist from further attempts in this direction and treat him as the ancient Jews would an unbeliever, that is, make no further effort to enter a relationship with the former partner. In terms of attempted marital reconciliations, this would then make 1 Corinthians 7:12–16 applicable — "If the unbeliever wishes to depart, let him depart. The believer is not bound in this case."

If this conjunction of Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 7 is valid, then the practical implications would be that if Mrs. Gordon resists all attempts toward reconciliation when these are sincerely offered, Mr. Gordon would have fulfilled his responsibilities vis-à-vis the relationship, and his consideration of remarriage at this point would be scripturally approved.

Some might argue that such an approach is hopelessly idealistic and that since Mr. and Mrs. Gordon are divorced and estranged the more prudent course is to recommend premarital counseling for Mr. Gordon in his present relationship. However, such a recommendation overlooks two important points, one theological, the other psychological. The theological point has already been discussed, namely, that Christ's atonement cleanses us from our sin but does not nullify our promises, particularly promises made before God.

The psychological and spiritual point is that in their present state Mr. and Mrs. Gordon are still emotionally in a relationship even though they have a legal paper declaring them divorced. As James Framo, a pioneer of family therapy, has noted: "As long as one's ex-mate is considered the enemy, one is not free, because hate is a relationship" (1978, 102).

The psychological aspect of their one-flesh relationship is still present, and they will carry the effects of their fractured-but-not-dissolved relationship into any new marriage unless they have thoroughly worked through such feelings, as our hypothetical Biblical counselor did with Mr. Gordon. Otherwise the “unfinished business” of the former marriage will constantly be transferred onto his experiences in the new relationship.

God repeatedly urges brothers and sisters to live in harmony, not to harbor grudges, unforgiveness, or resentment, and does not make an exception to this principle in the case of brothers and sisters who are married or who were formerly married. Thus although it would certainly be easier to encourage Mr. Gordon to focus his energies on his new relationship rather than attempt a reconciliation, and would probably be more popular with him, at least initially, I believe that a more biblical and ultimately more thorough and satisfactory therapeutic approach would be to help him work through his feelings toward his first wife, genuinely attempt a reconciliation, and then, if this attempt is unsuccessful, initiate a new marital relationship.

### **Situation 6**

Mr. and Mrs. Baxter are both Christians. During the course of their marriage Mr. Baxter’s affections wandered, and he had an affair. Mrs. Baxter learned of this, felt it was impossible for her to continue to live with him, and sued for divorce. She later remarried. Mr. Baxter asks if he can also remarry.

Scripture does not explicitly speak to the question of the remarriage of the “guilty” partner in a biblical divorce, so no definitive answer is possible on the issue. As we have seen, the biblical use of the concept of divorce meant a complete dissolution of the previous relationship, always with the right to remarry. Thus since Mrs. Baxter dissolved the marital relationship on biblical grounds, it would seem to be no less dissolved for Mr. Baxter than for his former wife.

### **Situation 7**

Your church has asked you to be part of a study committee to do biblical research on what service those persons who have been previously divorced and are now remarried may perform in the ministries of the church. What biblical passages and concepts are relevant for answering this question?

First Timothy 3:2 and 12 and Titus 1:6 state the principle that overseers, elders and deacons are to be “the husband of one wife.” For this reason many believers have concluded that those who for any reason are now divorced and remarried, or those who have never been married, are to be excluded from ministries within the church because they are not “the husband of one wife.”

Although the English translation of these verses is ambiguous, many scholars of Greek agree that the Greek wording does not mean that they have never been married before, but rather that they are not presently bigamous (e.g., Robertson 1931, 5:572; Duty 1967, 140). The person who has remarried following the death of a spouse should certainly not be excluded from service on the basis of these verses (Rom. 7:2–3; 1 Cor. 7:39), nor the person who is not the husband of one wife because he has the gift of celibacy (1 Cor. 7:1–40). Such reasoning would exclude both Christ and Paul from participation in church ministry.

Thus it seems that to understand the phrase *mias gunaikos andra* (literally, a “one-wife man”) as meaning that those who minister in the church must have at least one wife but never have been married previously must be an inaccurate translation because such an interpretation contradicts the clear teachings of the above passages and the examples of both Christ and Paul.

Looking to the context to try to ascertain a more accurate understanding of the phrase, we find that the other qualifications in this list refer to *present character*, not *past history* (Ellisen 1977, 83ff.). The church leader must be above reproach, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, able to teach, gentle, and so on, all of which are present characteristics. Putting the contextual evidence together with that cited in the previous paragraphs, one plausible way of understanding the meaning of these verses is that they require a church leader to be one who, *in the present*, is “faithful to his own wife”(Mounce 1978). The potential

church leader must not be a person of wandering affections, but must be known for his fidelity to his wife or to his celibate lifestyle.

Thus it may not be fair to automatically exclude from consideration for church service those who have been involved in marital failure. In many cases such persons may have been the recipients of an unwanted divorce. Or they have been the initiator of a biblical divorce and need not be excluded from active participation in those ministries for which they are qualified.

Even if persons have been the initiators of an unbiblical divorce in the past, this is not an unpardonable sin. Everyone in the church is a forgiven sinner (1 Cor. 6:9–11). As with other sins, if genuine repentance is evident, the church should minister grace and forgiveness as representatives of Christ. While being the initiator of an unbiblical divorce may exclude a person from certain positions of leadership (probably as pastor, elder or deacon), if sufficient time has elapsed, and the person consistently demonstrates the other qualities of character found in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus, such persons need not automatically be excluded from consideration for other positions of service and ministry.

### **A Few Concluding Thoughts**

**A**s Christian counselors, we cannot avoid taking a position concerning the relationship between God's principles and grace. Even if we do not consciously take a position, our techniques nevertheless reflect such and indeed may even reflect a position that is dissonant with our own more strictly theological position and understanding.

There have been many informal discussions about whether there is a difference between Christian counselors and counselors who happen to be Christians. The difference, if there is one, seems to be in the degree to which one's theological convictions and spiritual relationship with God "inform" one's counseling methodology, goals, and guidelines. One basic consideration is whether being a biblical counselor means primarily being a minister of God's grace, of his principles, or of both.

This paper provides a starting point for discussing how the ministry of God's principles and grace relate to the subject of divorce and remarriage. It reviews the biblical passages devoted to marriage, divorce, and remarriage, and summarizes some of the primary theories about the meaning and application of these passages. It also develops a counseling philosophy regarding the relationship between God's grace and principles, a philosophy with implications not only for divorce and remarriage, but for many other areas as well. If it prompts further discussions of these questions, it will have served its intended purpose.

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