Evangelicals hold three main views on divorce and remarriage (fig. 1).

**Figure 1. Three Main Views on Divorce and Remarriage**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>View</th>
<th>Divorce</th>
<th>Remarriage after Divorce</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Never Initiate Divorce,</td>
<td>Never legitimate (to initiate)</td>
<td>Never legitimate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never Remarry</td>
<td></td>
<td>(as long as one’s former spouse is still alive)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Sometimes Divorce,</td>
<td>Sometimes legitimate (a)</td>
<td>Legitimate when</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never Remarry</td>
<td>Only for sexual immorality or</td>
<td>the divorce is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>physical desertion</td>
<td>legitimate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Sometimes Divorce,</td>
<td>(b) Also for other actions that</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes Remarry</td>
<td>break the marriage covenant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>like physical abuse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

1This article updates what I originally prepared for a meeting with my fellow elders of Bethlehem Baptist Church on July 21–22, 2017, in Minneapolis. I teamed up with my former colleague Jason DeRouchie, who presented what the OT teaches about divorce and remarriage. My article builds on DeRouchie’s unpublished article.

Part of what made my assignment challenging is that I disagree on this issue with John Piper, who faithfully pastored Bethlehem Baptist Church for over thirty years and who is the chancellor of Bethlehem’s church-based school, which is where I teach—Bethlehem College & Seminary. I love and respect John Piper immensely, and I thank God for him. (I recently dedicated a book to him on how to understand and apply the NT!) So I do not enjoy disagreeing with him, especially in the context of the church he shepherded. He read a draft of this article and shared detailed, forthright feedback. I am grateful that he welcomes hearty discussions about what the Bible teaches and that our disagreeing on this issue will not affect the partnership we share in the gospel and Bethlehem’s Elder Affirmation of Faith. After I sent him a draft of this article, he replied, “The things we love, and live for, and would die for, are so great this could not overthrow all those riches.”

Thanks to my wife, Jenni, and to friends who examined a draft of this essay and shared helpful feedback, especially Bryan Blazosky, Craig Blomberg, Jason DeRouchie, Rob Green, Wayne Grudem, Colin Hamer, Bill Heth, David Instone-Brewer, Craig Keener, Matt Klem, Jason Meyer, Jim Newheiser, Joe Rigney, Sam Storms, Mark Strauss, Brian Tabb, and Justin Taylor.
I should qualify figure 1 in three ways:

1. These are three main views. There are other variations.

2. When framing these three views on remarriage, I say “remarriage after divorce” (column 3 in fig. 1) because evangelical academics agree that one may remarry after one’s former spouse dies (Rom 7:2; 1 Cor 7:39). The debate is whether it is ever legitimate to remarry after divorce. According to views 1 and 2 in figure 1, only death can nullify a marriage covenant.

3. I could add a fourth view: Divorce is almost always legitimate, and remarriage after divorce is almost always legitimate. I am not including it because I am not aware of evangelical academics who support it, but (unfortunately, I think) it is the functional view of many professing evangelicals.

It may be helpful to highlight some proponents of the three views in figure 1:

**View 1.** The most influential evangelical proponent of the first view (never initiate divorce, never remarry) is John Piper.²

**View 2.** The most influential evangelical proponent of the second view (sometimes divorce, never remarry) used to be Bill Heth but is now probably Gordon Wenham.³

---


View 3. Nearly all evangelical academics hold a version of the third view (sometimes divorce, sometimes remarry). Bill Heth calls it the “majority” view—a label that occurs repeatedly in the tables below. He calls the first and second views the “minority” view. I hold the third view.

Among those who hold the third view, there are two main views:

1. Divorce is legitimate only for sexual immorality or physical desertion.

2. Others (including me) hold that what constitutes grounds for a legitimate divorce is not limited to only sexual immorality or physical desertion but also includes other actions that break the marriage covenant such as physical abuse.

Some describe their view as holding to only two grounds for divorce (sexual immorality and desertion) but then (sometimes tentatively) define desertion essentially as breaking the marriage covenant, so they include actions such as physical abuse or material neglect. Some who hold that there are grounds for divorce beyond sexual immorality and physical desertion include more subjective grounds such as a person’s failing to love their spouse with sufficient emotional support. I think the grounds are more

---


Heth, “Jesus on Divorce,” 5–12.


objective than that. But even when the grounds are more objective (e.g., when one spouse is physically abusing the other), a church’s elders must ask God for wisdom as they consider each situation on a case-by-case basis.

The rest of this essay attempts to concisely exegete all the texts in the NT that directly address divorce and remarriage. But first, three introductory notes:

1. The best way I know how to concisely exegete a passage is to phrase it, so I include a phrase diagram of each passage before commenting on it.  

2. After the phrase diagrams in each section, I include Bill Heth’s table that contrasts the majority view (view 3 in fig. 1) and minority view (views 1–2 in fig. 1). Heth concisely highlights the major exegetical and theological differences.

3. This is a polemical essay. Instead of focusing on the main idea in each passage (e.g., how an expositional sermon would), I focus on exegeting each passage with reference to the debate regarding divorce and remarriage. (The main idea of the passages is not that God sometimes permits divorce and remarriage!) And while I care deeply about how this applies to practical and pastoral issues, I focus on principles. There are too many types of situations to try to address them all here specifically.


A phrase diagram is a type of an argument diagram, which is a figure that graphically discerns and displays a text’s logical flow of thought by dividing up the text into propositions and phrases and then noting logical relationships between them. A phrase diagram indents clauses and phrases above or below what they modify and adds labels that explain how the propositions and phrases logically relate. The below phrase diagrams are in English, but I first phrased the Greek text and then mirrored that in the ESV as much as possible. For an introduction to phrasing, see ch. 5 in Andrew David Naselli, How to Understand and Apply the New Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017), 121–61. I prepared all of the below phrase diagrams using www.Biblearc.com.

1. MATTHEW 5:31–32 AND 19:3–12

Figure 2. Phrase Diagram of Matthew 5:31–32

Figure 3. Phrase Diagram of Matthew 19:3–12

Scripture quotations are from the ESV unless otherwise noted.
Figure 4. Heth on the Majority vs. Minority Views on Matthew 5:32 and 19:3–12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Majority View</th>
<th>Minority View</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The exception, applied in a legal way, qualifies Jesus’ prophetic pronouncement (i.e., a wisdom saying that should be read as a prophetic and somewhat hyperbolic summons to an ideal like the preceding sayings about anger and lust). The exception reflects the language of Deut 24:1 and identifies a valid divorce. For first-century Jewish readers, a valid divorce by definition included the right to remarry.</td>
<td>This saying employs a legal ordinance form similar to OT casuistic law (cf. Luke 16:18a). This antithesis cannot be read in light of the first two. Jesus sets before the disciples a standard (as opposed to an ideal) that he wants them to keep. The exception restricts the statement “causes her to commit adultery.” It is tautological: if one’s wife has already committed adultery, then the husband who divorces her does not make her commit adultery. She has made herself one [i.e., an adulteress] already. The question of freedom to remarry after a lawful divorce is not addressed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Matt 5:32 | Matthew sees Jesus as explaining the meaning of the law. Deuteronomy’s “some indecency” = Matthew’s “sexual immorality.” In the OT, divorce for “some indecency” identified a legally valid divorce. Valid divorces always included the right to remarry. Jesus demotes Moses’ concession in Deuteronomy and subordinates it to Genesis, but valid divorces are God’s permissive will for some innocent victims of divorce. | Jesus opposes the way the Pharisees employed Deut 24:1 and contrasts divorce with God’s will “from the beginning.” Jesus would neither interpret nor abrogate something Moses never legislated. Jesus prohibited what Moses permitted; he did not permit what Moses prohibited. So Jesus neither divinely interprets nor abrogates Deut 24:1. It was a concession to human sinfulness in the OT era and contrary to God’s will all along. |

| Jesus’ Orientation toward Deut 24:1 in Matt 19/Mark 10 | Exceptions are precisely exceptions. That the clause modifies both the divorce action and the remarriage action is determined more by the concept of justifiable divorce than by Greek grammar. The clause, either spoken by Jesus himself (Carson, Blomberg) or supplied by Matthew under the Spirit’s inspiration (Stein, Keener, Hawthorne), clearly justifies divorce for immorality and permits remarriage. True, marriage must not be dissolved. But if dissolved by persistent sexual |
| | The placement of the clause after “divorces” but before “and remarries” argues that Jesus permitted divorce for marital unfaithfulness but not also remarriage. In a culture that demanded the wife be divorced for immorality, the exception clause relieves the man of the responsibility for the divorce and its consequences. Understands Matthew’s exception in light of the unqualified form of Jesus’ sayings in Mark, Luke, and Paul (i.e., remarriage after any divorce results in adultery) and the Gen |

---

12Heth, “Jesus on Divorce,” 9–11. (This table and the others like it below are quoting Heth.)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Majority View</th>
<th>Minority View</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| immorality, the marriage covenant is violated. | 2.24 “kinship” nature of the marriage relationship.  

### Meaning of “divorce” (*apolyo*)

Valid divorces always included the right to remarry. Both Jewish and Roman cultural contexts permitted, ye even required, divorce for adultery and remarriage could naturally follow. Thus Matthew’s readers would assume that the divorce Jesus permits for immorality must be the same kind of divorce that Jesus’ contemporaries practiced: it included the right to remarry. If it meant separation or legal divorce only, without the right to remarry, then Matthew’s readers would not have readily recognized this semantic shift without further explanation.

Evidently the bill of divorce does not dissolve the marriage since Jesus states that remarriage amounts to adultery (Matt 5:32b; 19:9b). Matthew’s Jesus rejects the Pharisees’ proof-text for their “remarriage-assumed” view (Deut 24:1) and instead appeals to Gen 2:24 (with its kinship understanding of marriage) as the basis for his views. Three factors suggest that Jesus’ reference to “divorce” does not sanction remarriage: (1) the “one flesh” kinship concept of marriage; (2) the probably authentic longer reading of Matt 19:9 (“and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery” [cf. Matt 5:32b]); and (3) Jesus’ response to the disciples’ objection in vv. 10–12.

### Matt 19:10–12 & the “eunuch saying”

Even with the exception, Jesus’ position is more daunting than Shammai’s. “This saying” (v. 11) refers to the disciples’ objection in v. 10 that “it is better not to marry.” Jesus recognizes that God enables some to remain celibate for the sake of advancing the claims and interests of God’s kingdom (cf. 1 Cor 7:7, 25–38).

“This saying” (v. 11) refers to Jesus’ difficult word against divorce and remarriage in v. 9. “Those to whom it is given” are the faithful disciples (as opposed to Pharisees and outsiders [cf. 13:11–12]) that Jesus encourages (v. 12) to embrace his difficult word that they should remain single after divorce even for sexual immorality.

### How do Jesus & Shammai differ?

Jesus is more radical than Shammai. Jewish (and Roman) law mandated divorce for sexual immorality, but Jesus only permits it. This means that broken marriages may still be restored.

Jesus is much more radical than Shammai. Shammai mandated divorce for sexual immorality, but Jesus prohibits most divorces and remarriage after divorce for *porneia* (i.e., adultery, bestiality, incest, sodomy, homosexuality, etc.).

#### 1.1. Jesus Permits but Does Not Require Divorce for *Porneia*

In Matthew 5:31–32 and 19:3–12, Jesus addresses what was a contemporary controversy—namely, how Jewish teachers at the time

---

13That is not how John Piper argues. See §1.3.1 below.
understood “some indecency” in Deuteronomy 24:1. (“Some indecency” translates the Hebrew phrase תַוְרֶע רָבָד—which a more form-based translation could render “nakedness of a thing.”) What the Pharisees ask in Matthew 19:3 confirms that the issue regarded no-fault divorce: “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause [κατὰ πᾶσαν αἰτίαν]?”—or as the NIV nicely puts it, “for any and every reason?” At that time the Jews debated among themselves which of two rabbis (both Pharisees) to follow on divorce—Shammai (c. 50 BC–AD 30) or Hillel (c. 110–10 BC).  

- **Shammai’s view (a minority Jewish view at the time).** If a wife commits πορνεία, then the husband must divorce his wife and may remarry. “The Shammaite school (who disagreed with the Hillelites on hundreds of other issues) said that ‘a cause of indecency’ [Deut 24:1] was a single phrase with a single meaning: it referred to ‘nothing except indecency’ (i.e., adultery).”

- **Hillel’s view (the majority Jewish view at the time).** In addition to Shammai’s view, a husband may divorce for “any cause” (Matt 19:3) and may remarry. “The Hillelite school argued that the phrase ‘a cause of indecency’ (Deut 24:1) referred to two grounds for divorce: ‘indecency’ (i.e., adultery) and ‘a cause,’ which they interpreted as ‘any cause.’” This view interprets “some indecency” in Deuteronomy 24:1 so broadly that the grounds for divorce could be as carnal as the husband’s finding a better-looking woman or as trivial as the wife’s burning a meal.

Both views required divorce for πορνεία and permitted remarriage. Among the Jews, “Everyone agreed that adultery and other similarly weighty offenses—e.g., abuse, cruelty, humiliation, persistent refusal to provide requisite food or clothing, willful conjugal or emotional neglect (cf. Exod 21:10–11)—were clear cause for divorce and required the punishment of the offending party.”

What Jesus teaches in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 is stricter than both Shammai and Hillel, which is why his disciples reply in 19:10, “It is...”

---


17Ibid.

18The Pharisee Josephus, who was himself divorced, held Hillel’s view (Ant 4.253).

better not to marry”.

Both Shammai and Hillel required divorce for πορνεία, but Jesus only permits it. Thus, when a spouse has a ground for divorce, that does not mean that they must divorce. To the contrary, since marriage is a sacred union, a couple should do everything they can to avoid separating that union. Andreas Köstenberger summarizes how Jesus differs from Shammai and Hillel (see fig. 5):

Figure 5. Differences of Views between the Schools of Shammai and Hillel and Jesus concerning Divorce

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Differences of Views</th>
<th>Shammai</th>
<th>Hillel</th>
<th>Jesus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OT background texts</td>
<td>Deut 24:1–4</td>
<td>Deut 24:1–4</td>
<td>Gen 1:27; 2:24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for marriage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning of πορνεία</td>
<td>Immodest behavior or sexual</td>
<td>Any instance where a wife did</td>
<td>Immoral behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>immorality</td>
<td>something displeasing to her</td>
<td>on the part of the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>husband</td>
<td>wife, including,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>but not restricted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>to, adultery (major-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ity view)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorce for πορνεία</td>
<td>Required</td>
<td>Required</td>
<td>Permitted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The application</td>
<td>Men only</td>
<td>Men only</td>
<td>Both men and women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of the standard</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for divorce and</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>remarriage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

20Heth, “Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion,” 72: “The disciples, like nearly everyone else at the time, would have held to the Hillelite position, not the Shammaite position. They had just heard Jesus say that Hillelites ‘any cause’ divorces were illegitimate and that whoever remarries after such an invalid divorce commits adultery! This would have been shocking to first-century Jews, suggesting that Jesus’ view is stricter than Shammai’s—the radical love of God does unexpected things, like forgiving the seemingly unforgivable—and adequately explains the disciples’ incredulous reaction in Matthew 19:10 to Jesus’ saying in verse 9.”

21Contra William R. G. Loader, “Did Adultery Mandate Divorce? A Reassessment of Jesus’ Divorce Logia,” New Testament Studies 61 (2015): 67–78. John R. W. Stott is more persuasive (“The Biblical Teaching on Divorce,” Churchman 85 [1971]: 170): “Divorce for immorality is permissible, not mandatory. Jesus did not teach that the innocent party must divorce an unfaithful partner, still less that sexual unfaithfulness ipso facto dissolves the marriage. He did not even encourage divorce for unfaithfulness. His whole emphasis was on the permanence of marriage and on the inadmissibility of divorce and remarriage. He added the exceptive clause to indicate that divorce and remarriage because of sexual infidelity is alone not tantamount to adultery. His purpose was not to encourage divorce for this reason, but to forbid it for every other reason.” See also MacArthur, Divorce Dilemma, 22.

22This table is by Andreas J. Köstenberger, with David W. Jones, God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 229.
I.2. Remarriage Is Always Legitimate When the Divorce Was Legitimate

Both Shammai and Hillel permitted remarriage, as did all known Jewish and Greco-Roman views at that time. If Jesus intended to forbid remarriage, then it is highly likely he would have forbidden it explicitly without any exceptions because everyone—Jew and Gentile—assumed that remarriage is legitimate when the divorce is legitimate. Divorce in the Jewish and Greco-Roman historical-cultural contexts always included the right to remarry. The standard wording on rabbinic divorce certificates, explains Instone-Brewer, was

“You are allowed to marry any man you wish.” This wording can be traced through Jewish divorce certificates and marriage certificates that have survived from as far back as the fifth century B.C.E., and it can then be traced through Babylonian marriage certificates and law codes back as far as the fourteenth century B.C.E.

This historical-cultural context is one of the main factors that convinced Heth to change from view 2 (sometimes divorce, never remarriage) to view 3 (sometimes divorce, sometimes remarriage—see fig. 1). This is not an instance of some alleged historical-cultural context controversially saying the opposite of what the texts transparently say and eliminating those texts. Instead, this historical-cultural context illuminates those texts.

---


25 Instone-Brewer, Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible, 29.

26 See the section “‘Divorce’ in the First Century Was Synonymous with the Right to Remarry,” in Heth, “Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion,” 67–68. Heth argues, “Simple separation without the possibility of remarriage was unheard-of in both Jewish and Roman marriage law. Though this became the traditional Catholic view of Jesus’ teaching and is a view also held by a minority of evangelicals, there were, in fact, no religious sects in the first century that prohibited remarriage after divorce. The whole purpose of obtaining a divorce was to be freed up to remarry. This is what the Jewish bill of divorce made abundantly clear: ‘Behold, you are free to marry any man’ (67).

1.3. Πορνεία = Sexual Immorality (Matt 5:32; 19:9)

Παρακτός λόγου πορνείας ("except on the ground of sexual immorality" [5:32]) and μὴ ἐπὶ πορνεία ("except for sexual immorality" [19:9]) indicate a legitimate ground for divorce. Πορνεία commonly referred to sexual immorality in general—that is, any kind of immoral sex.28 R. T. France translates πορνεία in this context as "sexual unfaithfulness."29 Don Carson refers to πορνεία as "marital unfaithfulness," which is "a larger category than adultery, and includes homosexuality and all other sexual indecency."30 "It is an inclusive term which refers to all sexual irregularity. For a married couple, it involves sexual marital unfaithfulness."31

1.3.1. Πορνεία Does Not Refer Exclusively to Premarital Sex in Betrothal

In the context of a statement about marriage, πορνεία refers primarily to adultery. John Piper argues that we should read πορνεία in Matthew 5:32 like this: “Whoever divorces his wife—not including, of course, the case of fornication [πορνεία] between betrothed couples—and marries another, commits adultery.”32 In other words, in the exception

---

28Instone-Brewer, "Divorce," 215: "The term porneia and its cognates are used in the NT to refer to visiting a prostitute (1 Cor 6:13–15, 18), incest (1 Cor 5:1), general sexual sin by a married person (1 Cor 7:2), use of cultic prostitutes (Rev 2:20–21) and the sin of the 'whore of Babylon' (Rev 17:2, 4; 18:3, 19:2). The most common meaning is general 'sexual immorality' (e.g., Acts 15:20; Eph 5:3; Col 3:5). This family of words is used outside the NT with the same wide range of meanings." See also Thomas R. Edgar, "Divorce and Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion," in Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views, ed. H. Wayne House, Spectrum Multiview Books (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 162–87; Keener, And Marries Another, 28–33; MacArthur, Divorce Dilemma, 23–24, 47–48.


30D A Carson, God with Us: Themes from Matthew (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1985), 118.


clauses in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, πορνεία refers to premarital sex when a person is betrothed according to the first-century Jewish custom (i.e., what Joseph thought Mary was guilty of).

Piper’s view has at least three problems:

1. It seems to commit the exegetical fallacy of appealing to unknown or unlikely meanings. Piper’s argument hinges on Matthew’s using πορνεία in a peculiar way that differs from its standard usage in the rest of the NT and other contemporaneous literature. “If anything, porneia should mean more than adulterous infidelity.”

2. Πορνεία refers to a sin that occurs in the context of marriage (not just betrothal) because the context of Matthew 19:3–12 is divorce and remarriage. More specifically, the context of Matthew 19:3–12 concerns marriage and not betrothal.

3. The context of Matthew 19:3–12 concerns the first-century Jewish controversy regarding no-fault divorce, and everyone assumed that adultery is a ground for divorce (see §1.1).

Bill Heth, who formerly championed the “sometimes divorce, never remarriage” view (see fig. 1), later conceded that his arguments were unconvincing. He highlights a principle that applies to the betrothal

---


35In an email to the author on February 22, 2018 (quoted with permission), John Piper argues that one may translate the phrases παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας (Matt 5:32) and µὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ (Matt 19:9) as “excluding [the case of] fornication,” which he paraphrases, “leaving out of account the case of sexual unfaithfulness during, say, betrothal.” Thus, the exception clauses are Jesus’ way of saying, “I am not talking about sexual sin that involves a kind of ‘divorce’ as, for example, in Matt 1:19—‘Joseph resolved to divorce her quietly.’” So when someone objects to Piper’s view that Matt 5:32 and 19:19 are dealing with marriage and not betrothal or any other kind of non-marital separation, Piper responds that that is the very point of the exception clauses. Piper argues that the presence of Matt 1:19 in the Gospel according to Matthew shows that the point is not gratuitous.

In an email to the author on July 18, 2017 (quoted with permission), Bill Heth argues, “The Mishnah records what may be an exaggerated example of Hillel’s view illustrating the husband’s total freedom in the matter of divorce when it says the husband can divorce ‘Even if she spoiled his dish’ (Gittin 9:10). Yet no betrothed woman would be fixing her ‘husband’ a meal in an as-yet-to-be-consummated marriage, for they are not living together. This larger rabbinic debate concerned married couples in general, not some subset situation like betrothal. The only way the betrothal view will work is if we assume the exception clause refers to that situation against contextual evidence that suggests marriage in general.”

36In an email to the author on February 22, 2018 (quoted with permission), John Piper responds that everyone except Jesus assumed that adultery is a ground for divorce. Piper argues that Jesus was radically out of step with his day.
view of πορνεία: “I might also add from my own experience that holding fast to one or two inaccurate concepts means that several others will have to be misconstrued in order to bring coherence to the whole.”

Defining πορνεία as premarital sex in betrothal is holding fast to an inaccurate concept that skews one’s overall position on divorce and remarriage.

1.3.2. Πορνεία Is Not Limited to Immoral Sexual Intercourse

In Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, πορνεία refers primarily to physical adultery, but there are not sufficient lexical grounds for concluding that πορνεία must always refer only to immoral sexual intercourse. Further, there are theological grounds for not limiting πορνεία to immoral sexual intercourse.

Lexically, πορνεία is the broadest term to describe sexual sin. For example, “In the Pauline writings the word group [πορνεύω, πορνεία, πόρνη, πόρνος, ἐκπορνεύω] evidently denotes any kind of illegitimate sexual activity.”

Theologically, there is a figurative aspect of πορνεία: “There are numerous passages where, in imitation of the Heb., πορνεύω and its cognates are used fig. of unfaithfulness to God, who is portrayed as a husband to Israel.... It is thus not primarily the sexual intercourse that shocks the prophets, but the absolute lack of personal faithfulness.”

Consequently, πορνεία does not refer only to immoral sexual intercourse. It can also refer to sexual sins that do not involve intercourse. For example, although the NT authors who use the word πορνεία obviously were not thinking of being addicted to internet pornography, by implication πορνεία can apply to that—similar to how “Do not get drunk with wine” (Eph 5:18) also implies that you should not get drunk “with beer, whiskey, rum, vodka, or champagne.” Indulging in pornography is a type of sexual immorality that could be grounds for divorce.

Churches and their elders should deal with such situations on
a case-by-case basis. 42

1.4. Jesus Does Not Qualify Πορνεία with the Words Repeated or Unrepentant

In 2009 Bethlehem Baptist Church’s elders articulated this position: ‘Divorce may be permitted when a spouse decisively and physically deserts the relationship; commits repeated, unrepentant adultery; or is guilty of protracted, unrepentant life-endangerment.’ 43 I agree with that sentence, but I think it could wrongly imply that divorce is illegitimate in certain instances when it is biblically permissible. In particular, there is insufficient scriptural warrant to require that divorce is legitimate only when the adultery is repeated and unrepentant.

The only possible scriptural warrant I am aware of is assuming that ‘hardness of heart’ in Matthew 19:8 and Mark 10:5 refers to Jeremiah 3 and 4:4. 44 That is possible but difficult to prove, and such a tenuous connection is insufficient for narrowing what constitutes grounds for divorce.


This may raise practical questions about how to discern when a spouse’s porneia apart from sexual intercourse may be a ground for divorce. It is a wisdom issue—just like excommunication for such behavior is a wisdom issue. For example, a professing Christian man who unrepentantly refuses to stop indulging in pornography and visiting strip clubs is in a different category than a professing Christian man who browses a sports website and accidentally sees a pornographic image and does not immediately turn away but later repents. Just like churches do not ordinarily excommunicate a church member for indulging in pornography (though they may), indulging in pornography should not ordinarily be the sole ground for divorce (though it could be). (See the final paragraph in §1.4.)

43 Bethlehem Relational Commitments (Minneapolis: Bethlehem Baptist Church, October 6, 2009).

44 Instone-Brewer, Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible, 181; “Divorce is allowable—if there is a stubborn refusal to stop committing adultery. It is not certain that Jesus was teaching this…. It is based on the assumption that ‘hardness of heart’ is a reference to Jeremiah 4:4 and to chapter 3, for which 4:4 acts as a summary.”
That reading also does not harmonize with how the Gospel of Matthew portrays Joseph’s planning to divorce Mary (Matt 1:19). Martin Luther argues,

No one should be compelled to take back a public prostitute or an adulterer if he does not want to do so or is so disgusted that he cannot do so. We read (Matt. 1:19) that although Joseph was a pious man, he was not willing to take Mary, his betrothed wife, when he saw that she was pregnant; and he is praised for being “resolved to divorce her quietly” instead of registering a complaint against her and having her executed, as he had a right to do.45

When a spouse commits πορνεία and genuinely repents and asks the spouse they sinned against to forgive them, the sinned-against spouse must forgive the repentant spouse. Ideally that couple will not divorce, and the sinned-against spouse will pursue the repentant spouse with the same unselfish loyal love with which (a) Hosea loved Gomer the whore, (b) Yahweh loved Israel the whore, and (c) Jesus loves the church. But Jesus does not say πορνεία must happen repeatedly in order for it to qualify as a ground for divorce. Nor does Jesus say that the spouse guilty of πορνεία must be unrepentant in order for their action to qualify as a ground for divorce. Nor does Jesus say that the adulterous spouse is genuinely repentant.) Depending on the circumstances, divorce may be the unfortunate consequence of a spouse’s (even repentant) covenant-breaking sin. I agree with Newheiser:

I do not believe the innocent spouse can be compelled (e.g., under the threat of church discipline) not to exercise the right to divorce on the grounds of adultery, even if the adulterer claims to be repentant. Wronged spouses who refuse to fully forgive usually act this way because they are not convinced that the repentance is genuine (e.g., this has happened on multiple occasions). In addition, the sin might have been so serious (e.g., rape, molesting a child) that they do not wish to pursue reconciliation. Or they may have decided that they no longer wish to remain married to a person who has callously broken the covenant or to live with the consequences of the sin (e.g., a sexually transmitted disease). Sometimes forgiven sin still has consequences (Gal. 6:6–7). The consequence could be the end of a marriage. Wronged spouses, however, must guard their hearts. Bitterness and hatred are always sinful (Eph. 4:31–32).46

If πορνεία does not have to be repeated and unrepentant in order to be a ground for divorce and if πορνεία is not limited to immoral sexual intercourse (see §1.3.2), does that mean that a spouse’s indulging

45Martin Luther, The Sermon on the Mount (Sermons) and the Magnificat, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Luther’s Works 21 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), 96–97.

in pornography one time is a ground for divorce? No. It is important to
distinguish different senses of adultery. (1) Physical adultery is having
sexual intercourse with someone other than your spouse. That is what
πορνεία primarily refers to in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9. (2) Metaphorical
adultery (see the Blomberg quote in §1.9) includes other sexual sins
that break the marriage covenant because of their egregious nature. Just
like there is a difference between anger and murder, there is a difference
between a single lustful glance and physical adultery. For the conse-
quences of non-physical (metaphorical) adultery to be equal to the con-
sequences of physical adultery, the non-physical adultery must be
egregious. That is where qualifiers like repeated and unrepentant are
fitting. For example, a church treats an angry man differently than a
convicted murderer. A church is more likely to excommunicate an angry
man only after multiple unrepentant expressions of anger.

1.5. ποιεῖ αὐτὴν µοιχευθῆναι = Makes Her
the Victim of Adultery (Matt 5:32)

The ESV translates ποιεῖ αὐτὴν µοιχευθῆναι (5:32) as “makes her
commit adultery.” But the NIV is probably more accurate here: “makes
her the victim of adultery.” The voice of µοιχευθῆναι is passive. Craig
Blomberg, a member of the NIV Committee on Bible Translation,
explains,

In English we don’t say “to be adulterated,” at least not if we
mean that someone else has committed adultery against us. [R. T.] France has searched in vain for any examples of a deponent passive
with this verb, inside or outside of the New Testament, in ancient
Greek, i.e., in a context in which the passive form could be translated
actively. Modern grammatically tagged databases with all known an-
cient Greek texts digitized make such searches possible for the first
time in history. So that rules out the common “makes her commit
adultery.”

The updated NIV nicely captures the passive sense with its
“makes her the victim of adultery.” It is also the first major English
translation to do so.

One confirming historical argument is as follows: While many
women whose husbands divorced them in the ancient Roman world
sought to remarry, not all did. So in what sense did those who re-
mained single commit adultery on the common rendering of this
verse? But men who initiated divorce in the ancient Roman world did
so for one reason only—to legally remarry another woman. It makes
sense, therefore, to say that the wife left behind has been made the vic-
tim of adultery. It also makes sense of the shift in the next clause to
the demonstrably deponent-like middle form moichatai—“and anyone
who marries a divorced woman commits adultery,” which should be
treated as equivalent to an active voice. 47

47Craig L. Blomberg, “Victims of Adultery,” Denver Seminary, 7 July 2011,
The translation “makes her commit adultery” leads some to conclude that the non-adulterous spouse is guilty of adultery if they remarry. But if the translation “makes her the victim of adultery” is correct (and I think it is), then that removes another argument for the “never remarriage” views (views 1 and 2 in fig. 1).

### 1.6. The Exception Clauses Also Qualify Marrying a Divorced Person (Matt 5:32; 19:9)

The exception clause in 5:32c (see fig. 2 above) qualifies not only “everyone who divorces his wife” (5:32b) but also by implication qualifies “whoever marries a divorced woman” (5:32e). That is, “whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery” except if that woman divorced legitimately.

The same is true for the exception clause in 19:9c (see fig. 3 above). It qualifies not only “whoever divorces his wife (19:9b) but also “whoever...marries another” (19:9d). That is, “whoever...marries another commits adultery” except if that person divorced legitimately. Carson paraphrases 19:9, “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries someone else commits adultery—unless his wife has been unfaithful.”

### 1.7. Divorce Is Not What God Originally Intended (Matt 19:4–6)

God originally intended for marriage to be inseparable and lifelong (19:4–6; citing Gen 1:27; 2:24; also Mark 10:5–9). All three views in figure 1 agree here. Jesus’s main point is that you should not divorce your spouse because God originally intended for marriage to be permanent.

### 1.8. A Divorced Couple Is No Longer Married in God’s Eyes

Jesus says in Luke 16:18, “Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.” Piper infers, “Evidently the reason a second marriage is called adultery is because the first one is considered to still be valid.” I agree with DeYoung:

> Marriage is not indissoluble. This means marriage really can end.

---


50Piper, What Jesus Demands from the World, 6:738.
Now, usually they shouldn’t. But they can. The covenant can be severed. When Jesus says, “What God has joined together, let no man separate” he implies that the couple can be separated. I mention this because sometimes people will argue against remarriage saying, “She’s still married in God’s eyes.” I don’t think that’s the right way to talk about the situation. Divorced couples are divorced. They are not married in God’s eyes. The question is whether they should still be married and hence, they ought not to be with another man or woman.

A divorced couple—whether the divorce was legitimate or not—is no longer married in God’s eyes. Jesus’s reply to the woman at the well illustrates this. He does not say, “You have five husbands.” He says, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true” (John 4:17b–18, emphasis added).

1.9. Remarriage Is Illegitimate When the Divorce Is Illegitimate (Matt 19:9)

As a general rule, it is sinful for a person who illegitimately divorced to remarry. A person who illegitimately divorced their spouse should repent of their sinful divorce. If that person is currently remarried (i.e., that person married someone else after illegitimately divorcing their spouse), then they should stay as they are (which is the main idea in 1 Cor 7—see §4.1).53

The principle that “remarriage is illegitimate when the divorce is illegitimate” is a general rule because there are circumstances for which remarriage may be feasible. If a person who illegitimately divorced their spouse is unmarried and repentant and if their former spouse has remarried, may that person marry someone else? Jesus and the rest of the NT do not directly answer that question, and I do not think a church

---


52See Newheiser, Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage, 230–34.

53DeYoung, “A Sermon on Divorce and Remarriage”: “Does this mean those Christians have gotten away with sin? Not at all. We are never better off for having sinned. There are consequences in our relationships. There may be consequences in your spiritual life. And if you look back at your sinful divorce and remarriage and think ‘Wow, I’m glad I didn’t know all this ten years ago,’ that is a dreadful sign that something is very wrong in your heart. If the Spirit is at work, you will not think, ‘Phew, I really got away with one here.’ Instead you will think, ‘O Lord, I am so sorry. I was ignorant of the Scriptures. I was blind to my own sin. I have broken your law and sullied the name of Christ. Please forgive me. Have mercy on us Lord.’ And you’ll not only ask for the Lord’s forgiveness, you’ll make things right with your ex-spouse, with your kids, your parents, your in-laws—you’ll make amends and ask for forgiveness with anyone else you hurt by breaking your marriage vows.”
should excommunicate a member for remarrying in such a situation.\textsuperscript{54}

\textbf{1.10. Πορνεία Is a Ground for Divorce Because It Breaks the Marriage Covenant}

Jesus explains that Moses permitted divorce because the Israelites had hard hearts—that is, they idolatrously rebelled against God (Matt 19:8; also Mark 10:5). The Israelites were spiritual whores. That is why God divorced Israel: “I had sent her away with a decree of divorce” (Jer 3:8; see 3:6–9; cf. Isa 50:1). And “if the Lord can divorce his adulterous spouse, then divorce must not always be wrong.”\textsuperscript{55} Πορνεία is a ground for divorce because it breaks the marriage covenant to leave and cleave and to become one flesh (Gen 2:24).\textsuperscript{56} Violating the marriage covenant is a ground for divorce because it breaks the marriage covenant to leave and cleave and to become one flesh (Gen 2:24).

\textsuperscript{54}John MacArthur’s position seems wise: “When a person sins as an unbeliever and those sins are responsible for the destruction of a marriage, if that person later becomes a Christian, he or she should first do everything possible to make restitution and seek forgiveness from all who were wronged by the sin, starting with the aggrieved spouse. If both partners are still unmarried and both are now believers, it might well be possible to restore the marriage. In such a case, the person should seek reconciliation and restoration of the marriage as part of the duty of making restitution. But where restoration of the marriage is impossible; or in cases where remarriage would involve an unequal yoke with an unbeliever; or if there is some other factor that would compound the sin that caused the divorce in the first place—as long as all the sins that led to the dissolution of the marriage have been abandoned and forgiven, I see no reason to forbid the repentant person from remarrying. But what if the guilty party was already a professing believer when the sin that caused the divorce occurred?... As a pastor, I would not consent to remarry a person who was unfaithful to a previous spouse while professing faith in Christ. If that person’s original profession of faith meant so little, how is it possible to know whether a subsequent profession of repentance is legitimate? At the same time, I’m not prepared to state dogmatically that such a person can never, under any circumstances, remarry. Since Scripture is silent on the matter, I wouldn’t want to place limits on the grace and mercy of God where He himself does not explicitly draw such boundaries” (\textit{Divorce Dilemma}, 27–28).

\textsuperscript{55}DeYoung, “A Sermon on Divorce and Remarriage.” Newheiser, \textit{Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage}, 211, n. 3: “Those advocating the permanence position try to answer by pointing out that the Lord’s divorce of Israel is metaphorical.... Yet the metaphor is meaningful because of its correspondence to literal marriage. Additionally, those holding the permanence position do not hesitate to use the metaphor when it seems to suit their purpose (e.g., arguing for their position from the Lord’s faithfulness to his people).”

covenant breaks it and gives the non-adulterous spouse the right to formally nullify it (though the non-adulterous spouse may choose not to nullify it—as Yahweh does with adulterous Judah in Jer 3).

Heth used to defend the minority view, but what was decisive for changing his mind was better understanding that covenants are not indissoluble: “The Genesis 2:24 ‘one flesh’ relationship that results from the covenant of marriage ratified by sexual consummation is not an indissoluble union, just one that should preeminently not be dissolved, and a sexual sin like adultery is the preeminent violation of the marriage covenant.”

2. MARK 10:2–12 AND LUKE 16:18


57Heth, “Jesus on Divorce,” 19.
**Figure 8. Heth on the Majority vs. Minority Views on Mark 10:11–12 and Luke 16:18**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Majority View</th>
<th>Minority View</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mark 10:10–12</strong></td>
<td>Jesus, a prophetic wisdom teacher, uses rhetorical overstatement to drive home a general point to hostile questioners. Thus Mark simply records Jesus’ emphatically stated divorce saying without intending to specify possible exceptions. Jesus cannot be construed as teaching an “exceptionless absolute” based on Mark because both Matthew (5:32; 19:9) and Paul (1 Cor 7:15) qualify Jesus’ prohibition of remarriage after divorce. Alternatively, Jesus’ sayings should be understood as generalizations that admit of exceptions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Luke 16:18</strong></td>
<td>This is Luke’s one example of radicalizing the law, and the way it is stated admits of no exceptions. The casuistic form is employed for emphasis and exaggeration: it presents an ideal like Jesus’s sayings in Mark 10:11–12. Jesus’ concern is not with legal definitions but with moral exhortation. Alternatively, Luke uses this saying as an allegorical statement on Jesus’ non-abolition of the Law (v. 17)—the person who annuls part of the Law in favor of some other practice is like a man divorcing his wife in favor of another woman. Provides no help in determining Jesus’ literal views on divorce and remarriage.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

58Ibid., 8.
These passages are similar to Matthew 5 and 19, but they do not include the exception clauses that appear in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9. Why? Because in its historical-cultural context, the phrase “whoever divorces his wife” (Mark 10:11; Luke 16:18) assumes an exception that Jews at the time shared regarding the divorce debate: whoever divorces his wife for any cause. Jews were debating whether a husband could divorce his wife if she burned his dinner. Jesus emphatically rejects divorcing for trivial reasons. And what Jesus says in Mark 10:11 and Luke 16:18 does not nullify what he says in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9.59

Mark 10:10–12 and Luke 16:18 do not repeat the exception clauses in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 because Jesus was specifically addressing the controversy regarding no-fault divorce (see §1.1). Everyone would have assumed the exception clauses because everyone—both Jews and Gentiles—assumed that there are legitimate grounds for divorce such as adultery, and Jews universally assumed that there are scriptural grounds for divorce. “Matthew is merely making explicit what was assumed by Mark and Luke to be already obvious to their readers.”60

We commonly speak in ways that assume what we mean without explicitly mentioning exceptions. Here are five examples:

1. “Everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent [i.e., for the purpose of sexually desiring that woman] has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt 5:28). But there is an exception. Jesus means “Everyone who looks at a woman except for his wife…”61

2. “It is against the law to drive only 10 mph on an interstate when the speed limit is 70 mph.” But there are exceptions—like driving slowly during a traffic jam or during perilous conditions like snow, ice, or torrential rain.

3. “No Trespassing.” We assume such a sign may mean “No trespassing except in certain situations.” A house may have that sign on its property. But if you notice late one evening the home is on

---

59See Grudem, Christian Ethics, 781–82.
61Cf. Instone-Brewer, Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible, 153; Heth, “Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion,” 75. The phrase πρὸς τὸ ἐπιθυσμαί means to look for the purpose of lusting, but the verb that most translations render as “lust” (i.e., ἐπιθυμέω) simply means “to have a strong desire to do or secure someth., desire, long for” (BDAG 371). More specifically, it can mean “to have sexual interest in someone” (BDAG 372). The English word lust connotes sinful desiring, so in that sense a husband should not lust after his wife. But desiring itself is not necessarily sinful—it depends on the nature of the desire. A husband should sexually desire his wife (and no one else), and a wife should want her husband to sexually desire her (and no one else).
fire while the household appears to be fast asleep, there is an inherent unstated exception to that sign. You should do whatever you can to notify the people inside that their house is on fire—even if that means you enter their property without their permission.

4. “None is righteous, no, not one” (Rom 3:10). But there is an exception—none is righteous except God. Some theologians might be more precise: “All humans are sinners.” But what about Jesus? Jesus is human, but he never sinned. All humans are sinners except Jesus. In those statements, we assume the unstated exception.

5. David Instone-Brewer asks a question that parallels Mark 10:2 (“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”):

   The question, as it stands in Mark, makes little sense, because the only logical response to “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” is to say, “Yes, the law allows him to divorce.” However, because the “any cause” divorce was being debated at the time, the question makes better sense if “for any cause” is implicitly understood. A modern-day equivalent is the question “Is it lawful for sixteen-year-olds to drink?” The only logical answer is “Yes, or else they will die of thirst.” But anyone asked this question today would mentally add the words “alcoholic beverages” because that is the question in current debate.\(^\text{62}\)

3. ROMANS 7:2–3

---

**Figure 9. Phrase Diagram of Rom 7:1–6**

\(^{62}\)Instone-Brewer, “Divorce,” 214.
God’s people in the new covenant are not under the old covenant. Christians are not under the Mosaic law. Paul illustrates that concept with remarriage: when your spouse dies, you are free to remarry. Paul is not discussing the intricacies of divorce and remarriage. Like any good teacher, he is simply using a basic analogy that helps communicate a single abstract concept more clearly. In Romans 7:2 (and 1 Cor 7:39), Paul is talking about marriage in general and not divorce, so we should not be surprised that he does not mention exceptions. I agree with Carson:

> A few teachers attempt to expound this text [i.e., Rom 7:1–3] at the expense of all other biblical references to divorce, and assert thereby that there are no grounds whatsoever for divorce. This is patently either foolish or blind, in the light of the entire biblical revelation pertaining to this subject. The point is, Romans 7:1–3 is not dealing with marriage at all, except by way of illustration as to the way a man is bound to observe the law. It would have been ridiculous for Paul to introduce here the extraneous question of divorce.

Doug Moo and Tom Schreiner, two of evangelicalism’s premier commentators on Romans, agree.

---

63 Heth, “Jesus on Divorce,” 12.


66 Douglas J. Moo, The Letter to the Romans, 2nd ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 438, n. 649: “These verses are sometimes cited to prove that remarriage on any basis other than the death of one’s spouse is adulterous. Whether this is the biblical teaching or not, these verses at any rate are probably not relevant to the issue. Paul is not teaching about remarriage but citing a simple example to prove a point. In such a situation, one often generalizes to what is usually true in order to simplify the analogy.” Thomas R. Schreiner, Romans, 2nd ed., Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
4. 1 CORINTHIANS 7:10–16, 39

Figure 11. Phrase Diagram of 1 Corinthians 7:10–16

Figure 12. Phrase Diagram of 1 Corinthians 7:39

(Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 352: “This passage cannot settle that question [i.e., the issue of divorce and remarriage], since it isn’t Paul’s intention to provide a full discussion of his view of divorce and remarriage. The general principle is that divorce and remarriage constitute adultery, but we cannot conclude from this text alone that divorce and remarriage are always adultery. Paul employs a generalization for the sake of the illustration at hand.”
Paul is talking about divorce in situations other than divorce for sexual unfaithfulness. The believers advocating asceticism (1 Cor 7:1) wanted to enforce their “no sexual relations” slogan on the married (vv. 1–7), the widowers and widows (vv. 8–9, 39–40), those advocating separation (vv. 10–16), and the engaged (vv. 25–28, 34, 36–38), who, like other singles (vv. 29–35), are still free from matrimonial ties and could live single if they have the gift of sexual self-control (vv. 7, 9a; cf. Matt 19:11–12).

Studies indicate that Paul’s teaching on sexuality, marriage, and singleness in 1 Corinthians 6 and 7 stems from the same tradition of Jesus’ teaching that Matthew records in 19:3–12. Yet Paul says that if a divorce or separation takes place, “let them remain unmarried or else be reconciled.” Where Paul specifically mentions the possibility of remarriage, in both instances he notes explicitly that one of the spouses has died (1 Cor 7:39; Rom 7:2–3). Thus Paul follows the teaching of Jesus.

Like Matthew’s exception clause, Paul’s qualifier relieves the innocent party of the guilt of violating Christ’s command not to divorce (mentioned 4× in vv. 10–13). Nothing is said about the possibility of remarriage. The following considerations suggest remarriage is not permitted: (1) marriage is a creation ordinance, binding on all irrespective of their faith or the lack thereof; (2) Paul has already specifically prohibited remarriage in vv. 10–11; (3) when Paul speaks about the binding character of marriage he uses the term deō (Rom 7:2; 1 Cor 7:39; cf. 7:27, a promise of engagement), not doulō (1 Cor 7:15); and (4) where he clearly mentions the possibility of remarriage, Paul also refers to the death of one of the marriage partners (1 Cor 7:39; Rom 7:2).

---

6Heth, “Jesus on Divorce,” 11–12.
Majority View | Minority View
---|---
1 Cor 7:39: “a wife is bound (de-detai) to her husband as long as he lives” | Whenever Paul mentions the possibility of remarriage, in both cases [here and Rom 7:2] he notes specifically that one of the spouses has died. This is Paul’s ordinary usage for the indissolubility of marriage as long as a mate is living.

4.1. The General Principle in 1 Corinthians 7 Is to Stay Where You Are

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul addresses a constellation of issues: having sex in marriage, staying single, getting divorced, and getting (re)married. What ties these issues together is the general principle to stay where you are. That is, stay in the condition you are in right now (and Paul lists exceptions all along the way):

- Those who are married should keep having marital relations (vv. 2–5).
- The unmarried and widows should stay unmarried (vv. 8–9).
- Christians who are married to Christians should stay married (vv. 10–11).
- Christians who are married to non-Christians should stay married (vv. 12–16).
- Those circumcised should stay circumcised, and those uncircumcised should stay uncircumcised (vv. 18–19).
- Those who are bondservants should stay bondservants, and those who are free should stay free (vv. 21–23).
- Those who are unmarried should stay unmarried (vv. 26–38).
- Married women should stay married, and widows should stay unmarried (vv. 39–40).

4.2. A Husband and Wife Should Not Divorce

(1 Cor 7:10–11)

In vv. 6–7, Paul sets the stage to address three groups of people (vv. 8–9, 10–11, 12–16). For each group Paul describes an ideal situation and allows for a less than ideal option.

In vv. 10–11, the ideal situation is that a husband and wife remain married and that neither divorce the other. This passage raises at least three questions:
1. Why does Paul say, “Not I, but the Lord” here and then say, “I, not the Lord” in v. 12? He is referring to what the Lord Jesus taught during his earthly ministry (see Matt 5:32; 19:9; Mark 10:11; Luke 16:18). In Jesus’s earthly ministry, he directly addressed the issue Paul raises in 1 Corinthians 7:10–11 (and Jesus gave exceptions in Matt 5:32 and 19:9 that Paul does not repeat here), but Jesus did not address the issue Paul raises in 1 Corinthians 7:12–16. Jesus did not address that issue because in his context he was teaching Jews, who married fellow Jews. But now Paul was addressing a new situation: Christian Gentiles who were married to non-Christian Gentiles.

2. Is there a difference between the terms separate (χωρίζω) and divorce (ἀφίηµι) in the final phrases of vv. 10–11? No, they are synonymous. Paul did not share the technical category for separation but not divorce that some cultures have today.

3. Paul says that if a person divorces their spouse, then that person has two options: (1) remain unmarried or (2) reconcile with their spouse—are those the only options? Apparently, yes, if the divorce was without a biblical ground, but no, if the divorce was with a biblical ground.

---

68 Paul is not implying that vv. 10–11 are authoritative but that vv. 12–16 are not authoritative but simply Paul’s fallible opinion. The apostle Paul’s instruction is God-breathed.

69 David Instone-Brewer, “1 Corinthians 7 in the Light of the Graeco-Roman Marriage and Divorce Papyri,” Tyndale Bulletin 52 (2001): 106–7: “Some have suggested that these two verbs demonstrate a distinction in Paul between divorce and separation. Although it is possible that these two verbs have slightly different connotations (χωρίζω has a sense of ‘separate’ while φίλανθροπισθεῖν has a sense of ‘release’) they are used in 1 Corinthians 7 as synonymous terms, and there is no doubt that χωρίζω means ‘divorce’. There is no distinction in the marriage papyri between divorce and separation, and in Graeco-Roman law, separation with intention to end the marriage was divorce.” Again, Instone-Brewer, Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible, 198–99: “Both the verbs χωρίζω and φίλανθροπισθεῖν have the sense of ‘to divorce’ although they have been translated here by ‘to separate’ and ‘to dismiss,’ respectively. Differences between these words should not be exaggerated. There may be no significance in their use other than stylistic variation.”

70 That does not mean that there was never any such thing as a husband and wife temporarily separating in Graeco-Roman culture with the hope that they would get back together. It means that the two terms Paul uses in 1 Cor 7:10–11 are synonyms that do not refer to what people in cultures today refer to as separation.

71 See §1.9. Newheiser wisely explains (Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage, 269), “I believe that this passage may apply to those circumstances when, while the divorcing spouse doesn’t have clear-cut grounds for divorce, things are bad enough that church leaders would be reluctant to discipline the person for moving out. The church’s answer in such cases could be, ‘While we don’t approve of your divorce (or separation), we will not enact church discipline against you for it, but based on 1 Corinthians 7:10–11, you are not free to remarry.’”
4.3. A Christian Should Not Divorce Their Non-Christian Spouse (1 Cor 7:12–14)

In vv. 12–14, Paul addresses “the rest,” that is, those who do not fit in vv. 8–11. Since Paul forbids a Christian to marry a non-Christian (v. 39), the main scenario he has in mind here is that after two non-Christians are married only one of them becomes a Christian. A Christian should not divorce their spouse simply because their spouse is not a Christian. The reason is that if one spouse is a Christian, then the entire family benefits: both the non-Christian spouse and their children are “holy” (cf. 1 Pet 3:1–2). This does not mean that a Christian spouse automatically turns the rest of their family into Christians (see 1 Cor 7:16). Rather, a Christian, whose body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (6:19–20), sets the entire household apart in some sense and positively influences it (cf. the non-salvific sanctification language in Heb 10:29).

4.4. A Christian May Divorce Their Spouse If Their Spouse Deserts Them (1 Cor 7:15–16)

In vv. 15–16, Paul includes an exception. The condition for the non-Christian spouse in vv. 13–14 is that they consent to live with their Christian spouse. But if the non-Christian physically deserts the Christian spouse (e.g., because they reject their spouse’s Christian faith), then the Christian is no longer obligated to stay married: “If the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so” (v. 15). That separation refers to physical, spatial desertion that essentially constitutes divorce: “There was…no distinction between ‘separation’ and ‘divorce’ in Roman law; anyone who separated with view to ending the marriage was considered fully divorced, without the need for any written deed or court appearance.”

When a spouse physically deserts their Christian spouse, the Christian is free to divorce because they are “not enslaved.” The reason Paul gives is that God has called Christians to peace, so a Christian wife or husband is not obligated to wait indefinitely to reconcile with a non-Christian spouse who has physically deserted them. The Christian spouse simply has no assurance that they will be the human instrument through which God may save their non-Christian spouse.

If a spouse who is a professing Christian sinfully abandons their Christian spouse, then the church should go through the process of church discipline with the goal of restoring the marriage. If the guilty spouse is unrepentant, then the church may choose not to affirm that that spouse is a believer.

---

Physical desertion is as serious as πορνεία (see §1.10). Each is a ground for divorce because each breaks the marriage covenant to leave and cleave and to become one flesh (Gen 2:24).

4.5. A Christian Who Divorces Their Spouse After Their Spouse Deserts Them Is Free to Remarry (1 Cor 7:15)

There are two main views on what Paul means by “not enslaved”: (1) The Christian is free to divorce but not to remarry (i.e., vv. 10–11 apply to this situation). (2) The Christian is free to divorce and remarry.

The second view is far more likely for two reasons. First, “not enslaved” in v. 15 conceptually parallels “bound” and “free to be married” in v. 39. Second, the ancient Greco-Roman world and Jewish world did not have a category for a lawful divorce that excluded remarriage (see §1.2 and below).

John Piper argues that a deserted and divorced spouse is not free to remarry:

The word used for “bound” (douloo) in verse 15 is not the same word used in verse 39 where Paul says, “A wife is bound (deo) to her husband as long as he lives.” Paul consistently uses deo when speaking of the legal aspect of being bound to one marriage partner (Romans 7:2; 1 Corinthians 7:39), or to one’s betrothed (1 Corinthians 7:27). But when he refers to a deserted spouse not being bound in 1 Corinthians 7:15, he chooses a different word (douloo) which we would expect him to do if he were not giving a deserted spouse the same freedom to remarry that he gives to a spouse whose partner has died (verse 39).74

That reading seems to commit two exegetical fallacies: (1) distinguishing synonyms in contexts where they function synonymously and (2) falsely assuming a technical meaning.75 The words δουλόω (v. 15) and δέω (v. 39) are synonymous in this context.76 Why must Paul use

74 Piper, “Divorce and Remarriage.” Heth used to argue similarly: Wenham and Heth, Jesus and Divorce, 140–44.


76 David Instone-Brewer, “1 Corinthians 7 in the Light of the Jewish Greek and Aramaic Marriage and Divorce Papyri,” Tyndale Bulletin 52 (2001): 238–40: “The divorce deed is compared to an emancipation certificate for a slave by early rabbinic traditions. This was not because they regarded marriage as slavery, but the divorce legislation of Exodus 21:10–11 was based on the law of the slave wife, and they found many parallels between the release of a woman from marriage and the release from slavery. The rules concerning release are similar and the wording of the two certificates was very similar. The emancipation certificate said: ‘Lo, you are a free girl, you belong to yourself’ and the only words which were necessary on a divorce certificate were ‘Lo, you are permitted to (marry) any man’. The rest of the divorce certificate is midrashic expansion. This helps to explain why Paul uses words which are associated with slavery when he speaks about freedom from the marriage bond. He uses δουλόω, enslave
the same word? He often uses synonyms. For example, in vv. 10–11, Paul writes, "the wife should not separate from [χωρίζων] her husband...and the husband should not divorce [ἀφιέναι] his wife." There Paul synonymously uses two different words for divorce (χωρίζω and ἀφιέναι). He does the same thing concerning remarriage in vv. 15 and 39 with δουλόω and δέω.

Evangelical historian Edwin Yamauchi explains that the ancient Greco-Roman world did not have a category for a lawful divorce that excluded remarriage:

Some church fathers restricted the so-called “Pauline privilege” of a believing wife to part from her unbelieving husband who had abandoned her, considering it to be “separation” and not divorce. But in the Greco-Roman world such a separation meant divorce and the privilege of remarriage.77

That was the case in the Jewish world as well. Jewish divorce certificates declared, “You are free to marry any man.” Craig Keener explains why that historical-cultural context is significant for understanding what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:15:

The Jewish legal passage in question is Mishnah Gittin 9:3, which reads:

The essential formula in the bill of divorce is, “Lo, thou art free to marry any man.” R. Judah says: “Let this be from me thy writ of divorce and letter of dismissal and deed of liberation, that thou mayest marry whatsoever man thou wilt.” The essential formula in a writ of emancipation is, “Lo, thou art a freedwoman: lo, thou belongest to thyself.”

The ancient Jewish marriage contracts we have found agree: in the context of divorce, “free” meant precisely that the woman was free to remarry, and meant nothing else than this.

If Paul meant that remarriage was not permitted, he said precisely the opposite of what he meant.78

---

78Keener, And Marries Another, 61. Cf. Craig S. Keener, 1–2 Corinthians, New
Martin Luther soundly explains 7:15: “If someone is not bound, he is free and released. If he is free and released, he may change his status, just as though his spouse were dead.”

What Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7:39—“she [i.e., a Christian widow] is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord”—quotes Jewish divorce certificates that specified a divorced woman was free to remarry, but Paul substitutes the words “in the Lord” for “any Jewish man.” Heth explains,

Why would Paul quote Jewish divorce certificate language with reference to a widow’s freedom to remarry? The clue to Paul’s reasoning is probably found in a passage in later rabbinic writings. Rabbi Ashi (d. AD 427) attempted to prove that even a childless widow was free to remarry whomever she wanted. He reasoned that “if a divorce gave a woman complete freedom to marry whomever she wished, then widowhood would give her the same freedom.” From the language Paul employs in both 1 Corinthians 7:15 and 7:39, it appears that he, too, reasoned that if a divorcée had this freedom to remarry, then so would a widow! Paul assumes that victims of valid divorces have the right to remarry.80

---

4.6. A Person Whose Spouse Dies Is Free to Remarry
(1 Cor 7:39; cf. Rom 7:2)

Paul mentions marriage in v. 38, and in v. 39 he reminds the Corinthians that marriage is a lifelong covenant that death breaks. A Christian is free to remarry anyone he or she desires on the conditions that (1) their spouse dies and (2) the new spouse is a Christian.

4.7. Breaking the Marriage Covenant Is a Ground for Divorce (1 Cor 7)

Hypocrisy and physical desertion are not the only grounds for divorce (see §§1.10 and 4.4). According to Exodus 21:10, a husband is responsible to provide for his wife: “He shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights.” And one can argue from the lesser to the greater: if that was the case for a husband’s slave wife, how much more is that the case for his free wife? Exodus 21:10 demonstrates that God deeply cares about a vulnerable wife when her husband is not providing for her, and there is nothing in the New Testament to suggest that Jesus’s fulfilling the Mosaic law nullifies a wife’s rights and a husband’s responsibilities. To the contrary, what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7 parallels Exodus 21:10:

- Those who are married should regularly have sex with each other (1 Cor 7:2–5). “The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband…. Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control” (7:3, 5).
- Spouses should not abandon each other (7:10–16). “But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved” (7:15).
- The husband is responsible to provide for his wife and family (7:32–35).81

Since Paul repeats the requirements of Exodus 21:10 and since

---

81In 7:25–40, Paul focuses on “the betrothed,” which likely refers to engaged women. The issue is whether betrothed couples should finalize their marriages “in view of the present distress” (v. 26), which I think refers to a crisis that resulted from a famine that caused a food shortage in Greece in AD 51/52. The main idea of 7:32–25 is that Paul wants the Corinthians not to be tied up with anxieties because of “the present distress.” Unmarried men and women are free to serve the Lord with relatively few distractions, but married men and women are divided because they have more obligations (i.e., to each other and their children). Paul wants the Corinthians to serve the Lord with “undivided devotion” (v. 35)—in contrast to the “divided” interests in marriage (v. 34), especially in light of “the present distress.”
Exodus 21:11 allows for divorce when those requirements are not met, the principle still applies: divorce is legitimate when those requirements are not met—that is, when one breaks the marriage covenant. Breaking the marriage covenant is a ground for divorce. (That does not mean that divorce is necessary but only that it is permissible.) The two clearest grounds in the NT are πορνεία and physical desertion. But the same logic applies to other grounds:

- refusing to fulfill conjugal rights
- a husband’s failing to provide for his wife (i.e., material neglect)
- a husband’s failing to protect his wife (i.e., cruelty such as physical abuse)

Each of those patterns is a way a spouse may break the marriage covenant and thus desert the other spouse. That desertion or separation may not be spatial—that is, the spouses may still live in the same home. But the desertion or separation is still real because the sinful patterns abandon the one-flesh union that is essential to the marriage covenant.82

**Objection 1:** But 1 Corinthians 7:15 refers only to spatial separation—not to relational separation. In reply, “relational separation” makes it sound like a husband merely hurt his wife’s feelings. The point, however, is that the husband has broken the marriage covenant. Instead of protecting his wife, he is brutally beating her. One can argue from the lesser to the greater: How can a husband’s spatially departing from his wife be a ground for divorce but a husband’s physically brutalizing his wife not be? Both actions break the marriage covenant.

**Objection 2:** But the NT explicitly mentions only two grounds for divorce—πορνεία and physical desertion. In reply, the same logic in §2 applies here. Mark and Luke do not repeat the exception clauses that appear in Matthew 5 and 19 because everyone would have assumed the exception clauses. The same logic applies to not providing for your spouse, especially in light of Exodus 21:10.

Further, those two grounds for divorce—πορνεία and physical desertion—come from separate texts. So we cannot interpret either text to mean “This ground for divorce is the only one” without contradicting the other text. Similarly, the texts do not require us to conclude that there are two and only two grounds for divorce.

As I mention at the end of §1.3, this may raise practical questions about how to discern when a spouse’s actions may be a ground for divorce when it is not physical adultery or spatial desertion. It is a wisdom

82 Jones, Biblical Christian Ethics, 188–204.
issue—just like church discipline for such behavior is a wisdom issue. Churches and their elders should deal with such situations on a case-by-case basis.83

4.8. Divorce and Remarriage Can Protect Innocent Spouses (and Children)

One reason God sometimes allows divorce and remarriage is to protect the innocent spouse (and sometimes their children). That is the spirit behind Exodus 21:10–11, which parallels 1 Corinthians 7 (see §4.7). Newheiser explains,

Biblical standards for divorce are actually designed to protect the innocent party…. The situation of a young woman who has been abandoned by an unfaithful husband would be like that of a younger widow, who would do well to remarry and have children (1 Cor. 7:39; 1 Tim. 5:14). Remarriage to a godly husband can be God’s way of providing and caring for her.85

5. 1 TIMOTHY 3:2 AND TITUS 1:6
(ALSO 1 TIMOTHY 3:12)

The passages in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are not explicitly about divorce or remarriage, but I am addressing them because some argue that a one-woman man refers to a man who has never been divorced.86 I focus below on the phrase “one-woman man” in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6 in the elder qualifications, but what I write applies similarly to that same phrase in 1 Timothy 3:12 in the deacon qualifications.


84By innocent, I do not mean sinless but rather not guilty of an offense that is a ground for divorce.

85Newheiser, Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage, 191.

86E.g., “Persons remarried after divorce will forego positions of official leadership at Bethlehem which correspond to the role of elders or deacons (1 Tim 3:2, 12)” (“A Statement on Divorce and Remarriage in the Life of Bethlehem Baptist Church”).
Figure 14. Phrase Diagram of 1 Timothy 3:1–7

3:1 The saying is trustworthy:
  [1] the husband of one wife [μύρτωρ καιρτιώτης—NIV and NLT: faithful to his wife]

3:2 therefore an overseer must be above reproach,
  [0] sober-minded,
  [0] self-controlled,
  [0] irreproachable,
  [0] hospitable,
  [0] able to teach,
  [0] not a drunkard,
  [0] not violent
  [0] not a gloomy person

3:3 [0] not a lover of money,
  [12] he must manage his own household well,
    [0] with all dignity
    [0] keeping his children submissive,
    [0] for if anyone does not know how to manage his own household,
      [0] how will he care for God’s church?

3:4 [13] he must not be a sensualist,
    [0] or he may become entangled with sensuality
      [0] and fall into the condemnation of the devil.

3:5 [14] Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders,
      [0] so that he may not fall
        [0] into disgrace,
        [0] into a snare of the devil.

Figure 15. Phrase Diagram of Titus 1:5–9

1:5 This is why I left you in Crete,
  [0] so that you might put what remained into order,
  [0] and appoint elders in every town
    [0] as I directed you—

1:6 if anyone is above reproach,
  [1] the husband of one wife [μύρτωρ καιρτιώτης—NIV and NLT: faithful to his wife]
  [0] and his children are believers [ESV note: are faithful]

1:7 and not open to the charge of debauchery or immorality.
  [0] For an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach.

1:8 [4] He must not be quick-tempered
  [4] or a brawler,
  [4] or violent
  [4] or greedy for gain,
  [4] nor hospitable
  [10] a lover of money,
  [10] self-controlled,
  [10] upright
  [10] holy,
  [10] disciplined

1:9 [11] He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught,
      [0] so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine
        and also
          [0] refute those who contradict it.
What the NT Teaches about Divorce and Remarriage

Figure 16. The Majority vs. Minority Views on 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Majority View</th>
<th>Minority View</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“The husband of one wife” means that a man is “faithful to his wife” (NIV, NLT).</td>
<td>“The husband of one wife” entails that a man (1) has never divorced his wife and (2) has not married someone who has been divorced.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The overarching qualification for an overseer (synonymous with elder and pastor) is that he is “above reproach.” That is the umbrella requirement. All the other qualifications specify what it means to be above reproach. The first qualification is “the husband of one wife.”

There are at least four major views on what “the husband of one wife” means (fig. 16 displays only two of them): (1) faithful to his wife, (2) married, (3) monogamous (i.e., not a polygamist), and (4) not divorced or married to a divorcée.

5.1. “The Husband of One Wife” = Faithful to His Wife

The main reason “the husband of one wife” means “faithful to his wife” is that all the other qualifications describe a man’s life and character at that point in his life—not what that man has ever done at other points in his life. “The real issue is not so much where he has come from but who he is now by God’s grace. If a man is currently faithful to his wife, being above reproach, and has proven himself in that relationship, then it is possible for him to become an elder.”

A man could have been an out-of-control, disrespectful, violent drunkard and brawler. Or a man could have been a murderer like the apostle Paul himself (Acts 9:1; 22:4; 26:10). But God can change a man’s heart so that after a period of time people in his community think of his character as above reproach rather than as what he used to be. God can transform a man so that he is “faithful to his wife”—that is, he is faithfully devoted solely to her as his wife. At this point in his life, he is above reproach by physically and emotionally romancing his wife and his wife alone.

---

87Heth does not include this passage in his table that I cite above for the other passages.

88For a helpfully concise survey of these four views, see Benjamin L. Merkle, 40 Questions about Elders and Deacons, ed. Benjamin L. Merkle (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 124–28. I agree with how Merkle defends the “faithful to his wife” view and refutes the other three. Merkle labels the fourth view above as “an elder must have only one wife his entire life” (126–27). But I am not aware of any contemporary evangelical academics who would say that an elder whose wife dies is not free to remarry (in light of Rom 7:2–3; 1 Cor 7:8–9, 39). The debate is more focused: (1) May a divorced man be an elder? (2) May a man whose wife has died and who has remarried a divorced woman be an elder?

89Merkle, 40 Questions about Elders and Deacons, 128.
5.2. “The Husband of One Wife” ≠ Married

If “the husband of one wife” means that an elder must be married, then Jesus, Paul, and Timothy would not qualify to be elders. It would undermine how Paul exalts singleness in 1 Corinthians 7, and it would further require that elders must have two or more children since 1 Timothy 3:4 and Titus 1:6 refer to an elder’s “children” (plural). “The husband of one wife” merely reflects “the common situation of the time because most people were married. It was simply the norm that men married [and had children], and there was no need to highlight the exception.”

5.3. “The Husband of One Wife” ≠ Monogamous

“The husband of one wife” requirement entails that a married man has only one wife, but the main point of that qualification is not to target polygamy. There are two main reasons:

First, in the historical-cultural Greco-Roman and Jewish contexts, polygamy was uncommon. Bryan Chapell explains,

Polygamy was not normally practiced at the time and place where Titus ministered. If polygamy were being addressed, it would have been a peculiar addition to a list of elder qualifications—something akin to saying in this society, “An elder must not be a cannibal.” We know what cannibalism is and do not want our leaders to be cannibals, but it would be strange to put it in a list of qualifications where the practice does not commonly exist.

Second, 1 Timothy 5:9 uses a similar phrase for women: “Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband [ἑνὸς ἀνδρὸς γυνή].” “The wife of one husband” is formally “a one-man woman.” A one-woman man (μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἀνήρ in 1 Timothy 3:2 and μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα in Titus 1:6) parallels a one-man woman (ἑνὸς ἐνδρός γυνή in 1 Tim 5:9). If being a one-woman man is primarily prohibiting a man from having more than one wife, then being a one-man woman is primarily prohibiting a

---

90See Barry Danylak, Redeeming Singleness: How the Storyline of Scripture Affirms the Single Life (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).
91Merkle, 40 Questions about Elders and Deacons, 125.
woman from having more than one husband. But I am not aware of any evidence that polyandry existed in Greco-Roman and Jewish contexts, let alone that it was common enough for Paul to highlight it in a list of character qualifications for women.

The translation “having been the wife of one husband” (1 Tim 5:9 ESV, NASB, KJV) is misleading. The NIV, NLT, and CEB more accurately translate ἑνὸς ἄνδρος γυνή as one who was “faithful to her husband.”

5.4. “The Husband of One Wife” ≠ Not Divorced or Married to a Divorcée

The qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:6–9 describe character qualities about a man’s present life (see §5.1). Three additional arguments support that “the husband of one wife” does not mean “not divorced or married to a divorcée.”

5.4.1. The Character Qualifications Apply to All Christians (and Divorce and Remarriage Are Sometimes Legitimate for Christians)

After reflecting on the lists in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:6–9, Carson observes that what is remarkable about the required qualifications is that they are not remarkable:

The list is remarkable for being unremarkable. In other words, there is nothing about superior IQ, charisma, powerful personality or the like. The Christian minister is supposed to be gentle, not supposed to get drunk, and so forth: the list is remarkable for being unremarkable. Indeed, with only a couple of exceptions, all of the qualifications listed here are elsewhere in the New Testament demanded of all Christians. For instance, this elder is supposed to be given to hospitality. But that is demanded of all Christians in Hebrews 13. What this means, then, is that the Christian pastor must exemplify in his own life the virtues and graces that are demanded of all the people of God. There are only a couple of entries here that cannot be demanded of all Christians, viz. “not a novice” and “able to teach.” Everything else is the responsibility of all believers, not just the pastors of believers.94

If the character qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:6–9 apply to all Christians and if divorce and remarriage are sometimes legitimate (i.e., not sinful) for Christians (as I argue in §§1–4), then there is no scriptural warrant to automatically disqualify a divorced/remarried man from serving as an elder solely because he is divorced/remarried. There may be other reasons to consider that would suggest it is wise for such a man not to serve as an elder at a certain

time, but a man’s divorced/remarried status alone is not automatically disqualifying.

5.4.2. Automatically Disqualifying Divorced/Remarried Men Unbiblically Stigmatizes Them

When churches automatically forbid all divorced/remarried men from serving as elders, they stigmatize those men without scriptural warrant. Carson explains,

Some believe this verse [1 Tim 3:2] teaches that an elder cannot be a divorcé who has remarried. The Bible certainly warns against divorce in many ways. But it is also very important not to make divorce the worst sin on the horizon, the unforgivable sin, the sin against the Holy Spirit. Some have tried to impose a prohibition against anyone becoming a minister of the gospel who has ever been divorced at any time in his life. So he might have been a murderer, and then paid his debt to society, got out of prison and been converted and become a minister of the gospel. But if he’s been divorced, he can’t enter the ministry—which somehow projects an image of divorce as the unforgivable sin. Where divorce does disqualify a person from ministry, it seems to me, is bound up with a category we’ve already discussed: an elder “must be blameless.” It’s a credibility issue; or, again, a little further on, “he must be able to govern his own house well.” You worry about someone whose life has cracked up in his marriage, and then three months later, he feels he’s qualified to be back in ministry. He has repented, after all, and the gospel is all about forgiveness, isn’t it? Clearly the Bible has something more stringent to say than that. Divorce is not the ultimate sin, nor is it the unforgivable sin, yet it may disqualify a person for ministry precisely because it destroys so much of a person’s credibility, it destroys so much of his believability…. Divorce simply is not what this qualification is about.95

5.4.3. Many Leaders of the Early Church Were Unbiblically Ascetic Regarding Sex

Some appeal to the early church to support their view that “the husband of one wife” entails that a man has never divorced or has not remarried someone who has been divorced.96 But this will not do for at least three reasons:

First, it is not at all clear that the first centuries of church history prohibited remarriage as uniformly as Heth and Wenham allege. [As of 2002, it is only Wenham and not Heth]…

Second, virtually all the early church fathers relied on one of several inferior forms of the text of Matt 19:9 which included language

95Ibid.

96Wenham and Heth, Jesus and Divorce, 19–44.
What the NT Teaches about Divorce and Remarriage

43

borrowed from 5:32 (e.g., “and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery”) that would make one read the rest of v. 9 as more obviously excluding remarriage.…

Third, the general tendencies toward asceticism in sexual matters in early Greek and Latin Christianity make Patristic opinion on texts like this much less crucial for determining Scripture’s original intention than it might in other areas of doctrine or practice.97

The main reason is the final one: many leaders in the early church were unbiblically ascetic regarding sex. Bill Heth, who coauthored a book that rested its argument for the “no remarriage” view largely on the view of the early church fathers, later rejected that view:

The church fathers restricted Jesus’ prohibition in line with a growing asceticism in the early church…. This asceticism was visible in embryonic form already in the New Testament (cf. 1 Cor. 7:1, 28, 36; 1 Tim. 4:3; Col. 2:21), and it eventually led to the requirement that ministers in the Roman Catholic Church be celibate. The extent to which this asceticism manifested itself is evident in those writers who disallowed second marriages even after the death of a spouse (Athenagoras, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria), contrary to the clear teaching of the apostle Paul (1 Cor. 7:39). Athenagoras (ca. AD 177) went so far as to refer to marriage after a spouse’s death as a veiled form of adultery! Most of these writers also took a very dim view of sexual relations within marriage, much like the ascetics Paul confronted in Corinth (1 Cor. 7:1b). In effect, most church fathers said, “Marital relations are only for begetting children, and even then you’d better not enjoy it!” This was hardly the teaching of Paul (1 Cor. 7:2–6; 1 Tim. 4:4).98

5.5. Therefore, Divorced/Remarried Men May Be Elders

“Divorced persons should not automatically be excluded from leadership positions in the church, nor should those who have remarried after the very limited cases in which the New Testament permits remarriage after divorce (i.e., divorce with just cause).”99 Divorced/remarried


men may be elders, but that does not mean that all divorced/remarried men should be elders. Merkle explains,

If he was the “innocent” party in the divorce and was not unfaithful, some time is still needed for him to prove himself in his new marriage. The same is true if he was divorced before he became a Christian (whether he was unfaithful in the relationship or not). But if a professing believer was unfaithful to his wife and was later divorced, then extreme caution must be exercised. The sin of unfaithfulness and divorce, like all sins, can be forgiven, and the person can become renewed. Thus, after a period of many years in his new marriage, it may be possible, though perhaps not advisable, for [such] a divorced man to become an elder.

6. CONCLUSION

While it is a serious error to permit what God forbids, it is also wrong to forbid what God permits. To insist that (a) initiating a divorce is never legitimate or (b) remarriage after divorce is never legitimate or (c) a divorced/remarried man is automatically disqualified to be an elder is to forbid what God sometimes permits.

---
