

Why God hates divorce

Biblical teaching on divorce (Chapter 16 - The Great Divorce Controversy)

ES Williams

Having examined what the Bible says about marriage, we can now turn to the issue of divorce. We have seen that the Bible teaches that marriage is the lifelong union of one man with one woman. That is God's ideal. What does the Bible have to say on divorce? This remains controversial as we saw in our examination of the parliamentary debates. Although a large theological literature debates the meaning and interpretation of the key biblical passages, there is still uncertainty among Christians as to what the Bible teaches about divorce. The issue at stake is this: does Christ allow divorce with remarriage? In other words, is the marriage bond dissolved by divorce? Those theologians who support the Protestant doctrine of divorce argue that Christ allows divorce for marital unfaithfulness, and some claim that the apostle Paul allows divorce and remarriage following desertion by an unbelieving spouse. On the other side of the debate are those who believe that the Bible teaches that marriage is indissoluble and, therefore, remarriage is not permitted following a divorce. For those who wish to study the detailed theological arguments two books are recommended. *Jesus and Divorce* by Gordon Wenham and William Heth deals in detail with the arguments of those who support the Erasmian view of divorce.¹ They explore the different schools of interpretation, and provide a strong critique of the view widely held by evangelicals today, that allows for remarriage after divorce on the grounds of immorality. Andrew Cornes, in *Divorce and Remarriage*, provides a comprehensive study of singleness, marriage, divorce and remarriage from a biblical perspective.²

I believe that the biblical teaching on divorce and remarriage, an issue that affects everyone, is clear and understandable. Those who claim that the Scriptures are unclear on divorce imply that Jesus Christ taught in a way that caused confusion. The confusion does not lie with Christ, but with those who find themselves unable to accept the plain truth of his teaching. It is a serious error to claim that the teachings of Christ are unclear. On the contrary, he did not fail to tell the world God's plan for marriage in clear, understandable language. Indeed, he did so in such plain words that his teaching has caused offence even among those who claim to be his followers. The apparent confusion over divorce and remarriage is entirely man-made. This chapter examines two Old Testament passages and the teachings of Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul.

The message of Malachi – God hates divorce

The following passage from Malachi describes God's attitude to divorce.

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. 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. 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. '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 (Malachi 2: 13–16).

The idea of covenant is a biblical concept used to describe the relationship between God and his people. It has been defined as an unchangeable, divinely imposed legal agreement between God and man that stipulates the conditions of their relationship.³ There are two parties to a covenant, God and man; but man cannot negotiate with God, or change the terms of the covenant; he can only accept the obligations of the covenant or reject them. The prophet makes it clear that God sees marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman. It is a relationship of personal obligation. Both husband and wife have given their word that they will be faithful to each other; they are committed to live together for life. As John Richardson writes in *Sex, God and Marriage* (1998), 'This helps explain why divorce was so hated by God, since the term "covenant" also describes the relationship between God and his people. Moreover, the covenant between God and Israel in the Old Testament is itself pictured as a marriage.'⁴

According to Malachi, Israel was concerned that God was no longer blessing them. Their prayers were not being answered because of God's displeasure with their attitude towards marriage; they were breaking their marriage covenants and divorcing their wives. God was displeased and said, 'You have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant' (Malachi 2:14), thereby highlighting the underlying cause of all divorce. God told his people that unfaithfulness, which is a wider term than adultery, is the root cause of all broken marriages and the sin that leads to divorce. The prophet explains why breaking faith with their wives was such a terrible sin—because they had promised lifelong commitment to their marriage covenant, and God was the witness.

The underlying cause of all divorce is always the result of one or both partners being unfaithful to their marriage vows. In public they promise to be faithful whatever the circumstances, but because of selfishness they fail to keep the promises they made when they entered into the marriage covenant. So human waywardness and unfaithfulness lie at the centre of all marriage failure. According to Laney, 'divorce is not only a violation of God's original plan for marriage, it violates the marriage covenant to which the Lord is a witness. Divorce is treachery against life's most intimate companion and is a grievous sin which God hates.'⁵

Yet contemporary society sees divorce as if no one is at fault; it is no longer fashionable to speak of faithfulness to one's marriage partner. Many people feel little compunction in breaking their vows when it is no longer convenient to keep them. There is no longer a belief that loyalty to a marriage partner through thick and thin, for better for worse, is important. Those ideals are portrayed as old-fashioned and outmoded. Instead when a husband or wife feel they no longer love their marriage partner, or the marriage goes through a difficult time, or they fall in love with someone else, then divorce becomes an option. There is little acknowledgement that human unfaithfulness is at the heart of all divorce. Yet the Bible is quite clear on this point and warns, 'Do not break faith with the wife of your youth' (Malachi 2:15).

God's attitude towards divorce is clearly stated by the prophet Malachi. 'I hate divorce,' says the Lord God of Israel, 'and I hate a man's covering himself with violence...' (Malachi 2:16). The God of the Bible, who instituted marriage for the good of mankind, hates divorce. Faithfulness

is central to the character of God, he is faithful to all his promises and is faithful to his people. 'If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself' (2 Timothy 2:13). Even though we are unfaithful, God remains faithful to us. Marriage is a covenant promise to live together as man and wife for life, and faithfulness is the knot that binds husband and wife together. Implicit within the marriage covenant is the promise to be faithful to our children, to love and care for them. Divorce breaks the covenant promise of faithfulness to those who are nearest and dearest. Because it is the ultimate expression of human unfaithfulness, it is repulsive to the divine nature and God *hates* it.

Malachi goes on to explain that in the mind of God divorce and violence are linked. In God's eyes, divorce is violence directed against our own family; it is violence against our own flesh and blood, violence against our husband or wife, violence against our children. There can be no more brutal act than perpetrating violence against our marriage partner and children who are dependent on our love and protection. The spectacle of the terrible violence unleashed by divorce is clearly visible to all around. Because divorce is violence against the family, it is hateful to God. He hates divorce because of what it does to the families involved; the devastation and suffering that result are highly displeasing to him.

In particular, God *hates* the suffering of the children involved in divorces. God *hates* it when a home is broken and a family shattered. God *hates* it when children are deprived of father or mother by divorce. God loathes the heartbreak of the children, and the loneliness experienced by the divorced husband and wife. It is not good for man to be alone and divorce results in loneliness. It is not good for children to be deserted by their parents, and divorce results in deserted children. It is unthinkable that God could have any other attitude to divorce. The message of Malachi is that God *hates* divorce.

The message of Hosea – be reconciled

The prophet Hosea was called by God to live out his message to his people by marrying a woman who would be unfaithful to him, and so his marriage was a symbolic picture of the relationship between God and his people. Hosea was to proclaim Israel's need for reconciliation to their faithful, loving God. The key verse is:

The Lord said to me, 'Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods...' (Hosea 3: 1).

Hosea's wife had been unfaithful and committed adultery with other men. God saw her behaviour as symbolic of the unfaithfulness of his people who were running after other gods, and being unfaithful to the covenant God had made with them. They promised to love him with all their hearts, and to have no other gods. But they had been disloyal by worshipping man-made idols. Yet God did not cast them aside, even though they had betrayed him. Although he was angry and offended by their unfaithfulness and waywardness, he invited his people to return and repent of their sin. The Lord said, 'I will heal their waywardness and love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them' (Hosea 14:4). Despite their unfaithfulness, God was merciful and offered them the hope of reconciliation.

In the same way as God acted towards faithless Israel, he directed Hosea to act towards his unfaithful wife, who was running after other men. Despite the fact that she was an adulteress, God did not tell Hosea to divorce his wife, but rather to love her again. It is clear that God wanted Hosea to restore the relationship; he wanted Hosea to be reconciled, even though his wife was an adulteress, and the law of Moses permitted him to divorce her.

There is no more explicit message in the Bible regarding God's attitude to divorce. God hates it, and does not want a couple to divorce, even when adultery has been involved. Instead, he wants them to make every effort to be reconciled and save their marriage – yes, even to the extent of forgiving an unfaithful wife or husband. Although divorce is permitted for marital unfaithfulness, the Bible teaches that we should do all we can to achieve reconciliation. The unfaithful partner bears a terrible responsibility for they have sinned against God, against their marriage partner, against their children and against their family. They should repent of their foolish action, change their behaviour and ask for forgiveness from all concerned. Adultery is not the unforgivable sin, and God is able to restore the relationship if there is a true change of heart.

True reconciliation requires a change of behaviour on the part of the unfaithful partner, and that the one who has been sinned against should be willing to forgive and be reconciled. Although this may take a long time to achieve, and sometimes is not possible because of the unrepentant heart of the unfaithful partner, the faithful partner should aim at this rather than allowing their marriage to be broken by divorce. Even after divorce, the possibility of reconciliation should be left open, and, if at all possible, it should be sought actively and encouraged. God's guidance for those who face the possibility of a divorce because of marital unfaithfulness is that they should do all in their power to save their marriage. They should be like Hosea and again show their love to their unfaithful partner, doing everything possible to achieve reconciliation. The example of Hosea illustrates God's ideal in the case of a broken marriage.⁶ Wenham and Heth write, 'in the event of marital unfaithfulness we believe that Jesus would surely require the forgiveness of seventy times seven and the goal of restoration exhibited by Hosea'.⁷

Jesus' teaching on divorce

Jesus taught about divorce on two occasions. The first time was during the Sermon on the Mount, recorded in Matthew chapter five, and the second occasion, recorded in Mark chapter 10 and Matthew chapter 19, was toward the end of his ministry when the Pharisees confronted him regarding the causes of divorce. The gospel of Luke also gives a brief summary of Jesus' teaching.

Moral responsibility towards marriage (Matthew 5:31–32)

It is significant that Jesus taught about divorce in his Sermon on the Mount while setting his standards for human behaviour. He was dealing with the question of individual responsibility. The Lord outlined a moral framework that was completely revolutionary in its content. In essence he taught that our inner attitude toward God and other people is the foundation for morality. Jesus taught that we ought to treat others as we would like them to treat us. The attitude of our heart is the essence of morality. By Jesus' standard, to look at a woman with lust is adultery; that is, the inward, lustful desire is of itself sinful. These are the standards

of behaviour that God expects from his people; they have to do with attitudes, thoughts and desires, as well as the way we treat others. Above all, the standard is that we should be kind and forgiving. We should not seek revenge when wronged, and should even pray for our enemies and those who persecute us. Applying his teaching to divorce, Jesus shows that divorce is not only wrong, but with the correct attitude to one's marriage partner should not even be contemplated.

While on the Mount, Jesus dealt with divorce in the context of his teaching on adultery. Jesus said,

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 (Matthew 5:31–32).

Here Jesus sets God's standard for marriage. With the words, 'but I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to commit adultery', Jesus says that any man who divorces his wife is causing her great harm, for he is the cause of her becoming an adulteress. It is against God's will and cannot be an option to be used for man's convenience. What Jesus is teaching is that an attitude of the heart that even entertains the thought of divorce is adultery against one's marriage partner. So the principle the Lord is laying down is that in God's eyes even the thought of divorce is immoral—an act equal to adultery. However, he makes an exception to this rule for the man whose wife is guilty of marital unfaithfulness. For a man to divorce an unfaithful, adulterous wife is not equal to adultery on the part of the man for it does not cause her to commit adultery because she has already done so. (The exception clause is discussed in more detail below.)

Having established the principle that to divorce is immoral, unless it is for marital unfaithfulness, Jesus places an absolute restriction on remarriage. He says that a man who divorces his wife causes her to commit adultery, unless of course she has already committed adultery. The assumption is that the divorced wife will remarry and so commit adultery against her husband. The fact that the divorced wife commits adultery when she remarries a single man means that her marriage bond is still intact and therefore was not destroyed by the divorce. And Jesus lays the responsibility squarely at the feet of the husband; it is his immoral action in divorcing his wife that causes her to commit adultery.

Furthermore anyone who marries a woman so divorced commits adultery. That is, the (single) man who marries the divorced woman, whether she is the innocent partner or not, commits adultery against her husband. This is a remarkable teaching for it raises the obvious question: how can a man be guilty of adultery if he marries a divorced woman? The only possible explanation is that in Jesus' understanding the marriage bond is still intact because she is joined to her husband by God—so the divorced woman is still bound to her husband for the marriage bond is indissoluble except by death. Therefore, in God's eyes, her first marriage is still intact even although her husband has divorced her, and so the (single) man who marries her is entering into an illicit sexual relationship with a married (although divorced) woman. For this reason anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery, and the divorced woman commits adultery when she remarries.

In evidence to the Royal Commission of 1912, Professor JP Whitney, a church historian, explained that the passage was dealing with the question of human responsibility. ‘A man was responsible if by the act of divorcing his wife he put her in the position in which she was almost bound to commit adultery. The question is presented as one of the responsibilities of man and in pronouncing it the Lord, as it were, pulled himself up before condemning the man, because if the man put away his wife for adultery it is clear that he could not be held responsible for her afterwards falling into adultery. The real cause and responsibility (for the adultery) then lay not with the man but with the woman.’⁸

The Lower House of the Convocation of York explained this passage in a report produced in 1896. ‘Here the putting away of the wife for fornication is granted, but for no other cause. To put her away for any other cause save this would be to put her into the way of temptation to adultery, and the guilt would lie at the husband’s door, he would be the cause if she fell into adultery. If, however, she be put away for fornication, which is a just cause of separation, the guilt of any future sin rests with her, as the separation came about through her own misconduct. But to marry a woman thus separated from her husband for fornication – is adultery. In this passage, then, putting away for fornication is allowed, but for any woman put away to marry again is adultery. Why? It can only be because her husband is alive, and because the bond exists. If it exists for her, it equally exists for him. If a new marriage is adultery for her, so is a new marriage for him.’⁹

No remarriage following divorce (Luke 16:18)

In Luke’s gospel Jesus deals with the issue of the remarriage of the divorced husband and the divorced wife. The gospel is written for the Gentile world, which would have been largely ignorant of the Jewish laws regarding divorce. Jesus states the simple truth:

Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery (Luke 16:18).

Here Jesus warns that both a divorced man and a single man commit adultery by being involved in a remarriage. The first point is that for a divorced man to remarry another (single) woman is adultery. It follows that for the remarriage of the divorced man to be adulterous his first marriage must still be intact in Jesus’ eyes, and that is why his sexual relationship with a single woman is adultery. Jesus then speaks about the single man who marries a divorced woman. He is guilty of adultery against the divorced woman’s husband, because in Jesus’ eyes the first marriage of the woman is still intact. According to Andrew Cornes, this text is concerned principally with remarriage. The first part of the verse teaches that ‘legal divorce cannot break the marriage bond because (and this is Christ’s point) remarriage after divorce is in fact adultery. The second part of the verse makes the point that it is also adultery for a single man to marry a divorced woman.’¹⁰

The teaching of Luke is straightforward and clear. It states an absolute position that all remarriage is wrong. Now there can be no doubt that Luke was familiar with Christ’s teaching on divorce, and it seems remarkable that he would have written in the way that he did if, in fact, Christ had allowed an exception. Indeed, if that were the case Luke could be accused of causing

confusion and misleading the Church. For if Christ had taught that there were grounds for divorce, it would be unforgivable for Luke to have simply ignored the exception which fundamentally alters the teaching. It would be highly misleading for Luke to write in a way that could be construed to support the idea that marriage was indissoluble, when, in fact, Christ was teaching the opposite. But we know that Luke, a physician, was meticulously accurate in the way he recorded the gospel of Christ. It is unthinkable that he would not have qualified his writing to make it clear that there was an exception if that were the case. But he did not do so. There is no doubt that Luke believed that Jesus taught that the marriage bond was indissoluble.

Later in his ministry a group of Pharisees tested Jesus by asking him about the causes of divorce. The encounter with the Pharisees is recorded in Matthew 19:3–12 and Mark 10:2–12. While the two gospels report the same event, there are some differences between the accounts of Matthew and Mark. The record of Matthew, which was written for a mainly Jewish audience, mentions the so-called exception clause ‘except for marital unfaithfulness’, while Mark omits any reference to an exception. At the time there was a debate among the Pharisees about the legitimate grounds for divorce, which was required by Jewish law when a wife was guilty of adultery. This is important because the exception clause has become the foundation of the Protestant doctrine of divorce, and is used by modern Christians to justify their practice of remarriage following divorce. While many books have been written on the interpretation of this clause, the matter remains controversial among theologians.

Jesus and the Pharisees (Mark chapter 10)

Jesus was travelling through Transjordan on his way to Jerusalem and his final Passover before his trial and crucifixion. While in the territory of Perea, which was ruled by Herod Antipas, the man who had imprisoned and executed John the Baptist because of his comments about Herod’s incestuous marriage to his brother’s wife, the Pharisees approached Jesus and tested him by asking,

‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’ Jesus replied [with a question], ‘What did Moses command you?’ They said, ‘Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.’ Jesus replied, ‘It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,’ [and then Jesus quoted from Genesis] ‘But at the beginning of creation, God “made them male and female”. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh”.’ [Jesus concluded] ‘So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate’ (Mark 10:2–9).

The response of Jesus is highly significant. He does not launch into a discussion on the possible grounds for divorce or discuss the lawfulness of divorce. In this dramatic encounter the Lord quotes from the two texts in Genesis (1:27 and 2:24) which form the foundation of God’s ordinance of marriage as an indissoluble one flesh union. This tells us that if we wish to know the mind of Christ on divorce then we must take account of these two verses. Essentially Jesus is saying that God created one man and one woman and when God united them in marriage they became one flesh. Jesus then draws the conclusion that husband and wife have been joined

together by God to become one. For this reason, man should not separate them. This was the public teaching of Jesus on the issue of the lawfulness of divorce.

Later, when Jesus and the disciples were in the house they asked him to explain this teaching. Jesus answered,

Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery (Mark 10:11–12).

Here Jesus is saying that remarriage is wrong, reinforcing the teaching given during the Sermon on the Mount. A divorced man who marries a single woman commits adultery against his first wife. This is because the one flesh bond created by God at marriage is still intact in God's eyes, and so the sexual relationship with another woman is adulterous. Similarly, the woman who divorces her husband and remarries another man commits adultery. This is because the divorce has not freed her from the marriage bond and she is still tied to her husband, although legally divorced from him. Therefore, being still married in the eyes of God, she is required either to be reconciled to her husband or to remain unmarried. For her to marry another man is adultery. The emphatic teaching of Jesus is completely contrary to human expectations. He refers to God's creation ordinance, thereby confirming from the Scriptures that marriage is indissoluble and so remarriage following divorce is always adultery.

Andrew Cornes's comments on Jesus' teaching in Mark are helpful. 'Since Jesus specifically calls remarriage after legal divorce "adultery", he is saying that whatever has taken place legally in divorce, the partners are still married. This means that remarriage is not only wrong, it is impossible at the deepest level. Jesus makes the astonishing statement – astonishing in his own day and just as amazing in our own – that it is not actually possible to marry again during the lifetime of a divorced partner; it is only possible to commit adultery with a third party, even though from a legal point of view this new "marriage" has been properly entered into.

'Jesus' teaching also means that divorce – at least in the sense in which the Pharisees thought of it – is not only wrong but is impossible. Again, it is of course perfectly possible to secure a divorce that is valid from the legal point of view. But it is not possible to undo what God has done... Since even after divorce, to marry someone else is to commit adultery, clearly this marriage bond still remains, even after legal divorce. Therefore full divorce – in the sense of the "dissolution" or elimination of the marriage bond – is not something which any legal process is capable of achieving. Only death dissolves the bond.'¹¹

It is noteworthy that Mark's account of this exchange with the Pharisees does not mention the phrase 'except for marital unfaithfulness', but makes it clear that Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage apply to husband and wife alike.

The exception clause (Matthew chapter 19)

In Matthew's account of the testing of Jesus, the first question put by the Pharisees was, '*Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?*' (Matthew 19:3). As we have seen, Jesus did not answer the question directly, but referred to the Genesis account of the

Creation, and the institution of marriage. He then said, *‘So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate’* (Matthew 19:6). The Pharisees persisted with their questioning, *‘Why then did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?’* (Matthew 19:7). Jesus corrected the Pharisees by pointing out that Moses did not command divorce, but rather permitted divorce because their hearts were hard. He then reaffirmed his teaching given in the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus replied, *‘Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery’* (Matthew 19:8-9).

Does adultery dissolve the marriage bond?

A pillar of the Protestant doctrine of divorce is based on Matthew 19:9. The interpretation is that adultery (marital unfaithfulness) dissolves the marriage bond and therefore allows remarriage following divorce. We saw in chapter 3 that Luther and Calvin claimed that adultery meant that the guilty marriage partner was *as good as dead* [my italics], and therefore they believed that the innocent party was free to remarry. Calvin, for example, wrote that a woman who commits adultery sets her husband free, for she cuts herself off from him as a rotten member.¹² Luther said that whoever commits adultery is considered *as one dead* [my italics], and therefore the other may remarry just as though his spouse had died, if it is his intention to insist on his rights and not to show mercy to the guilty party.^{13,14} The Westminster Confession of Faith, which outlines the doctrine of the Reformed Protestant faith, says ‘in the case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce, and, after the divorce, to marry another, *as if the offending party were dead* [my italics].’¹⁵ Significantly, Luther and Calvin both acknowledge that the marriage union is only broken by death. So the question is whether they are correct in their amazing claim that adultery equates to the death of a marriage partner.

The report of the committee of the Lower House of the Convocation of York commented on the official Protestant position. ‘We cannot but express our strong feeling that to refuse to the convicted defendant (adulterer), and to grant to the successful plaintiff (innocent party), a licence to marry is an illogical position. They – both of them – are either married or unmarried. If both are married already, then both should be refused, because they already each have a partner alive, and a licence could only be granted for what would in fact be bigamy and adultery. If they are unmarried, the bond is broken, and the one is as free to be married as the other... The Church of England has in no way sanctioned the idea that the bond has been broken.’¹⁶

In the book *Divorce in America* (1925), the Bishop of Vermont warned of the inevitable consequences of a divorce law that permitted divorce for adultery. ‘Where marriage has been allowed to be dissoluble, it has been found impracticable, first, to restrict this to one cause; or second, in practice to prevent collusion in the furnishing of this cause; or third, to distinguish between the “innocent party” (where such really exists) and the guilty as to the right of remarriage. If the bond of marriage has been broken – either by the act of adultery, or by judicial sentence following upon this – it must have been broken for both parties. It can only therefore be a rule of ecclesiastical discipline which forbids a second marriage to the guilty party. On the

assumption that the bond of marriage no longer exists, the imposition of such lifelong penalty can hardly be justified.’¹⁷

Kenneth Kirk examined the assertion that adultery breaks the marriage bond, allowing the innocent person to remarry, in his book *Marriage and Divorce*. He contended that two questions arise which prove the view to be entirely untenable. ‘The first is, why should this power of “dissolving a marriage” be attributed to marital infidelity, and be withheld from sins in every degree as flagrant violations of the duty of husband to wife and wife to husband – persistent cruelty, or neglect, or desertion, for example? Indeed, many of these sins are very often more flagrant than adultery. An isolated act of infidelity may be the result of momentary passion or loss of self-control, but cruelty and desertion are conscious and deliberate. Surely, therefore, they must destroy the marriage bond even more effectively than adultery is said to do? There seems to be no satisfactory answer to this question...

‘More important, however, is the second question, even though at first sight it appears pedantic and casuistical. If adultery does indeed dissolve the marriage bond, at what moment does it do so? At the moment it is committed – or at the moment when it is first discovered by the innocent party – or at the moment when it is established as a fact after judicial enquiry? ... It seems then that what must be meant by this statement that “adultery dissolves the marriage bond”, is the very different statement, “adultery makes the marriage bond voidable, if the injured party chooses to bring an action for divorce”. So stated, we have, in effect the present English law on the subject.... For it is natural to ask once more, “Why should this be asserted only of adultery, and not of other causes too?”’¹⁸

In his discussion of Matthew chapter 19, Andrew Cornes concludes that Jesus had a different idea of divorce from the Pharisees. While they conceived only of full divorce with the right to remarry, Jesus taught that divorce could take place, but it did not break the marriage bond. He makes this clear by calling remarriage after divorce adultery.¹⁹ Jesus teaches that remarriage is not only wrong, it is impossible, for it is not possible to contract a true marriage while a marriage partner is still living. ‘And it is not only wrong to divorce one’s partner: it is actually impossible in any full sense. You may be able to break the legal ties, you may be able to live apart, but you cannot destroy the marriage; your unity with your partner still exists in God’s eyes; the marriage bond can only be broken by death.’²⁰

Supporting this interpretation Wenham and Heth say that the one flesh bond of marriage is not dissolved by legal divorce, nor by sexual relations with a third party. ‘Just as we cannot “divorce” our children from being our own blood relations, no matter how disreputable they may be, so a man cannot “divorce” his wife who is his own flesh and blood through marriage.’²¹ They believe that when Matthew 19:9 is analysed into its constituent parts that it makes a fitting retort to the catch question of the Pharisees. ‘They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all?” Jesus replied: “It is always wrong to divorce what God had joined together: what is more, divorce, except for marital unfaithfulness, is tantamount to committing adultery; and remarriage after divorce is always so”.’²² Wenham and Heth conclude that the Erasmian attempt to harmonise the teaching of Jesus in Matthew with the absolute prohibition of divorce and remarriage in Mark and Luke ‘is flawed by modern assumptions that Jesus taught against the wrong of unwarranted divorce (a “breaking” of the conjugal life) and not the wrong of

remarriage (an attempt to break the union completely, reversing what God has done). Jesus was against both; but if a divorce today should take place against the Master's will, the faithful disciple must not compound the problem by remarriage. The disciple must above all have that faith which counts his Lord's word as good and perfect. And remarriage, which Jesus calls adultery, cannot be God's best for his children.'²³

The belief that adultery breaks the marriage bond persists among evangelical Christians who permit remarriage today. Some believe that adultery *per se* breaks the marriage bond and therefore permits remarriage just as if the offending husband or wife was dead. But this belief raises many difficult questions. If adultery does break the marriage bond, and if the innocent party is willing to be reconciled, do the couple need to be married again? And what if the innocent party is unaware of the adultery? Is she divorced from her husband who has secretly committed adultery? According to Heth, the view that adultery dissolves the marriage bond 'not only degrades the conception of marriage by making its physical side the dominant consideration; it involves two absurdities. First, a man may cease to be married and yet be unaware of the fact. Secondly, it makes adultery, or the pretence of having committed it, the one way to get rid of a marriage which has become distasteful, and so puts a premium on adultery.'²⁴

Others believe that sexual sin (referred to in the gospel of Matthew by the Greek word *porneia*, and translated as marital unfaithfulness) permits the innocent party to choose between divorce with remarriage, and reconciliation. That is, adultery does not *per se* break the marriage bond, but allows the innocent party the choice of breaking the marriage bond or not. An example of this line of thinking is given by Stephen Clark in his recently published book, *Putting Asunder* (1999). In his discussion of the exception clause, Clark argues that 'where the divorce was on the basis of illicit sexual intercourse, then neither the divorce nor subsequent remarriage by the man whose wife had been the guilty party would involve him in adultery. Jesus was neither commanding nor commending divorce for such a reason, nor was he encouraging remarriage. But neither was he forbidding or discouraging it.' Accordingly, 'we are not to understand divorce as a failure to live up to the teaching that Jesus had given in [Matthew] chapter 18 on the need for forgiveness'. So the exception clause in Matthew 19:9 'permits divorce where the wife has been guilty of behaviour which undermines the marriage'.²⁵ The implication of this teaching is that it is the choice of the innocent party that breaks the one flesh union created by God, and Jesus does not mind which choice we make. The innocent spouse has the right to choose whether or not to separate what God has joined together, and therefore the authority to choose to break the marriage bond. It is not difficult to see that this approach to breaking up a family appears to be completely against the spirit of Jesus' teaching, who warns us not to separate what God has joined together.

The serious fault with the view that adultery breaks the marriage bond is that it ignores the message of Hosea that a husband should love his unfaithful wife again, and do all in his power to achieve reconciliation. The Bible teaches that God wants husband and wife to go to the extreme of forgiveness in order to preserve the family. All attempts in both England and America to legislate for divorce on the grounds of adultery have proved totally disastrous. Even those who argued for the initial law were not prepared to go on defending a divorce law based on adultery as the only ground. It seems inconceivable that a law based on Scripture should prove unworkable in practice. Moreover, the attempts of various Christian denominations to carry out

church remarriage of the so-called innocent party have resulted in confusion and hypocrisy. The arbitrary way in which various Protestant churches have carried out remarriages, with different denominations applying different rules, and with differences even within denominations, undermines the credibility of their doctrine. The Protestant marriage discipline of selective remarriage of the innocent party after divorce remains a mystery to most people. It is now widely acknowledged that it is not possible to establish guilt and innocence in any meaningful way.

The Protestant doctrine of divorce and children

A further objection to the doctrine that claims an adulterous spouse is 'as good as dead' is that it fails to understand that marriage consists of both a marital relationship between husband and wife, and a parental relationship between parents and children. It fails to acknowledge that an 'offending husband or wife' is also a father or mother with parental responsibilities. The Protestant doctrine of divorce needs to explain whether the offending man is dead both as husband and father and whether the offending woman is dead both as wife and mother. Up to now the doctrine has singularly failed to deal with this issue. If the offending man is 'as good as dead' does this mean that the relationship with his children is also 'as good as dead'? Take the example of the father who has an affair with his secretary. Because he is 'as good as dead', the 'innocent' mother is entitled to divorce him and remarry. But what are the consequences for the children? If their father is 'as good as dead' as far as the marriage is concerned, is he still their father? Can a man who is 'as good as dead' in the eyes of the Church, fulfil his responsibility as a parent? And when the 'innocent' mother remarries, what is the relationship between her new husband and her children? Is her new husband also a new father to her children? And if not, then what is the relationship between her new husband and her children? Or is the new husband, in the mind of the children and according to the teaching of Jesus, another man who is committing adultery against the children's father? So we see that the Protestant doctrine of divorce fails to explain the implications of its assertion that the offending party is 'as good as dead' to the children involved. It ignores the parental responsibility of husband and wife; it ignores the needs of children for the care, love and discipline of both mother and father; it ignores the need for children to grow up in a stable family environment.

The idea that Christ taught that adultery severs the relationship between parents and their children is absurd. It is unthinkable that Christ taught that children should regard an adulterous parent 'as good as dead'. Yet the Protestant doctrine allows divorce even although one of the essential family relationships is still intact—the relationship between parents and their children. According to this doctrine, either Jesus believed that the role of the father is not really important, or that a father, although excluded from the family, can still fulfil his responsibilities towards his children. The implication is that Jesus taught that adultery is a sufficient moral ground to break a family home and deprive children of the care of either father or mother. This doctrine has a devastating effect on children. It places the happiness of husband and wife above the moral well-being of children, and above the stability of the family. The children's well-being is considered to be of secondary importance compared to the needs of the individual parents. What is more, when a parent leaves the family home because of a marital offence, this is made blatantly obvious to children, although they do not understand it. Children are astounded

that their parents can so easily depart from the family home, and that they do so with the apparent blessing of the Church.

Does this doctrine really express the mind and attitude of Jesus towards children? Is Jesus, who received the little children despite the objections of his disciples, the one who is responsible for the doctrine that has led to millions of children growing up without a father? No, it is unthinkable that people should claim that the teaching of Jesus allows children to be deserted by their parents. The express purpose of the teaching of Jesus is to preserve the family and prevent children suffering the consequences of broken homes, even to the extent of stating, as he did, that marriage is indissoluble. It is unthinkable that the teaching of Jesus has made children the innocent victims of divorce. The falseness of the Protestant doctrine is a travesty of the teaching of Christ.

Because Jesus' teaching against divorce was so strong and so opposed to the prevailing view of the time, his disciples responded with the amazing statement, *'If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry'* (Matthew 19:10). Clearly even his disciples found it difficult to accept his uncompromising teaching, for they understood it to mean that marriage is for life, and so divorce with remarriage is not an option. This teaching was even stricter than the strictest teaching of the Pharisees. Jesus replied, *'Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it has been given. 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'* (Matthew 19:11–12). With this reply, was Jesus acknowledging that not everyone could accept this word, which is the situation today, where remarriage has become common in some parts of the Church?

Jesus emphasised the seriousness of marital unfaithfulness by teaching that it can lead to a divorce (a separation from bed and board). A husband or wife who divorces his or her marriage partner because of marital unfaithfulness is not guilty of immoral behaviour. Instead it is the unfaithful partner who has been immoral. The shame of adultery is that it can split a family, and be the cause of suffering for all involved. It can therefore never be condoned, even though it may be forgiven. In some marriages, plagued by persistent unfaithfulness, divorce may be the only solution. In effect, adultery can wreck a marriage and damage the family. It is a heinous sin because it affects so many other people; it is a total disaster for all concerned. However, Jesus taught an attitude of forgiveness and reconciliation. *'First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift'* (Matthew 5:24). In a marriage in which there is marital unfaithfulness the innocent party should do all he or she can to persuade their unfaithful spouse to a change of heart, and so bring about reconciliation that would save the marriage. Many people, when they face the awful consequences of adultery, come to their senses and repent of their sin. Jesus taught that divorce can only be considered when there is marital unfaithfulness—and even then Hosea's marriage is an example. Everything possible should be done to save a marriage. However, as we have already seen, a legal divorce for marital unfaithfulness does not allow a remarriage because in God's eyes the marriage bond is still intact.

Teaching of the apostle Paul

The apostle answered a number of inquiries from Christian believers concerning marriage in his first letter to the Corinthian Church. In particular Paul deals with two important questions. The first was—is divorce permitted? Paul writes:

To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife (1 Corinthians 7:10–11).

Paul is teaching new believers and stresses that he is giving them a command from the Lord. And the command from the Lord is clear and emphatic—a wife must not separate from her husband. However, should circumstances arise which make separation inescapable, then the deserted wife has two options: either to be reconciled to her husband or to remain unmarried. Note that remarriage is not an option. It seems unlikely that Paul would have failed to mention the possibility of remarriage for the divorced woman, if he understood that the teaching of Christ allowed remarriage. But Paul does not do so. Instead, he reaffirms the teaching of no remarriage in the strongest possible way.

According to Andrew Cornes, Paul knew of the one exception that Christ allowed namely, divorce in a case of marital unfaithfulness. ‘Paul knows this and includes it in his quotation of Christ’s teaching. Christ taught not only that a woman should not divorce her husband and a man should not divorce his wife. He also taught that you may divorce for adultery. Moreover, that exception of Christ’s came in a setting where remarriage was being discussed. So Christ also taught (according to Paul here) that if (following Christ’s permission) you divorce for adultery, then you must remain single or be reconciled to your partner. This is what Paul is doing: relaying Christ’s teaching about the right marital state after the one exception Christ allowed: divorce for adultery. The only difference is that Christ put it negatively (to remarry is to commit adultery) whereas Paul puts Christ’s teaching positively (after divorce, you must remain single or be reconciled).’²⁶ FF Bruce adds the comment, ‘For a Christian husband or wife divorce is excluded by the law of Christ: here Paul has no need to express a judgement of his own, for the Lord’s ruling on the matter was explicit.’²⁷

Paul then deals with the issue of the Christian married to a non-Christian. Can they divorce?

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. 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. 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. 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 (1 Corinthians 7:12–15).

The essence of Paul’s teaching is that a believing husband or wife must not divorce his or her unbelieving marriage partner. He mentions that the unbelieving partner and children have been sanctified through the marriage, indicating that their hope of salvation lies in the witness of the Christian parent. The children love both parents, believer and non-believer, and want their family to remain together. It is unthinkable that the Christian parent would do anything to

destroy their family. Therefore the Christian should do all he or she can to preserve the marriage and pray for the conversion of the unbelieving partner which God frequently brings about.

In the situation where the unbelieving partner chooses to leave the marriage, despite the Christian spouse having done all they can to preserve it, the Christian should not resist, but allow the unbeliever to leave in peace. But there is no suggestion that the Christian who is left by an unbelieving partner is permitted to remarry. Should an unbelieving partner leave the family home, the Christian spouse should do all in their power to achieve reconciliation; remarriage, which destroys the hope of reconciliation, should not enter their mind.

The so-called Pauline privilege, which allows remarriage for desertion, is derived from the words ‘a believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances’. According to Stephen Clark in *Putting Asunder* (1999), evangelicals who believe that Jesus allows divorce and remarriage for sexual infidelity have long been divided over the question as to whether Paul allows another ground for divorce in this verse. ‘Some have argued that this verse allows divorce for desertion, while others have said that it teaches no such thing. Those who believe that it allows for divorce in cases of desertion differ amongst themselves as to the type of situation with which Paul is dealing.’²⁸ The *New Bible Commentary* suggests that this verse probably allows divorce for desertion. ‘Separation in this case presumably means that the Christian is free to marry someone else—provided he or she is a Christian.’²⁹ But this interpretation appears to be reading into these words what human nature wishes to find, for a perfectly valid interpretation is that a Christian is absolved from pursuing an unbelieving spouse, because ‘God has called us to live in peace’. To interpret the words as overriding the clear command from the Lord (that a separated wife must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband) is perverse. Moreover, such an interpretation is out of sympathy with the instruction that ‘each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him’ (1 Corinthians 7:17). Paul’s final summing up leaves no doubt about his teaching regarding remarriage:

‘A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord’ (1 Corinthians 7:39).

Here Paul mentions the one and only situation in which a woman is permitted to remarry, and that is on the death of her husband; and this is because she is bound to her husband for life. If Paul was teaching that remarriage was permitted for desertion he would surely have said so—he could have written ‘but if her husband dies or leaves her’ but he did not do so. Like Jesus, Paul taught that marriage was indissoluble except by death.

Two doctrines on divorce, but one is false

From our study of the history of divorce we have seen that since the time of the Reformation the Christian Church has been split on the issue. Some theologians, building on the work of Erasmus and Luther, claim that Jesus allows full divorce (a divorce that dissolves the marriage bond and allows remarriage) in the case of adultery and desertion. This view has become increasingly popular during the 20th century, and is held by most evangelical Christians and Protestant denominations, and is gaining ground in the Church of England. It underpins the

campaign to change the marriage discipline of the Church of England and introduce remarriage in church during the lifetime of a former partner.

On the other side of the doctrinal divide are those who believe that marriage is an indissoluble union created by God; that the teaching of the Scriptures permit separation without the right to remarry because the marriage bond is still intact and cannot be broken by legal divorce. The Roman Catholic Church has always held this position, and it is found in the canon law of the Church of England.

These two positions are, of course, diametrically opposed to each other and they cannot both be right; it follows, therefore, that there is a major error in one section of the Christian Church. All the evidence considered in this book suggests that the Protestant doctrine of divorce is based on a false interpretation of the teaching of Christ. The weight of biblical teaching is that divorce is wrong and against God's will; that it is rebellion against God's divine institution of marriage. From the very beginning, God's intention was that marriage is for life.

Endnotes. [Return to top of page](#)

Chapter 16. Why God hates divorce

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