

Dearly Beloved,

In the above article on the permanence of marriage in Messiah, I have dealt with a number of scriptures and historical understandings to show marriage as a covenant until death. However, I have not dealt with all of the common claims to exceptions. This is most true in the claims of the Catholic Church, which while it strongly proclaims the lifelong nature of marriage, allows for exceptions in the cases of “Pauline Privilege” along with a variety of annulments.

I’d like to address both of those cases right here. What the Catholic Church calls Pauline Privilege was first supported in the very late fourth century by John Chrysostom. Apparently, it gradually gained a wider acceptance, and eventually became a part of Catholic Canon Law. Pauline Privilege claims, based on 1 Corinthians 7:12-15, that a Christian may remarry if forced into a divorce by a non-believing spouse.

The verses read as follows (NKJV):

¹² But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her. ¹³ And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him. ¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy. ¹⁵ But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace.

Supporters of Pauline Privilege, both Catholic and non-Catholic, point to the words at the end, “a brother or a sister is not under bondage” as meaning that not only is separation acceptable, but remarriage as well. This is under the assumption that “not under bondage” essentially means “not married.”

However, this is very problematic, and we should not accept that an exception for remarriage exists here. Number one, just read the passage again yourself – it never says that the spouse can remarry. That has to be read into it. Number two, the Greek word meaning “under bondage” (douloo) is not even the same word used elsewhere for marriage in either the New Testament or even the same chapter; rather this is “deo”, translated as “bound” in 1 Corinthians 7:27, 39

along with Romans 7:2. Douloo (under bondage) is used most of the time to refer to severe servitude. Deo (bind) is used multiple times for marriage, as well as other kinds of binding. If they are not even the same word in Greek, we should not take them to mean the same thing, and consider the believing spouse free to remarry. This makes simple linguistic sense. Please feel free to check a concordance yourself and you'll find the same thing.

Naturally then, this phrase "not under bondage" might be referring to other marriage responsibilities or even the previous instructions to the believing spouse to stay with the unbelieving one for sanctification. It is saying – you are not a slave to these things. Not only that, but if we take "not under bondage" to mean the spouse can remarry after this kind of divorce, the instructions are then in conflict with many clear passages calling remarriage adultery and calling marriage a covenant until death. This includes in the very same chapter. We should not take this passage then to be an exception, because scripture cannot contradict scripture.

Another common exception, famously used by Catholics but practiced by plenty of others, is the use of annulments. Annulments do not say that a marriage has ended and now a remarriage can take place; they say that the marriage never was valid, due to a major missing element at its beginning, and it is to be considered null and void. Either person coming out of an annulled marriage can marry without it being adultery. While there are obviously many abuses that take place with this practice, our position at Kodesh Kallah is in affirmation of the basic annulment principle; that certain marriages are invalid to begin with.

I realize some will protest. I also realize annulments come from human deduction, and not clearly from scripture; however, in defense of that, I'd point out many things we do come from deduction rather than scripture, including passing laws against pedophilia, which scripture never deals with. Holy Scripture is our foundation of truth in all matters, but it does not give us the explicit truth in everything. Marriage, according to scripture is a covenant until death. What God joins together, no man can tear apart. However, this demands we ask – what exactly is a marriage? I understand there are many abuses in the annulment process brothers, but are you prepared to say that a 6-year-old bride in Pakistan has a legitimate marriage before God? Are you prepared to say that a psychotic, who gave assent to marry while floridly hallucinating, has a legitimate marriage? I am not prepared to say that in either of those cases, and I hope you are not either. An assent to marriage logically should include sound mind and voluntary will. A psychotic mind or a person with a gun to their head cannot give true assent to marriage.

I want to add, that our position does not stand in support of all the historical reasons given for annulments, nor some of their outrageous applications. Annulments have certainly been abused. However, I would be prepared to say we ought to accept only certain marriage as valid, and be prepared to use annulments in cases such as small children marrying, people who were psychotic at the time, people who were forced to marry, or people who were deceived about a core concept of the marriage such as the other's religion. There are perhaps more reasons as well.

On a related note, for the Body of Messiah to apply marriage teachings, whether the permanent nature of marriage from scripture or any possible annulments, it is going to be impossible without greater unity than exists today. Anyone can observe this is true. That is why I propose the Protestant and Evangelical world plan national or global meetings to work Church marriage doctrine out. The Church's teachings cannot be as disparate as they are today without deeply confusing people and being a terrible witness to the world; even without leading people into serious sin. We need to unify policy regarding marriage, as well as unify principles behind annulments, with a focus on shoring up against the many modern abuses and making sure they don't happen anymore.

This is our position on Pauline Privilege and annulments. I believe they complement and harmonize with our support of lifelong Covenant Marriage. Please take the time to examine each point, as well as to examine the overall doctrine of marriage permanence. The disaster of contemporary marriage in the Kahol (Church) should help spark the fire of repentance. So should the incredible goodness of our Savior's marriage with us.