

A Response to John MacArthur's Views on Remarriage

and a Plea to Restore Marriage

by: Thomas Ackerman

Here is my written response to John MacArthur's acceptance of divorce and remarriage in his Bible commentary. It is also a response to your statement of trust in modern Protestant Bible commentators, who are always going to be wrong if they go against what the Bible teaches. I recognize as you said that you have taken plenty of stands for God's truth and been willing to sacrifice for it. I have always known that, I respect it, and it's one of the reasons I am at the church in the first place. The area of divorce and remarriage is one more area that requires a consistent and courageous stand for truth. It is only through the actions of faithful men, and of course the grace of God, that doctrine on marriage can be restored along with marriages themselves.

I want to start by remembering that you said you were moved that many of the Bible commentators you highly respect permitted divorce and remarriage, and permitted the remarried to continue as members in Church. This is a certain statement of trust in these men, although we both would agree that our ultimate trust is in the Word of God above any man. By the Bible all men's opinions will be judged. However, if we are talking about valuing the intelligent opinions of godly men, why don't we first go to the early Christians and see what they said about marriage? Would you consider that these men deserve at least as much respect and trust as later Protestant commentators?

Early Christians are the men who helped build the Church immediately after the apostles. These are the men who gave us doctrines like the Deity of Jesus, the Trinity, the Hypostatic Union, Original Sin, the Virgin Birth and spelled out a system of morality and ethics based on the Bible, much of which we still use today. These early Christians were also men who were dedicated to their faith, led holy lives and in many cases were willing to go to the death for their faith. They trusted in the authority of the Bible. They trusted in God and in Jesus Christ. So please allow them a good amount of respect and credibility. I personally believe they have a notch higher credibility than others since they were much closer to the lives of the apostles, but either way, if you wish to see how other respected and intelligent Christians view marriage -- not just modern Protestant commentators -- please go through some of their comments in the several

pages below. I think you will see they sound like they respect the plain reading of scripture. They do not accept remarriage. They recognize it as a sin, and recognize excuses for what they are – just excuses. Please listen to what the men who helped found the Church said on marriage:

Hermas:

"I charge you," said he, "to guard your chastity, and let no thought enter your heart of another man's wife, or of fornication, or of similar iniquities; for by doing this you commit a great sin. But if you always remember your own wife, you will never sin. For if this thought enter your heart, then you will sin; and if, in like manner, you think other wicked thoughts, you commit sin. For this thought is great sin in a servant of God. But if any one commit this wicked deed, he works death for himself. Attend, therefore, and refrain from this thought; for where purity dwells, there iniquity ought not to enter the heart of a righteous man." I said to him, "Sir, permit me to ask you a few questions." "Say on," said he.

And I said to him, "Sir, if any one has a wife who trusts in the Lord, and if he detect her in adultery, does the man sin if he continue to live with her?"

And he said to me, "As long as he remains ignorant of her sin, the husband commits no transgression in living with her. But if the husband know that his wife has gone astray, and if the woman does not repent, but persists in her fornication, and yet the husband continues to live with her, he also is guilty of her crime, and a sharer in her adultery."

And I said to him, "What then, sir, is the husband to do, if his wife continue in her vicious practices?"

*And he said, "The husband should put her away, and **remain by himself**. But if he put his wife away and marry another, he also commits adultery."*

And I said to him, "What if the woman put away should repent, and wish to return to her husband: shall she not be taken back by he husband?"

And he said to me,

"Assuredly. If the husband do not take her back, he sins, and brings a great sin upon himself; for he ought to take back the sinner who has repented...In this matter man and woman are to be treated exactly in the same way.

–The Shepherd 4:1-10

Justin Martyr wrote:

"In regards to chastity, Jesus has this to say: 'If anyone look at lust at a woman, he has already before God committed adultery in his heart.' And, 'Whoever marries a woman who has been divorced from another husband, commits adultery.' "

*"According to our teacher, just as they are sinners who contract a second marriage, even though it is in accord with human law, so also are they sinners who look with lustful desires at a woman. He repudiates not only one who actually commits adultery, but even one who wishes to do so; for not only our actions are manifest to God, but even our thoughts."***(First Apology 15)**

Clement of Alexandria:

*That scripture counsels marriage, however, and never allows any release from the union, is expressly contained in the law: "You shall not divorce a wife, except for reason of adultery." And it regards as adultery the marriage of a spouse, while the one from whom a separation was made is still alive. "Whoever takes a divorced woman as wife commits adultery," it says; for "if anyone divorce his wife, he debauches her;" that is, he compels her to commit adultery. And not only does he that divorces her become the cause of this, but also he that takes the woman and gives her the opportunity of sinning; for if he did not take her, she would return to her husband." **(Miscellanies 2:23:145:3)***

Origen:

*For confessedly he who puts away his wife when she is not a fornicator, makes her an adulteress, so far as it lies with him, for if, "when the husband is living she shall be called an adulteress if she be joined to another man;" and when by putting her away, he gives to her the excuse of a second marriage, very plainly in this way he makes her an adulteress... Just as a woman is an adulteress, even though she seems to be married to a man, while a former husband yet lives, so also the man who seems to marry who has been divorced does not marry her, but, according to the declaration of our Savior, he commits adultery with her."**(Commentaries on Matthew 14)***

Basil the Great wrote:

The man who has deserted his wife and goes to another is himself an adulterer because he makes her commit adultery; and the woman who live with him

is an adulteress, because she has caused another woman's husband to come over to her...The woman who lives with an adulterer is an adulteress the whole time.

The woman who has been abandoned by her husband, ought, in my judgment, to remain as she is. The Lord said, "If any one leave his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, he causes her to commit adultery;" thus, by calling her adulteress, He excludes her from intercourse with another man. For how can the man being guilty, as having caused adultery, and the woman, go without blame, when she is called an adulteress by the Lord for having intercourse with another man? A man who marries another man's wife who has been taken away from him will be charged with adultery... -Amphilochius 199

Ambrose of Milan:

But what shall I say about chastity,

when only one and no second union is allowed? As regards marriage, the law is, not to marry again, nor to seek union with another wife. It seems strange to many why impediment should be caused by a second marriage entered on before baptism, so as to prevent election to the clerical office, and to the reception of the gift of ordination; seeing that even crimes are not wont to stand in the way, if they have been put away in the sacrament of baptism. But we must learn, that in baptism sin can be forgiven, but law cannot be abolished. In the case of marriage there is no sin, but there is a law. Whatever sin there is can be put away, whatever law there is cannot be laid aside in marriage. -

On the duties of Clergy:1:257

And what else did John have in mind but what is virtuous, so that he could not endure a wicked union even in the king's case, saying: "It is not lawful for thee to have her to wife."¹¹⁸ He could have been silent, had he not thought it unseemly for himself not to speak the truth for fear of death, or to make the prophetic office yield to the king, or to indulge in flattery. He knew well that he would die as he was against the king, but he preferred virtue to safety. Yet what is more expedient than the suffering which brought glory to the saint.

On the duties of Clergy, 3:89

No one is permitted to know a woman other than his wife. The marital right is given you for this reason: lest you fall in a snare and sin with a strange woman. "If you are bound to a wife do not seek a divorce," for you are not permitted, while

your wife lives to marry another." –

Abraham 1:57:59

You dismiss your wife, therefore, as if by right and without being charged with wrongdoing; and you suppose it is proper for you to do so because no human law forbids it; but divine law forbids it. Anyone who obeys men should stand in awe of God. Hear the Word of the Lord, which even they who propose our laws must obey: "What God has joined together, let no man put asunder."

–Commentary on Luke, Sec. 8:5

Jerome:

*In explaining the testimony of the apostle, "The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband; and likewise, also, the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife," we have subjoined the following: "The entire question relates to those who are living in wedlock, whether it is lawful for them to put away their wives, a thing which the Lord also has forbidden in the Gospel. Following the decision of the Lord the apostle teaches that a wife must not be put away saving for fornication, **and that, if she has been put away, she cannot during the lifetime of her husband marry another man, or, at any rate, that she ought, if possible, to be reconciled to her husband**. In another verse he speaks to the same effect: "The wife is bound ...as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband; she is at liberty to be married to, whom she will; only in the Lord. I find joined to your letter of inquiries a short paper containing the following words: "ask him,(that is me,) whether a woman who has left her husband on the ground that he is an adulterer and sodomite and has found herself compelled to take another may in the lifetime of him whom she first left be in communion with the church without doing penance for her fault." As I read the case put I recall the verse "they make excuses for their sins." We are all indulgent to our own faults; and what our own will leads us to do we attribute to a necessity of nature. It is as though a young man were to say, "I am over-borne by my body, the glow of nature kindles my passions, the structure of my frame and its reproductive organs call for sexual intercourse." Or again a murderer might say, "I was in want, I stood in need of food, I had nothing to cover me. If i shed the blood of another, it was to save myself from dying of cold and hunger." Tell the sister, therefore, who thus enquires of me concerning her condition, not my sentence but that of the apostle. "Know ye not, brethren (for I speak to them*

that know the law,) how that the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth? For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband, so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. So then, if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress." And in another place: "the wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord." The apostle has thus cut away every plea and has clearly declared that, if a woman marries again while her husband is living, she is an adulteress. You must not speak to me of the violence of a ravisher, a mother's pleading, a father's bidding, the influence of relatives, the insolence and the intrigues of servants, household losses. A husband may be an adulterer or a sodomite, he may be stained with every crime and may have been left by his wife because of his sins; yet he is still her husband and, so long as he lives, she may not marry another. The apostle does not promulgate this decree on his own authority but on that of Christ who speaks in him. For he has followed the words of Christ in the gospel: "whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced, committeth adultery." Mark what he says: "whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery." Whether she has put away her husband or her husband her, the man who marries her is still an adulterer. I have not been able quite to determine what it is that she means by the words "has found herself compelled" to marry again. What is this compulsion of which she speaks? Was she overborne by a crowd and ravished against her will? If so, why has she not, thus victimized, subsequently put away her ravisher? Let her read the books of Moses and she will find that if violence is offered to a betrothed virgin in a city and she does not cry out, she is punished as an adulteress: but if she is forced in the field, she is innocent of sin and her ravisher alone is amenable to the laws. Therefore if your sister, who, as she says, has been forced into a second union, wishes to receive the body of Christ and not to be accounted an adulteress, let her do penance; so far at least as from the time she begins to repent to have no farther intercourse with that second husband who ought to be called not a husband but an adulterer. If this seems hard to her and if she cannot leave one whom she has once loved and will not prefer the Lord to sensual pleasure, let her hear the declaration of the apostle: "ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of devils: ye cannot be partakers of the Lord's table and of the table of devils," and in another place: "what communion hath light

with darkness? and what concord hath Christ with Belial?

–Letters 55, 58

Augustine:

This we now say, that, according to this condition of being born and dying, which we know, and in which we have been created, the marriage of male and female is some good, the compact whereof divine Scripture so commends, as that neither is it allowed one put away by her husband to marry, so long as her husband lives; nor is it allowed one put away by his wife to marry another, unless she who have separated from him be dead. Our Lord, therefore, in order to confirm that principle, that a wife should not lightly be put away, made the single exception of fornication; but enjoins that all other annoyances, if any such should happen to spring up, be borne with fortitude for the sake of conjugal fidelity and for the sake of chastity; and he also calls that man an adulterer who should marry her that has been divorced by her husband. And the Apostle Paul shows the limit of this state of affairs, for he says it is to be observed as long as her husband liveth; but on the husband's death he gives permission to marry. For he himself also held by this rule, and therein brings forward not his own advice, as in the case of some of his admonitions, but a command by the Lord when he says: "And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband: but and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife." I believe that, according to a similar rule, if he shall put her away, he is to remain unmarried, or be reconciled to his wife. -Commentaries on the Sermon on the Mount, Harmony of the Gospels, Homilies on the Gospels

For whosoever putteth away his wife except for the cause of fornication, maketh her to commit adultery. To such a degree is that marriage compact entered upon be a holy Sacrament, that it is not made void even by separation itself, since so long as her husband lives, even by whom she hath been left, she commits adultery in the case where she marries another, and he who hath left her is the cause of this evil. But I marvel, if, if it be allowed to put away a wife who is an adulteress, so it be allowed, having put her away, to marry another. For holy Scripture makes a hard knot in this matter in that the apostle says, that, by commandment of the Lord, the wife ought not to depart

from her husband, but, in case she shall have departed to remain unmarried, or to be reconciled to her husband...I can not see how the man can have permission to marry another, in the case where he left an adulteress, when a woman can not be married to another when she left an adulterer. Seeing that the compact of marriage is not done away with by an intervening divorce, so that they continue as wedded persons one to another, even after separation, and commit adultery with those with whom they be joined, even after their own divorce, either the woman with the man, or the man with a woman. Neither can it rightly be held that a husband who dismisses his wife because of fornication and marries another does not commit adultery. For there is also adultery on the part of those who, after the repudiation of their former wives because of fornication, marry others... No one is so unreasonable to say that a man who marries a woman whose husband has dismissed her because of fornication is not an adulterer, while maintaining that a man who marries a woman dismissed without the ground of fornication is an adulterer. Both of these men are guilty of adultery.

-Adulterous Marriages 1:9:9

A spouse, therefore, is lawfully dismissed for cause of adultery, but the laws of chastity remains. That is why a man is guilty of adultery if he marries a woman who has been dismissed even for this very reason of adultery.-ibid., 2:4:4

A woman begins to be the wife of no later husband unless she has ceased to be the wife of a former one. She will cease to be the wife of a former one, however, if that husband should die, not if he commit adultery. -ibed, 2:4:3

Therefore to serve two or more (men), so to pass over from a living husband into marriage with another, was neither lawful then (in the Old Testament), nor is it lawful now, nor will it ever be lawful. To apostatize from the One God, and to go into adulteress superstitions of another, is ever an evil. -On the Holy Spirit; Doctrinal Treatises; Moral Treatises.

The above reflects a great deal of the thought of the early Church, albeit not the entirety. I reiterate that these men certainly deserve our trust as much as any man does. So why should John MacArthur receive any more trust than they? Not only do we see their powerful stand for

marriage being lifelong and against remarriage because it is sin, but we see a good idea of their reasoning process. This process is clearly based on a more literal reading of scripture, one which does not try and squeeze out of passages saying that death ends a marriage by telling stories about the context; one which does not try and reinterpret simple teachings like remarriage being adultery by literally inserting one's own thought process into the verses; one which does not put high-minded analysis above the plain didactic text of the Bible. When Paul says that a marriage lasts until death, they believe Paul.

It's also important to realize that MacArthur, and others like him, are affected by the same pressures that any pastor is affected by, which are the pressures of Christians who desire to have divorces and who desire to have remarriages. MANY Christians want these things. I view the willingness to ignore the plain meaning of scripture regarding marriage (while respecting it elsewhere) is pretty much a result of caving in to that pressure. Ministers want to give the people what they want, so they search for any scriptural excuse they can think of, and search for any hint or suggestion that such a union can be ended. It is in THIS state of mind, bent on avoiding possible loss, that I believe commentators find reason for divorce and remarriage. To repeat the words of the more courageous Jerome: *As I read the case put I recall the verse "they make excuses for their sins." We are all indulgent to our own; and what our own will leads us to do we attribute to a necessity of nature. It is as though a young man were to say, "I am overborne by my body, the glow of nature kindles my passions, the structure of my frame and its reproductive organs call for sexual intercourse."*

A response to MacArthur's interpretation of Matthew 5:31-32 and 1 Corinthians 7:12-15 regarding remarriage:

To begin, a good bit of what MacArthur says about marriage is true, as is a good bit of his reviewing of the Torah and the prophets on this subject. I believe that he sincerely cares about marriage and does not want to take it lightly. However, I also believe he is sincerely deceived. The first thing I want to point out is that throughout his analysis, he consistently makes several errors – he inserts his own thoughts in place of scripture, he assumes what God must have been doing, he ignores plain meaning of the text of the Bible and he never looks at the passages which speak of divorce and remarriage all together, but rather isolates the verses or passages he wants. These reasons, if not others, are to blame for MacArthur choosing to justify remarriage and claim it is not sinful.

While I mostly will talk about MacArthur's reading of Matthew 5 and speak little about the surrounding chapters, I want to mention that his view of this and other passages is affected by the overarching idea that Yeshua could not have altered the Mosaic laws in any way, and must merely have been correcting rabbinical perversions of them. Hence, the Sermon on the Mount in this view is just great rabbinical commentary. In some instances this may be true, but I'm afraid it is not true in all.

Firstly, to claim that He must only be correcting the rabbis is based on the scripture that He will not change one jot or tittle of the law (Matt 5:18). Yet this reading ignores the fact that the law and the prophets include the book of Genesis, from which He draws His marriage teaching, one which is not like the old. "Law" does not only mean the Mosaic commandments. Hebrews 7:12 even speaks of a "change also of the law" as relating to the priesthood, so we can't claim that change is an impossibility anyway. Moreover, this reading of the Sermon on the Mount ignores the fact that Yeshua Himself in Matthew 19 and Mark 10 draws a clear contrast between the Mosaic law and His own teaching and even explains that the Mosaic law was given because of the hardness of Israel's heart (Matthew 19:8). Notice, He didn't say the rabbinical interpretation was given because of Israel's hardness. Rather He says it was the Mosaic law itself. This is key. The Sermon on the Mount is NOT a mere correction of rabbinic perversion. It begins to transcend the Mosaic Law in certain areas, because it is a perfect reflection of the whole Torah itself. We have the New Testament, not the New Commentary. Does that make sense to you?

Here is the text MacArthur focuses on: ³¹ ***It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement:***

³² ***But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.***

A few other problems and errors I found in MacArthur's interpretation are below:

1 MacArthur simply inserts things into the text which are not there. For example, he says Jesus is saying it's wrong to divorce without "proper cause" when this is a rewriting of what Matthew 5 and Matthew 19 say. They say except for fornication (*porneia*) Claiming he meant without

“just cause” is not only inaccurate, but opens the door wide for those who wish to do find further exceptions. Here many readers will naturally accept Mr. MacArthur’s authoritative voice, alongside their own desire for a not-so-difficult Christian walk, as telling the truth. However, he is already going beyond the words of the Bible.

2 As he does with the other Gospel passages on this same subject, MacArthur simply avoids the fact that even this short passage asserts that whoever marries the divorced wife “commiteth adultery.” Why should anyone seeking to understand the Word of God ignore verses like this? Even more, he ignores Luke 16:18, which shows that BOTH the spouse sending away the other, AND the person being sent away commit adultery if they remarry. Both sides are committing adultery if they remarry. Is it right to pass over these teachings when we interpret what “**saving for the cause of fornication**” means? I think not. But that’s just what MacArthur does. You will notice also that in conformity to the verses which call remarrying adultery, several of the early Christian leaders I quoted above made it clear that neither of the spouses may remarry. It’s prohibited either way. THEY are the commentators whose teachings are in harmony with the Bible.

3 MacArthur assumes that the marriage passage in Matthew 19 is heavily limited by the context of Yeshua answering the question: **Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?** Yet this facet of the passage does NOT ratchet it into MacArthur’s meaning as he wishes it does. Like others who misuse context, MacArthur is forced to ignore OTHER major facets of the same context, and also ignore the plain reading of text both here and elsewhere. For example, even in this passage Yeshua HIMSELF makes it clear He is not merely correcting the Pharisees’ wrong interpretation, because He explains that the law was given because of Israel’s hardness and also points to God’s true intention from Genesis. How is that a mere rabbinical correction of their liberalism?

Moreover, since we care about context, the context at the end of the passage makes it clear that Yeshua is giving a very difficult teaching, for it says: **His disciples say unto him, If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry.**

¹¹ **But he said unto them, All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given.**

¹² **For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made**

themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.

Why would His disciples ever suggest “***it is not good to marry***” if His teaching is merely the Mosaic one and allows for remarriage after adultery? Adultery is not all that rare. You’re still looking at plenty of remarriages. And why would Moses’ original teaching be that shocking anyway? Lastly, why on earth would Yeshua respond with the possibility of being celibate if one is able if He’s merely tweaking the rabbinical teaching a bit? His own words ensure us that the teaching is as difficult as it sounds. Remarriage is adultery. Sometimes celibacy will have to be the answer! Those words at the end make no sense according to MacArthur’s view of marriage. They do make sense according to the other view. Could it be then that the early Christians I’ve quoted had it right?

4 MacArthur does not address in any detail the understanding of the early Church. This is that the exception clause of Matthew’s Gospel is an exception for divorce, but not for remarriage. This is a reasonable interpretation, at least in that it does not violate other passages in the New Testament which call remarriage adultery, and say that marriage is until death. This was the view of some of the prominent early Christian leaders, whose faith and intelligence is not questioned, and it became the view of the entire Church for centuries; that is until the Eastern Church started officially allowing remarriages for adultery and other reasons nearly one thousand years ago. How is it that MacArthur, while ignoring the plain reading of various texts, has managed to understand the Bible better than the early Christian leaders and the entire Church did for centuries? How is it that he tells us nothing about this interpretation either? Don’t his readers who might know very little about the historical church deserve to know?

5 MacArthur tries to write off the “betrothal view” (I will call it the *porneia* view), but his dismissal is based on some bad presumptions and a narrow understanding of that view. Number one, he seems to demand that the context speak explicitly of the betrothal period or of the Torah’s virginity law (Deut 22:13-21) for the *porneia* view to be correct. But why must it? Not everyone brings up all facts of a context in detail. Jesus’ listeners would have understood Moses’ law regarding virginity, and they also would have been steeped in the Jewish betrothal custom. So there is not a need to explain them in detail. Moreover, while some have a problem with Jewish tradition being brought in here, we have to remember that Jewish tradition is indeed present in the Gospel, most notably in the Passover, as Jesus takes the cups of wine.

There are no cups of wine in the Torah. They are from tradition. Yeshua was also present at the Feast of Dedication, a feast which was initiated long after the Torah was written. So why deny that Matthew could be speaking to an audience with an understanding of Jewish tradition regarding the betrothal period?

Number two, he fails to show a real problem with the text using the word *apoluo* (set free or send away). Where is it a problem for the *porneia* view? The betrothal period was in many ways like a marriage, as he himself admits. Moreover, the fornication view includes the discovered fornication AFTER marriage is consummated (Deut 22:13-14), which would allow for the use of *apoluo* even if the betrothal period does not. This view really includes both. So this is a non-problem.

Number three, he argues that fornication would require stoning the offender and that this itself makes the fornication view false; there'd be a stoning not a divorce. This is false. You see this argument that fornication would require stoning ignores how the law was often practiced in that day and also, if true, would negate his own view that divorce and remarriage is permissible for adultery since there'd have to be a stoning there too! You see, according to some accounts, stoning for morality offenses by the 1st century AD was not that common. Apparently many saw fit to be merciful, and may also have viewed punishments of the law as not being unchangeable as the moral law is. I would imagine even BEFORE the 1st century AD, some people preferred mercy rather than stoning for morality offenses. According to Jewish tradition, even in ancient times it was rare to use the Torah punishment of execution against the rebellious son (Deut 21:18-21). Most parents simply used the law as a warning. They didn't typically stone their child. While Jewish tradition is not inerrant, it does give us a possible view into why we read the 1st century Judaism didn't stone all the time for morality offenses.

Moreover, on pg. 317 MacArthur's makes the astounding point that "God permitted divorce rather than death...why would he not also permit remarriage?"* This seems to be little more than MacArthur inserting his own reasoning into the text of the Bible. Nowhere does it say that God permitted divorce rather than stoning. Those are his words. Nor does he cite anywhere in tradition where this claim was made. After ASSUMING that God allowed this switch, MacArthur then goes on the demand we accept his reasoning that God ALSO permits remarriage. This is pure rewriting of the Bible! It is nothing but the words of men. More likely what happened is that Jewish people chose not to practice execution for every offense, for better or for worse. They must have viewed penalties as more mutable than other laws in Torah. And so do we,

right? That doesn't mean that God was instructing them by special revelation to do this. Nor does it mean there was an official switch between stoning and divorce. That would be an assumption. A decrease in stoning is just how history happened among the Jewish people. MacArthur writes into this situation his own doctrine despite the complete lack of biblical evidence for it. Would we trust anyone else who did this? The New Testament calls remarriage adultery many times. We should not presume God thinks otherwise.

[On a related point, this concept of divorce being interchangeable with death has opened up to a terrible false principle in interpretation; this is the idea that a spouse can be "like dead" and hence the other can divorce or remarry. To mention one of many uses of this unbiblical principle, I recently saw a clip of Pat Robertson answering a man's question about whether he could divorce his wife who had Alzheimer's disease. Pat Robertson said that since Alzheimer's makes a person "like the dead" he was free to divorce and remarry. My first thought was – how wicked. What a false prophet. And I thought if one is "like dead" with a mental illness, then one could be like dead with a physical one too, since the sick often spend time lying horizontally, much like corpses do. Why not divorce and remarry for serious illnesses then? I hope you can see both the anti-biblical nature as well as the incredibly selfish aims of this principle. It is a tool of the devil.]*

On page 316 MacArthur rejects the idea that the exception clause appears ONLY in Matthew because of its Jewish audience. He claims rather "the exception clause would have been inappropriate" for Mark or Luke since they are not addressing the rabbis' perversion of the teaching. However, that is but an assertion. It seems quite appropriate to mention an important exception to a common moral law, regardless of whether He addresses that particular angle or not. Doesn't it almost seem dangerous not to mention it? Moreover, the teaching in Mark 10 certainly DOES address a Pharisee just like the teaching in Matthew, just one who provides a simpler question, which is about the lawfulness of divorce in general (vss 2-4). If a Pharisee is being addressed in Mark why didn't He correct their perversion? For these reasons, it comes off as odd for the exception to be lacking elsewhere (including in Paul's teachings) unless there is a strong reason. The fact that the exception would not have applied to Mark and Luke's primary audiences makes for a good reason. Nor would it have applied to Paul's mostly Gentile audiences.

It is important to remember that the *porneia* view of the exception clause is a robust view, with some amount of flexibility. It is not easily knocked down with the mere definition of a word if Greek. The *porneia* view includes fornication that occurred either before the betrothal period

or during it. It includes discovery of that fornication either during the betrothal period or immediately after marriage when the husband discovers the wife is not a virgin. MacArthur fails to show that any word used in Matthew disallows this view. Rather he rests here as elsewhere on his own questionable reasoning.

6 MacArthur claims the Pharisees understood Yeshua to mean divorce (not sending away during the betrothal period) but he does not prove this assertion.

7 On pg. 36 he says that adultery is “the only thing that can break a marriage bond” when scripture actually says *porneia* (fornication) rather than adultery.

8 MacArthur says that *porneia* means “any illicit sexual intercourse.” I would advise anyone to go through Daniel Jennings’ research in *Except for Fornication*. He shows from biblical scriptures and from extra-biblical literature that the main meanings for *porneia* were pre-marital sex and prostitution. The latter is not in view in Matthew. He shows than any hammered-flat definition of the word would be a rare usage. If that is the case, we should prefer to read the word *porneia* according to its common meaning, not a specialized one. That would be premarital sex, as many take it today.

9 We also see that MacArthur interprets Matthew 5, as brief as it is, with only little mention of Mark and Luke on the same subject. Yet Mark and Luke assert plainly that remarriage is adultery too, and do not mention the *porneai* exception. This seems to be his minimizing the evidence that opposes his own view, and focusing on the ones which aren’t so obviously opposed. I think if we look at ALL the clear New Testament scriptures on this subject (including in Paul), the number of plain statements declaring remarriage sin are enough to realize we ought to rule out interpretations like his.

10 MacArthur gives a brief defense of another alleged exception for remarriage, that of “Pauline Privilege.” This is the claim that 1 Corinthians 7:12-15 allows remarriage for a believer forced to divorce by a non-believing spouse. The big problem with this is that the exception does not exist anywhere in the text. I would challenge you to point to any words there which

permit remarriage. The words only permit accepting a divorce if a non-believing spouse demands it. In fact the very same chapter teaches that marriage is only ended by death (vs 39) and that if a separation occurs between spouses, they are either to reunite or remain celibate (vss 10-11). So the interpretation that an exception exists for remarriage here makes the Bible in the very same chapter contradict itself.

Many people point to the phrase “not under bondage” to claim that remarriage is possible. Yet the very word used for “under bondage” (*doulouo*) is not even used to describe the marriage bond in the same chapter, nor is it used to describe the marriage bond in the rest of the New Testament. It is rather a word used to describe strong forms of servitude (whether to sin, to God or to people). The word used elsewhere for the marriage bond is *deo* (ex: 1 Corinthians 7:27, 39; Romans 7:2), but Paul does not use it here. Therefore, finding an exception for remarriage in these verses demands inserting things into the text which simply are not there.

A Final View of the Subject

One thing to remember in looking at whether there really are two scriptural exceptions is how the exceptions are understood by those who believe in them. From what I have learned on the subject, and I have both read and heard personally from multiple sources, the exception based on adultery may be said to include the innocent party only, but for practical purposes countless churches WILL remarry the guilty party, so it functions both ways, becoming broader than it first appears. I do not even have to mention the many churches that make the “exception clause” cover emotional adultery and pornography, which are quite common practices. Moreover, many pastors allow that once ONE spouse has remarried after an invalid divorce, it qualifies as adultery, hence allowing remarriage for the OTHER spouse. Here we have a sneaky tactic that makes the exception enormously broad. You could sail an elephant through that one. So-called Pauline Privilege is also broadened by expanding it from a forced divorce by a nonbeliever to ANY abandonment whatsoever. Then the definition of “believer” is attacked so that a divorcing spouse with a few different theological beliefs is not considered a believer, hence allowing remarriage. Likewise, a divorcing spouse who is involved in some occult practices is not considered a believer, hence allowing remarriage. Protestants and Catholics alike knock this one wide open. But is that honest pastor? And does it fit with the clear difficulty of Yeshua’s teaching that His own disciples saw in it? And does it respect the ordinary reading of the words rather than read into them? I believe the answer to all three questions is “no.” Yet such expanding of these alleged exceptions is common and hardly rare. It is wicked fruit of allowing them in.

I'd be interested in learning if John MacArthur believes in OTHER exceptions beside the two he details here. We often find out that pastors do. I'd also be interested in learning how he applies them. If like many pastors he allows the remarried to be members of the church even for reasons beyond his accepted two, as you and I previously discussed, then he is practicing what is in effect liberalism. This makes sin look not very serious, and normalizes evil in the church. As I have mentioned already, it also reveals great inconsistency and hypocrisy in the Church by allowing the remarried to live without repentance but requiring of other sexually immoral church members to repent.

On a side note, his colleague in Calvinism John Piper has written a long paper explaining why there are NO biblical exceptions for divorce and remarriage. He presents some strong arguments. Then at the very end he explains that if you DO remarry, God will respect the union and you can remain in the church. So application is quite important just like doctrine. A church which has strong restrictions on remarriage, but which refuses to apply them through church discipline, really might as well not have them at all. It just undermines the doctrine itself.

I want to end by pointing out that if what pastors like MacArthur believe is true, then the Church has basically returned to the era of Moses, in which the law of marriage was given to accommodate the hardness of Israel's heart. And isn't this what pastors are doing in allowing remarriages? Accommodating the hardness of the heart? And if that is true isn't that in stark contrast to the New Covenant reality, one which includes the power of the Holy Spirit to become new creatures and to live in righteousness (Jer 31:33-34, Rom 3:31, 1 Cor 6:11 etc.)? Therefore, allowing remarriage is not a doctrine for the present covenant. It is one for the past.

Moreover, if permission of remarriage is accepted based on the large number of Protestant commentators who support it, we are choosing to trust in the "fathers" of the faith when we know how often the fathers have been wrong, and in large numbers. I am reminded of Stephen's incredible speech in Acts 7, in which he reviews the many acts of faithlessness by the fathers of Israel, which were commonplace, including among its leadership. He says that Israel has long been "***uncircumcised in heart and ears.***" In choosing whether to place trust in Protestant commentators or any other, we must hear those words from the past echo back. Has the Church never been uncircumcised in heart and ears too? I don't think we'd have any disagreement on that. We are a stiff-necked people. Jesus spoke of such a long tradition of

hard-heartedness, when he said to the Pharisees: ***“Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets... O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee.”***

We have a capacity to be more than that in the New Covenant. We do not have to be controlled by a hardened heart because we have a new one, made new in the Holy Spirit. I believe we should trust in the Word of God before we trust in what men like MacArthur say on the subject of marriage. They are replacing the true Word with the words of men, just as the Pharisees did. I also don't think we should be intimidated by what sounds like a hard teaching about marriage that Jesus has given. Remember that the vast majority of Christians had only one spouse for the vast majority of Christian history. Even today, with weakened doctrine and open rebellion, a slim majority of Christians still have only one spouse for their life. This is not asking too much of the holy people that God has called for Himself. It is not asking too much of God either, of course, whose grace is overflowing. This grace is not merely that which forgives, but also that which empowers and I trust it to empower the Body of Messiah to live as we are called. God's grace is a force.

I know you said you would have to be very confident in any doctrine to accept it, and I respect that need. If I can only say one thing about confidence, it is that confidence is found in God's Word. If we study all the plain New Testament teachings about marriage, they are quite clear that marriage is a bond for life, and that remarriage is adultery. They couldn't be clearer. If we then choose to look at the unclear scriptures through the truth of the clear, we can see they allow no such thing as remarriage. They are speaking of either divorce alone or of what we would call today an annulling for discovered fornication before marriage. In contrast, if we believe that remarriage is permissible for various reasons, we force the Bible to contradict its own testimony, and this is impossible. Remarriage is not permissible in the New Covenant. The New is not like the Old.

Therefore, I ask you to continue to meditate on these scriptures, and to pray over whether you can refresh the church's doctrine on marriage to respect its permanence. I believe a change would be closer to the Word of God, and closer to the early Church. If you are willing to examine other material about marriage or hear testimonies of brothers who chose celibacy over remarriage, I'd be happy to connect you with them. Thank you very much for your time and prayerful consideration.

“Jesus Christ did not come to this world to add another layer of hypocrisy” –
preacher Stephen Wilcox

And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled

²² In the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in his sight:

²³ If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven

(Colossians 1:21-23)