

Editorial: “Except it be for Fornication”

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Introduction: Our Lord’s teaching on marriage and divorce is crisply summed up in Luke 16:18: “Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery: and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband committeth adultery.”

Mark expands on this in chapter 10:2-12:

And the Pharisees came to him, and asked him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife? tempting him. And he answered and said unto them, What did Moses command you? And they said, Moses suffered to write a bill of divorcement, and to put her away. And Jesus answered and said unto them, For the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept. But from the beginning of the creation God made them male and female. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife; And they twain shall be one flesh: so then they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. And in the house his disciples asked him again of the same matter. And he saith unto them, Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her. And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery.

Paul uses this teaching to illustrate a point in Romans 7:1-3:

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: but if her husband be dead, she is

free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man.

And again in his formal treatment recorded in I Corinthians 7:10-13, the apostle writes,

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. But to the rest speak I, not the Lord: If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him.

We may summarize the Bible's teaching quite simply. When a man and a woman take one another in marriage and the marriage is consummated then they become "one flesh," joined together by God, not to be set asunder by man, but only by death. This has always been the historic teaching of the church.

One exception, and only one, is given by our Lord twice in Matthew's Gospel. In chapter 5:31-32, Christ states,

It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: 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.

And again in 19:3-12:

The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall

be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. They say unto him, Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away? He saith unto them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so. And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery. His disciples say unto him, If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry. But he said unto them, All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given. 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.

Now the commentators from Calvin on to the present are agreed in teaching that the exception is *adultery*! I have checked Matthew Poole; Matthew Henry; John Gill; Jamieson, Fausset and Brown; A. W. Pink; Lloyd-Jones; John Murray; Lenski; Leon Morris and almost anything else I could lay my hands on. All are agreed that adultery allows divorce. Likewise, the divines in the *Westminster Confession* 24:5. Now faced with such unanimity surely the wise thing is to shut up and write about something else!

The problem with this unanimity is this: the texts do not say "adultery"! They read: "saving for the cause of fornication" and "except it be for fornication." We biblical inerrantists hold to the doctrine of verbal inspiration and so reckon that what our Lord said, presumably in Aramaic and what the Holy Spirit inspired Matthew to write in Greek, was *porneia*, which we translate as "fornication."

So having cited the *Westminster Confession* in support of the adultery position let me further quote 1:10: "The supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined ... can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the scripture."

Preliminary considerations: The writer is neither a Greek scholar nor a theologian but I find in my studies that Greek is a language capable of very great precision. For instance, a good deal of light is shed on the baptismal controversy by noting the difference in meanings between *oikia* and *oikos*. Another example of precision is given by Paul in I Corinthians 6:9: "... nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind," where he uses the precise words: *malakos* and *arsenokoites* to indicate the passive and active partners in sodomy.

There must therefore be a *prima facie* case to understand the meaning of these texts as fornication. Let us begin with the word adultery. God gave mankind just ten words, and the seventh is, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." Because we are fallen human beings, our legislatures pour out a mass of laws—and impossible deluges of paperwork such that civil servants, doctors, police, and teachers, etc., are actually hindered in carrying out their respective duties—while God's law is in large part ignored, indeed, at times, actually legislated against. And certainly we reap what we sow in respect to this commandment in ill-health and death.

It is clear from Scripture that generically adultery (*moicheia*) is a comprehensive term covering all forms of sexual deviation: bestiality, consanguinity, fornication, harlotry, incest, lesbianism, lewdness, pornography, rape, sodomy, etc. Further, our Lord shows that even our thoughts are covered:

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart (Matt. 5:27-28).

I suspect most men are challenged by that, and by the remark of Peter about "having eyes full of adultery" (II Peter 2:14). Specifically, and in this context, adultery (*moicheia*) means sexual union between two persons one or both of whom are married to other persons. In its various forms, it occurs about 35 times in the New Testament.

Fornication (*porneia*) has the idea of "illicit sexual relations" outside marriage, perhaps particularly resorting to harlots (*pornai*). Immorality was widespread in the Greek world, as it has become in ours, and was scarcely counted a sin. Hence it is forbidden in the decree sent out from

Jerusalem (Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25; cf. I Thess. 4:3-7). The fact that here our Lord uses both words as He does in Matthew 15:19, "For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies," and elsewhere, suggests a clear distinction in His mind (cf. Mark 7:21; Gal. 5:19; Heb. 13:4). It occurs, in its varying forms, about 43 times.

Now Matthew's Gospel, which in spite of critical opinion, I believe to be the first, has a distinct Jewish cast, continually quoting links with the Old Testament and initially aimed at the Jewish situation. Only Matthew records the exception clauses in chapters 5 and 19. These exception clauses are not part of the main thrust of our Lord's teaching, which is clearly aimed at removing the Mosaic dispensation. Read the passages again and it is clear that the teaching is essentially the removal of any grounds for divorce. What God has joined together man cannot put asunder. It simply is not in our power to do so. Only death breaks the bond (Rom 7:2-3; I Cor. 7:39). So what idea would the word *porneia* convey to a practising Jew? Surely the situation described in Deuteronomy 22:13-22?

If any man take a wife, and go in unto her, and hate her, And give occasions of speech against her, and bring up an evil name upon her, and say, I took this woman, and when I came to her, I found her not a maid: Then shall the father of the damsel, and her mother, take and bring forth the tokens of the damsel's virginity unto the elders of the city in the gate: And the damsel's father shall say unto the elders, I gave my daughter unto this man to wife, and he hateth her; And, lo, he hath given occasions of speech against her, saying, I found not thy daughter a maid; and yet these are the tokens of my daughter's virginity. And they shall spread the cloth before the elders of the city. And the elders of that city shall take that man and chastise him; And they shall amerce him in an hundred shekels of silver, and give them unto the father of the damsel, because he hath brought up an evil name upon a virgin of Israel: and she shall be his wife; he may not put her away all his days. But if this thing be true, and the tokens of virginity be not found for the damsel: Then they shall bring out the damsel to the door of her father's house, and the men of her city shall stone

her with stones that she die: because she hath wrought folly in Israel, to play the whore in her father's house: so shalt thou put evil away from among you.

And if this first-century Jew's chosen version was the Septuagint (LXX), "by whoring" would in the Greek read *ekporneusai*. It is surely no accident that, in this connection, Matthew alone records the delicate situation that faced Joseph:

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily. But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins. Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us. Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS (Matt. 1:18-25).

The view that our Lord meant what He said and what He said was fornication not adultery is uncommon but certainly not new. We have already quoted Matthew Henry as supporting "divorce, in case of adultery," but he adds, "Dr. Whitby understands this, not of adultery, but (because our Saviour uses the word *porneia*—*fornication*) of uncleanness committed before marriage, but discovered afterward" (Daniel Whitby, 1638-1726, became Bishop of Salisbury).

To those who object, I commend a fourteen page article I discovered on

the internet, entitled “The Betrothal View of Divorce and Remarriage” by Dr. David Jones of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.¹ It is clear from this and the fifty-one often instructive footnotes that there is an active ongoing discussion, mainly in the US. His conclusion? “While not all Bible interpreters will agree with the conclusions reached by those who hold this view, responsible exegetes would be wise to consider this position with an open mind, not only in order to facilitate intelligent discussion ... but also because this interpretation could be correct.”

Based simply on the two words adultery and fornication, I find this conclusion makes sense!²

Discussion: Clearly this raises significant consequences for both church and state. Quite apart from this issue, surely it is now clear that the thrust of our Lord’s teaching is to remove the Mosaic concession on divorce. What God has joined together let not man try to put asunder—he can not do so; only God can by the death of one or both parties. Cases will arise where two parties are unable to live together: persistent adultery, lesbianism, sodomy, etc. But inevitably a remarriage brings both the new partners into a state of adultery. It is as stark as that! Does the church in its official representatives realise this and teach it? “What about the state?” I can hear someone querying. Yes, because it grants divorces, it is easy for the untaught to think they have a right to Christian remarriage. They do not! But there is a much higher issue here. Our Lord said,

All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world (Matt. 28:18-20).

¹A speech by Dr. Jones with the same title can also be listened to on-line (www.swbts.edu/dashboard.cfm?audioToPlay=conferences/the_family/583_V10_091407_D_Jones_fd0.mp3&fdi=_fd0).

²For an alternative view of *porneia* in the exception clauses in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, see David J. Engelsma, *Marriage, the Mystery of Christ and the Church* (Grandville, MI: RFPA, 1998), pp. 105-107, 131-133; and John Hooper, *From the Beginning: Recovering a Biblical Perspective of Divorce and Remarriage*, pp. 61-65. The latter, a newly published 68-page booklet, is available from the author (John Hooper, 8 Prospect Walk, Saltash, Cornwall, PL12 4RG, England) for £2.50 (inc. P&P).

Is the church willing to testify to her members and the state this truth also? Finally, does the “exception clause” have any use in our contemporary scene? Well, one can think of various of possibilities. When a young man takes a wife from a Christian family or inside a church context, he has a right to suppose she is a virgin and she that he is! Clearly these and the sort of issues that may arise with new converts need to be sorted out before marriage.

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