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Divorce & Remarriage: A Position Paper

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Note (added May 5, 1989): Readers of this paper should be sure to consult the official position paper of the Council of Deacons of Bethlehem Baptist Church entitled, *A Statement on Divorce and Remarriage in the Life of Bethlehem Baptist Church*. That document, dated May 2, 1989, represents the position on divorce and remarriage that will guide the church in matters of membership and discipline. The paper you are looking at is *not* the official church position on divorce and remarriage. It is my own understanding of the Scriptures and therefore the guidelines for my own life and teaching and ministerial involvement in weddings. But I intend to respect the official statement (having written the first draft myself) as our guide in matters of membership and discipline. I make this paper available so that the basis for certain statements in the official paper can be readily obtained.

Background and Introduction

All of my adult life, until I was faced with the necessity of dealing with divorce and remarriage in the pastoral context, I held the prevailing Protestant view that remarriage after divorce was Biblically sanctioned in cases where divorce had resulted from desertion or persistent adultery. Only when I was compelled, some years ago, in teaching through the gospel of Luke, to deal with Jesus' absolute statement in Luke 16:18 did I begin to question that inherited position.

I felt an immense burden in having to teach our congregation what the revealed will of God is in this matter of divorce and remarriage. I was not unaware that among my people there were those who had been divorced and remarried, and those who had been divorced and remained unmarried, and those who were in the process of divorce or contemplating it as a possibility. I knew that this was not an academic exercise, but would immediately affect many people very deeply.

I was also aware of the horrendous statistics in our own country, as well as other Western countries, concerning the number of marriages that were ending in divorce, and the numbers of people who were forming second marriages and third marriages. In my study of Ephesians 5 I had become increasingly persuaded that there is a deep and profound significance to the union of husband and wife in "one flesh" as a parable of the relationship between Christ and his church.

All of these things conspired to create a sense of solemnity and seriousness as I weighed the meaning and the implication of the Biblical texts on divorce and remarriage. The upshot of that crucial experience was the discovery of what I believe is a New Testament prohibition of all remarriage except in the case where a spouse has died. I do not claim to have seen or said the last word on this issue, nor am I above correction, should I prove to be wrong. I am aware that men more godly than I have taken different views. Nevertheless, every person and church must teach and live according to the dictates of its own conscience informed by a serious study of Scripture.

Therefore this paper is an attempt to state my own understanding of the issues and their foundation in Scripture. It serves, then, as a Biblical rationale for why I feel constrained to make the decisions I do with regard to whose marriages I will perform and what sort of church discipline seems appropriate in regard to divorce and remarriage.

If I were to give exhaustive expositions of each relevant text the paper would become a very large book. Therefore, what I plan to do is to give brief explanations of each of the crucial texts with some key exegetical arguments. There will be, no doubt, many questions that can be raised and I hope to be able to learn from those questions, and do my best to answer them in the discussion that will surround this paper.

It seems that the most efficient way to approach the issue is to simply give a list of reasons, based on Biblical texts, why I believe that the New Testament prohibits all remarriage except where a spouse has died. So what follows is a list of such arguments.

Eleven Reasons Why I Believe All Remarriage After Divorce Is Prohibited While Both Spouses Are Alive

1. Luke 16:18 calls all remarriage after divorce adultery.

Luke 16:18: Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.

1.1 This verse shows that Jesus does not recognize divorce as terminating a marriage in God's sight. The reason a second marriage is called adultery is because the first one is considered to still be valid. So Jesus is taking a stand against the Jewish culture in which all divorce was considered to carry with it the right of remarriage.

1.2 The second half of the verse shows that not merely the divorcing man is guilty of adultery when he remarries, but also any man who marries a divorced woman.

1.3 Since there are no exceptions mentioned in the verse, and since Jesus is clearly rejecting the common cultural conception of divorce as including the right of remarriage, the first readers of this gospel would have been hard-put to argue for any exceptions on the basis that Jesus shared the cultural assumption that divorce for unfaithfulness or desertion freed a spouse for remarriage.

2. Mark 10:11-12 call all remarriage after divorce adultery whether it is the husband or the wife who does the divorcing.

Mark 10:11-12: And he said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; ¹² and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.'

2.1 This text repeats the first half of Luke 16:18 but goes farther and says that not only the man who divorces, but also a woman who divorces, and then remarries is committing adultery.

2.2 As in Luke 16:18, there are no exceptions mentioned to this rule.

3. Mark 10:2-9 and Matthew 19:3-8 teach that Jesus rejected the Pharisees' justification of divorce from Deuteronomy 24:1 and reasserted the purpose of God in creation that no human being separate what God has joined together.

Mark 10:2-9: And some Pharisees came up to Him, testing Him, and began to question Him whether it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife. ³ And He answered and said to them, 'What did Moses command you?' ⁴ And they said, 'Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.' ⁵ But Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. ⁶ But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. ⁷ For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, ⁸ and the two shall become one flesh; consequently they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹ What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.'

Matthew 19:3-9: And some Pharisees came to Him, testing Him, and saying, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all?" ⁴ And He answered and said, "Have you not read, that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, ⁵ and said, 'For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh'? ⁶ Consequently they are no more two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." ⁷ They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate and divorce her?" ⁸ He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. ⁹ And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another commits adultery."

3.1 In both Matthew and Mark the Pharisees come to Jesus and test him by asking him whether it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife. They evidently have in mind the passage in Deuteronomy 24:1 which simply describes divorce as a fact rather than giving any legislation in favor of it. They wonder how Jesus will take a position with regard to this passage.

3.2 Jesus' answer is, "For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives" (Mt. 19:8).

3.3 But then Jesus criticizes the Pharisees' failure to recognize in the books of Moses God's deepest and original intention for marriage. So he quotes two passages from Genesis. "God made them male and female. ...For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh" (Genesis 1:27; 2:24).

3.4 From these passages in Genesis Jesus concludes, "So they are no longer two, but one." And then he makes his climaxing statement, "What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder."

3.5 The implication is that Jesus rejects the Pharisees' use of Deuteronomy 24:1 and raises the standard of marriage for his disciples to God's original intention in creation. He says that none of us should try to undo the "one-flesh" relationship which God has united.

3.6 Before we jump to the conclusion that this absolute statement should be qualified in view of the exception clause ("except for unchastity") mentioned in Matthew 19:9, we should seriously entertain the possibility that the exception clause in Matthew 19:9 should be understood in the light of the absolute statement of Matthew 19:6, ("let no man put asunder") especially since the verses that follow this conversation with the Pharisees in Mark 10 do not contain any exception when they condemn remarriage. More on this below.

4. Matthew 5:32 does not teach that remarriage is lawful in some cases. Rather it reaffirms that marriage after divorce is adultery, even for those who have been divorced innocently, and that a man who divorces his wife is guilty of the adultery of her second marriage unless she had already become an adulteress before the divorce.

Matthew 5:32: But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

4.1 Jesus assumes that in most situations in that culture a wife who has been put away by a husband will be drawn into a second marriage. Nevertheless, in spite of these pressures, he calls this second marriage adultery.

4.2 The remarkable thing about the first half of this verse is that it plainly says that the remarriage of a wife who has been innocently put away is nevertheless adultery: "Everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her (the innocent wife who has not been unchaste) an adulteress." This is a clear statement, it seems to me, that remarriage is wrong not merely when a person is guilty in the process of divorce, but also when a person is innocent. In other words, Jesus' opposition to remarriage seems to be based on the unbreakableness of the marriage bond by anything but death.

4.3 I will save my explanation of the exception clause ("Except on the ground of unchastity") for later in the paper, but for now, it may suffice to say that on the traditional interpretation of the clause, it may simply mean that a man makes his wife an adulteress except in the case where she has made herself one.

4.4 I would assume that since an innocent wife who is divorced commits adultery when she remarries, therefore a guilty wife who remarries after divorce is all the more guilty. If one argues that this guilty woman is free to remarry, while the innocent woman who has been put away is not, just because the guilty woman's adultery has broken the "one flesh" relationship, then one is put in the awkward position of saying to an innocent divorced woman, "If you now commit adultery it will be lawful for you to remarry." This seems wrong for at least two reasons.

4.41 It seems to elevate the physical act of sexual intercourse to be the decisive element in marital union and disunion.

4.42 If sexual union with another breaks the marriage bond and legitimizes remarriage, then to say that an innocently divorced wife can't remarry (as Jesus does say) assumes that her divorcing husband is not divorcing to have sexual relations with another. This is a

very unlikely assumption. More likely is that Jesus does assume some of these divorcing husbands will have sexual relations with another woman, but still the wives they have divorced may not remarry. Therefore, adultery does not nullify the "one-flesh" relationship of marriage and both the innocent and guilty spouses are prohibited from remarriage in [Matthew 5:32](#).

5. [1 Corinthians 7:10-11](#) teaches that divorce is wrong but that if it is inevitable the person who divorces should not remarry.

[1 Corinthians 7:10-11](#): To the married I give charge, not I but the Lord, that the wife should not separate from her husband ¹¹ (but if she does, let her remain single or else be reconciled to her husband)—and that the husband should not divorce his wife.

5.1 When Paul says that this charge is not his but the Lord's, I think he means that he is aware of a specific saying from the historical Jesus which addressed this issue. As a matter of fact, these verses look very much like [Mark 10:11-12](#), because both the wife and the husband are addressed. Also, remarriage seems to be excluded by verse 11 the same way it is excluded in [Mark 10:11-12](#).

5.2 Paul seems to be aware that separation will be inevitable in certain cases. Perhaps he has in mind a situation of unrepentant adultery, or desertion, or brutality. But in such a case he says that the person who feels constrained to separate should not seek remarriage but remain single. And he reinforces the authority of this statement by saying he has a word from the Lord. Thus Paul's interpretation of Jesus' sayings is that remarriage should not be pursued.

5.3 As in [Luke 16:18](#) and [Mark 10:11-12](#) and [Matthew 5:32](#), this text does not explicitly entertain the possibility of any exceptions to the prohibition of remarriage.

6. [1 Corinthians 7:39](#) and [Romans 7:1-3](#) teach that remarriage is legitimate only after the death of a spouse.

[1 Corinthians 7:39](#): A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. If the husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.

[Romans 7:1-3](#), Do you not know, brethren—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only during his life? ² Thus a married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies she is discharged from the law concerning her husband. ³ Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies she is free from that law, if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.

6.1 Both of these passages ([1 Corinthians 7:39](#); [Romans 7:2](#)) say explicitly that a woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. No exceptions are explicitly mentioned that would suggest she could be free from her husband to remarry on any other basis.

7. [Matthew 19:10-12](#) teaches that special Christian grace is given by God to Christ's disciples to sustain them in singleness when they renounce remarriage according to the law of Christ.

[Matthew 19:10-12](#): The disciples said to him, 'If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry.' ¹¹ But he said to them, 'Not all men can receive this precept, but only those to whom it is given. ¹² For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who

have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it.

7.1 Just preceding this passage in Matthew 19:9 Jesus prohibited all remarriage after divorce. (I will deal with the meaning of "except for immorality" below.) This seemed like an intolerable prohibition to Jesus' disciples: If you close off every possibility of remarriage, then you make marriage so risky that it would be better not to marry, since you might be "trapped" to live as a single person to the rest of your life or you may be "trapped" in a bad marriage.

7.2 Jesus does not deny the tremendous difficulty of his command. Instead, he says in verse 11, that the enablement to fulfill the command not to remarry is a divine gift to his disciples. Verse 12 is an argument that such a life is indeed possible because there are people who for the sake of the kingdom, as well as lower reasons, have dedicated themselves to live a life of singleness.

7.3 Jesus is not saying that some of his disciples have the ability to obey his command not to remarry and some don't. He is saying that the mark of a disciple is that they receive a gift of continence while non-disciples don't. The evidence for this is 1) the parallel between Matthew 19:11 and 13:11; 2) the parallel between Matthew 19:12 and 13:9, 43; 11:15; and 3) the parallel between Matthew 19:11 and 19:26.

8. Deuteronomy 24:1-4 does not legislate grounds for divorce but teaches that the "one-flesh" relationship established by marriage is not obliterated by divorce or even by remarriage.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4: When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house, ² and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man's wife, ³ and if the latter husband turns against her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her to be his wife, ⁴ then her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance.

8.1 The remarkable thing about these four verses is that, while divorce is taken for granted, nevertheless the woman who is divorced becomes "defiled" by her remarriage (verse 4). It may well be that when the Pharisees asked Jesus if divorce was legitimate he based his negative answer not only on God's intention expressed in Genesis 1:27 and 2:24, but also on the implication of Deuteronomy 24:4 that remarriage after divorce defiles a person. In other words, there were ample clues in the Mosaic law that the divorce concession was on the basis of the hardness of man's heart and really did not make divorce and remarriage legitimate.

8.2 The prohibition of a wife returning to her first husband even after her second husband dies (because it is an abomination) suggests very strongly that today no second marriage should be broken up in order to restore a first one (for Heth and Wenham's explanation of this see Jesus and Divorce, page 110).

9. 1 Corinthians 7:15 does not mean that when a Christian is deserted by an unbelieving spouse he or she is free to remarry. It means that the Christian is not bound to fight in order to preserve togetherness.

Separation is permissible if the unbelieving partner insists on it.

1 Corinthians 7:15: If the unbelieving partner desires to separate, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound. For God has called us to peace.

9.1 There are several reasons why the phrase "is not bound" should not be construed to mean "is free to remarry."

9.11 Marriage is an ordinance of creation binding on all of God's human creatures, irrespective of their faith or lack of faith.

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

9.13 The last phrase of verse 15 ("God has called us to peace") supports verse 15 best if Paul is saying that a deserted partner is not "bound to make war" on the deserting unbeliever to get him or her to stay. It seems to me that the peace God has called us to is the peace of marital harmony. Therefore, if the unbelieving partner insists on departing, then the believing partner is not bound to live in perpetual conflict with the unbelieving spouse, but is free and innocent in letting him or her go.

9.14 This interpretation also preserves a closer harmony to the intention of verses 10–11, where an inevitable separation does not result in the right of remarriage.

9.15 Verse 16 ("For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?") is an argument that you can't know, and so should not make the hope of saving them a ground for fighting to make them stay. This supports the understanding of verse 15 as a focus on not being enslaved to stay together, rather than not being enslaved to stay single.

9.16 Paul did not see the single life as a life of slavery and so would not have called the necessity of staying single a state of being enslaved.

10. 1 Corinthians 7:27–28 does not teach the right of divorced persons to remarry. It teaches that betrothed virgins should seriously consider the life of singleness, but do not sin if they marry.

1 Corinthians 7:27–28: Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek marriage.²⁸ But if you marry, you do not sin, and if a virgin marries, she does not sin.

10.1 Recently some people have argued that this passage deals with divorced people because in verse 27 Paul asks, "Are you free (literally: loosed) from a wife?" Some have assumed that he means, "Are you divorced?" Thus he would be saying in verse 28 that it is not sin when divorced people remarry. There are several reasons why this interpretation is most unlikely.

10.11 Verse 25 signals that Paul is beginning a new section and dealing with a new issue. He says, "Now concerning the virgins (ton parthenon) I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy." He has already dealt with the problem of divorced people in verses 10-16. Now he takes up a new issue about those who are not yet married, and he signals this by saying, "Now concerning the virgins." Therefore, it is very unlikely that the people referred to in verses 27 and 28 are divorced.

10.12 A flat statement that it is not sin for divorced people to be remarried (verse 28) would contradict verse 11, where he said that a woman who has separated from her husband should remain single.

10.13 Verse 36 is surely describing the same situation in view in verses 27 and 28, but clearly refers to a couple that is not yet married. "If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his virgin, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin." This is the same as verse 28 where Paul says, "But if you marry, you do not sin."

10.14 The reference in verse 27 to being bound to a "wife" may be misleading because it may suggest that the man is already married. But in Greek the word for wife is simply "woman" and may refer to a man's betrothed as well as his spouse. The context dictates that the reference is to a man's betrothed virgin, not to his spouse. So "being bound" and "being loosed" have reference to whether a person is betrothed or not.

10.15 It is significant that the verb Paul uses for "loosed" (luo) or "free" is not a word that he uses for divorce. Paul's words for divorce are *chorizo* (verses 10,11,15; cf. Matthew 19:6) and *aphienai* (verses 11,12,13).

11. The exception clause of Matthew 19:9 need not imply that divorce on account of adultery frees a person to be remarried. All the weight of the New Testament evidence given in the preceding ten points is against this view, and there are several ways to make good sense out of this verse so that it does not conflict with the broad teaching of the New Testament that remarriage after divorce is prohibited.

Matthew 19:9: And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.

11.1 Several years ago I taught our congregation in two evening services concerning my understanding of this verse and argued that "except for immorality" did not refer to adultery but to premarital sexual fornication which a man or a woman discovers in the betrothed partner. Since that time I have discovered other people who hold this view and who have given it a much more scholarly exposition than I did. I have also discovered numerous other ways of understanding this verse which also exclude the legitimacy of remarriage. Several of these are summed up in William Heth and Gordon J. Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce* (Nelson: 1984).

11.2 Here I will simply give a brief summary of my own view of Matthew 19:9 and how I came to it.

I began, first of all, by being troubled that the absolute form of Jesus' denunciation of divorce and remarriage in Mark 10:11,12 and Luke 16:18 is not preserved by Matthew, if in fact his exception clause is a loophole for divorce and remarriage. I was bothered by the simple assumption that so

many writers make that Matthew is simply making explicit something that would have been implicitly understood by the hearers of Jesus or the readers of Mark 10 and Luke 16.

Would they really have assumed that the absolute statements included exceptions? I have very strong doubts, and therefore my inclination is to inquire whether or not in fact Matthew's exception clause conforms to the absoluteness of Mark and Luke.

The second thing that began to disturb me was the question, Why does Matthew use the word *porneia* ("except for immorality") instead of the word *moicheia* which means adultery? Almost all commentators seem to make the simple assumption again that *porneia* means adultery in this context. The question nags at me why Matthew would not use the word for adultery, if that is in fact what he meant.

Then I noticed something very interesting. The only other place besides [Matthew 5:32](#) and [19:9](#) where Matthew uses the word *porneia* is in [15:19](#) where it is used alongside of *moicheia*. Therefore, the primary contextual evidence for Matthew's usage is that he conceives of *porneia* as something different than adultery. Could this mean, then, that Matthew conceives of *porneia* in its normal sense of fornication or incest (1 Corinthians 5:1) rather than adultery?

A. Isaksson agrees with this view of *porneia* and sums up his research much like this on pages 134-5 of Marriage and Ministry:

Thus we cannot get away from the fact that the distinction between what was to be regarded as *porneia* and what was to be regarded as *moicheia* was very strictly maintained in pre-Christian Jewish literature and in the N.T. *Porneia* may, of course, denote different forms of forbidden sexual relations, but we can find no unequivocal examples of the use of this word to denote a wife's adultery. Under these circumstances we can hardly assume that this word means adultery in the clauses in Matthew. The logia on divorce are worded as a paragraph of the law, intended to be obeyed by the members of the Church. Under these circumstances it is inconceivable that in a text of this nature the writer would not have maintained a clear distinction between what was unchastity and what was adultery: *moicheia* and not *porneia* was used to describe the wife's adultery. From the philological point of view there are accordingly very strong arguments against this interpretation of the clauses as permitting divorce in the case in which the wife was guilty of adultery.

The next clue in my search for an explanation came when I stumbled upon the use of *porneia* in [John 8:41](#) where Jewish leaders indirectly accuse Jesus of being born of *porneia*. In other words, since they don't accept the virgin birth, they assume that Mary had committed fornication and Jesus was the result of this act. On the basis of that clue I went back to study Matthew's record of Jesus' birth in [Matthew 1:18-20](#). This was extremely enlightening.

In these verses Joseph and Mary are referred to as husband (*aner*) and wife (*gunaika*). Yet they are described as only being betrothed to each other. This is probably owing to the fact that the words for husband and wife are simply man and woman and to the fact that betrothal was a much more significant commitment than engagement is today. In verse 19 Joseph resolves "to divorce" Mary. The word for divorce is the same as the word in [Matthew 5:32](#) and [19:9](#). But most important of all, Matthew says that Joseph was "just" in making the decision to divorce Mary, presumably on account of her *porneia*, fornication.

Therefore, as Matthew proceeded to construct the narrative of his gospel, he finds himself in chapter 5 and then later in chapter 19 needing to prohibit all remarriage after divorce (as taught by Jesus) and yet to allow for "divorces" like the one Joseph contemplated toward his betrothed whom he thought guilty of fornication (*porneia*). Therefore, Matthew includes the exception clause in particular to exonerate Joseph, but also in general to show that the kind of "divorce" that one might pursue during a betrothal on account of fornication is not included in Jesus' absolute prohibition.

A common objection to this interpretation is that both in [Matthew 19:3-8](#) and in [Matthew 5:31-32](#) the issue Jesus is responding to is marriage not betrothal. The point is pressed that "except for fornication" is irrelevant to the context of marriage.

My answer is that this irrelevancy is just the point Matthew wants to make. We may take it for granted that the breakup of an engaged couple over fornication is not an evil "divorce" and does not prohibit remarriage. But we cannot assume that Matthew's readers would take this for granted.

Even in [Matthew 5:32](#), where it seems pointless for us to exclude "the case of fornication" (since we can't see how a betrothed virgin could be "made an adulteress" in any case), it may not be pointless for Matthew's readers. For that matter, it may not be pointless for any readers: if Jesus had said, "Every man who divorces his woman makes her an adulteress," a reader could legitimately ask: "Then was Joseph about to make Mary an adulteress?" We may say this question is not reasonable since we think you can't make unmarried women adulteresses. But it certainly is not meaningless or, perhaps for some readers, pointless, for Matthew to make explicit the obvious exclusion of the case of fornication during betrothal.

This interpretation of the exception clause has several advantages:

1. It does not force Matthew to contradict the plain, absolute meaning of Mark and Luke and the whole range of New Testament teaching set forth above in sections 1-10, including Matthew's own absolute teaching in 19:3-8
2. It provides an explanation for why the word *porneia* is used in Matthew's exception clause instead of *moicheia*
3. It squares with Matthew's own use of *porneia* for fornication in [Matthew 15:19](#)
4. It fits the demands of Matthew's wider context concerning Joseph's contemplated divorce.

Since I first wrote this exposition of [Matthew 19:9](#) I have discovered a chapter on this view in Heth and Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce* and a scholarly defense of it by A. Isaksson, *Marriage and Ministry in the New Temple* (1965).

Conclusions and Applications

In the New Testament the question about remarriage after divorce is not determined by:

1. The guilt or innocence of either spouse,
2. Nor by whether either spouse is a believer or not,
3. Nor by whether the divorce happened before or after either spouse's conversion,

4. Nor by the ease or difficulty of living as a single parent for the rest of life on earth,
5. Nor by whether there is adultery or desertion involved,
6. Nor by the on-going reality of the hardness of the human heart,
7. Nor by the cultural permissiveness of the surrounding society.

Rather it is determined by the fact that:

1. Marriage is a "one-flesh" relationship of divine establishment and extraordinary significance in the eyes of God ([Genesis 2:24](#); [Matthew 19:5](#); [Mark 10:8](#)),
2. Only God, not man, can end this one-flesh relationship ([Matthew 19:6](#); [Mark 10:9](#)—this is why remarriage is called adultery by Jesus: he assumes that the first marriage is still binding, [Matthew 5:32](#); [Luke 16:18](#); [Mark 10:11](#)),
3. God ends the one-flesh relationship of marriage only through the death of one of the spouses ([Romans 7:1-3](#); [1 Corinthians 7:39](#)),
4. The grace and power of God are promised and sufficient to enable a trusting, divorced Christian to be single all this earthly life if necessary ([Matthew 19:10-12,26](#); [1 Corinthians 10:13](#)),
5. Temporal frustrations and disadvantages are much to be preferred over the disobedience of remarriage, and will yield deep and lasting joy both in this life and the life to come ([Matthew 5:29-30](#)).

Those who are already remarried:

1. Should acknowledge that the choice to remarry and the act of entering a second marriage was sin, and confess it as such and seek forgiveness
2. Should not attempt to return to the first partner after entering a second union (see 8.2 above)
3. Should not separate and live as single people thinking that this would result in less sin because all their sexual relations are acts of adultery. The Bible does not give prescriptions for this particular case, but it does treat second marriages as having significant standing in God's eyes. That is, there were promises made and there has been a union formed. It should not have been formed, but it was. It is not to be taken lightly. Promises are to be kept, and the union is to be sanctified to God. While not the ideal state, staying in a second marriage is God's will for a couple and their ongoing relations should not be looked on as adulterous.