

# Until death do us part

## Is remarriage biblically sanctioned after divorce?

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Divorce is perhaps the most painful wound a family can experience. After the initial trauma, its scars run deep and wide. Sadly, divorce touches nearly all of us directly or indirectly. In this essay, we will examine whether remarriage to another person is biblically permissible after divorce, while the former spouse is living. After surveying the question from historical and biblical perspectives, pastoral implications will be explored.

### Historical perspectives

In most professing Christian churches of today, the question “Is remarriage biblically permitted after divorce?” is met with an overwhelming “Yes.” In fact, few have heard or considered the alternative view that remarriage is biblically prohibited after divorce while the former spouse lives. Because of the dominance of the permissive view today, the historic views of the church may surprise those who have not studied this subject. For approximately 1500 years, the church was opposed to remarriage after divorce. In fact, this teaching on divorce and remarriage was held with more consistency than even the Trinity.

Because of closer proximity in time and space to Jesus and the apostles, as well as better understanding of the language and culture, the early church offers valuable perspective on this issue. In the first five centuries of church history, there was essential unanimity of the Greek (Eastern) and Latin (Western) church fathers in viewing remarriage as adultery.<sup>1</sup> Such writers include early Greek fathers such as Hermas, Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Theophilus of Antioch, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen and later Greek writers such as Basil, Gregory Nazianzus, Apollinaris, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and John Chrysostom. The early Greek writers should be heavily weighed since they knew Koine Greek as their mother tongue and thus understood the nuances of the New Testament language better than anyone could today. Of the early church writers who wrote in Latin, a

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<sup>1</sup>A historical overview is presented in Wenham and Heth, *Jesus and Divorce*, Paternoster press (2002), chapter 1.

similar picture exists: Tertullian, Ambrose, Innocent, Jerome, and Augustine concurred that remarriage after divorce is biblically forbidden. The witness of the early church is clear. "In all, twenty-five individual writers and two early councils forbid remarriage after divorce."<sup>2</sup> This steadfast and uniform witness held firm throughout the Middle Ages.

The prevailing modern view of most Protestant churches that allows for remarriage originated near the time of the Reformation and is sometimes called the Erasmian view since Erasmus was the first major writer to advocate the view. Many leaders of the Protestant Reformation adopted his understanding and thus the Erasmian view has percolated down to most modern churches.

The contrast in views on remarriage between the historic church and most modern churches is therefore stark. Anytime there is a clear disagreement between the views of the modern and early church, we should not casually dismiss the early church. Rather we should study the matter with humility, acknowledging that we live in a period of laxity and disobedience as "evildoers go from bad to worse." Of course, the biblical witness stands as the supreme and final arbiter of truth.

## What is marriage?

When Jesus was questioned on the subject of divorce, He sent His examiners back to Genesis to understand what marriage has been from the beginning. Jesus quotes Genesis 1:27, where God made them "male and female." By creating two distinct genders, God's marriage design is embedded into our very biology. He then quotes Genesis 2:24, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." Jesus therefore concludes, "Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate" (Mark 10:9). What Genesis does not explicitly teach, Jesus supplies: it is *God* who joins together man and woman in marriage. Thus no person should dissolve what God has united. To do so would be to destroy the work of God. Moreover, God Himself serves as the witness presiding over the marital covenant (Mal. 2:14).

There are two components of marriage: covenant and sexual union. The Bible describes marriage as a covenant (Ezek. 16:8; Mal. 2:14; Prov. 2:16-17). Covenants are alien to most Western societies today, but a contrast between contracts and covenants is helpful for our understanding:<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Wenham and Heth, p. 38.

<sup>3</sup>Modified from Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, Crossway

	<b>Contract</b>	<b>Covenant</b>
Objective	Defined benefit	Relationship
Expectation	Performance	Loyalty
Interaction	Negotiation	Gifts
Orientation	Things	People

As others have noted, contract-based societies are concerned primarily with rights. Covenant-based societies are concerned primarily with obligations.<sup>4</sup> In modern society, marriage has taken on the nature of a contract—when the benefits are perceived to end, so must the contract. In distinction, covenant-keeping love persists by virtue of its intrinsic goal of relationship.

Covenants are thrilling, beautiful, and mysterious—too often we forget their power:

If forgiving is the only remedy for your painful past, promising is the only remedy for your uncertain future. A human promise is an awesome reality... When you make a promise, you tie yourself to other persons by the unseen fibers of loyalty. You agree to stick with people you are stuck with. When everything else tells them they can count on nothing, they count on you. When they do not have the faintest notion of what in the world is going on around them, they will know that you are going to be there with them. You have created a small sanctuary of trust within the jungle of unpredictability.<sup>5</sup>

Understanding marriage as a covenant also helps correct a misconception. Some have mistakenly taught that sexual union alone generates a marriage. In the Old Testament, concubines were different from wives because concubines lacked covenantal sanction. Similarly, Joseph had to “divorce” Mary even though they had no sexual union because they were bound by covenant (Matt. 1:19). To have a covenant without sexual union is to be betrothed (e.g. Joseph). To have sexual union without covenant is to engage in fornication, adultery, or prostitution.

In the New Testament, the bright torch of full revelation illuminates the greatest truth of all: marriage is a picture of Jesus’ covenantal relationship with His church (Eph. 5:22-33). To this, we turn later.

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(2012), p. 140.

<sup>4</sup>G. Mendenhall’s observation; *ibid*, p. 141f.

<sup>5</sup>Lewis Smedes, “Controlling the Unpredictable—The Power of Promising,” *Christianity Today*, January 21, 1983 issue.

## Divorce and remarriage in the Old Testament

Surprisingly little instruction on divorce and remarriage is given in the Old Testament, particularly in the Pentateuch (or Torah). The first mention of divorce is one prohibiting priests from marrying those who are divorced: “They shall not marry a prostitute or a woman who has been defiled, neither shall they marry a woman divorced from her husband, for the priest is holy to his God” (Lev. 21:7).<sup>6</sup> Some have speculated that Jesus’ prohibition of remarriage after divorce (to be shown later) originated from this instruction, because He intended for His people to be a nation of holy priests (1 Pet. 2:9). This is a plausible and intriguing suggestion.

Most notably, throughout the Old Testament, there is no “enabling legislation” for divorce.<sup>7</sup> Instead, Old Testament laws merely *restrict* a practice that was already ongoing. The teachings in the Old Testament are thus much less permissive than many suppose. In fact, Malachi denounces divorce as faithless and akin to violence:

For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless. (Malachi 2:14-16)

Within the Torah, the lengthiest and most important teaching on divorce may seem quite obscure:

When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then 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 of his house, and she departs out of his house, and if she goes and becomes another man’s wife, and the latter man hates 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 man dies, who took her to be his wife, then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she

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<sup>6</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations from the New Testament are taken from the New King James Version ® (NKJV). Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations from the Old Testament are taken from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version ® (ESV), Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>7</sup>To use a phrase from Andrew Cornes.

has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the LORD.  
And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the LORD your  
God is giving you for an inheritance. (Deuteronomy 24:1-4)

This passage describes the case of a woman who is divorced by her husband because of “some indecency” and remarries another man. Deuteronomy 24:4 teaches that if her second husband divorces her or dies, she cannot return to her first husband because she has “been defiled” and that it would be “an abomination” before God and “bring sin” upon the land. While most modern translations (like the ESV above) accurately render the Hebrew, many people have been misled by the KJV which makes two unfortunate mistranslations that falsely appear to enable divorce and remarriage. The KJV reads “let him write her a bill of divorcement” (v. 1) and “she may go and be another man’s wife” (v. 2). Virtually all other translations correctly translate this as being a chain of situational “ands” (if this happens and that and that and that. . .) with only one conclusion, “then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled.” The KJV’s more permissive reading wrongly appears to sanction a man divorcing his wife and her remarrying, not surprisingly a position consistent with England’s long religious history of royal laxity concerning divorce and remarriage.<sup>8</sup> Despite the KJV’s influence, nowhere in the Old Testament are any statements given that “enable” divorce or remarriage. To the contrary, the defilement spoken of in Deuteronomy 24:4 is the same word used in cases of adultery in Leviticus 18:20 and Numbers 5:13-14. Thus even in the Old Testament, remarriage after divorce was regarded as defiling.

Great debate would swirl around Judaism for centuries about what “some indecency” meant in Deuteronomy 24:1. The school of Hillel taught that “some indecency” was anything that displeased the husband, including unsavory cooking. The more strict school of Shammai taught that “some indecency” was adultery. Into this debate, Jesus was thrust. But the Lord of marriage would surprise both sides and shatter even His own disciples’ expectations.

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<sup>8</sup>Henry VIII (1491-1547) was the king who split England from the Roman Catholic church so that he could divorce and remarry. He went on to have six marriages and even had his first wife executed. Henry VIII was a friend of Erasmus, the leading originator of the modern permissive view.

## Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage in Mark

We will now examine every direct teaching on the subject of divorce and remarriage in the New Testament. We begin by examining Jesus' teachings found in the Gospel according to Mark:

The Pharisees came and asked Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" testing Him. And He answered and said to them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce, and to dismiss her." And Jesus answered and said to them, "Because of 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 reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'; so then they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate."

In the house His disciples also asked Him again about the same matter. So He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." (Mark 10:2-12)

In Mark's account, Jesus is questioned about whether or not divorce is lawful *at all*. (As we will see, in Matthew, the Pharisees ask a slightly different question). In response, Jesus sends his examiners back to Genesis to first understand the nature of marriage. To address divorce, Jesus appeals to the one-flesh union as the basis of comprehending marriage. On this basis, He declares that man should not separate what God has joined together. The answer to the Pharisees' question about divorce being lawful is evidently "no." The reader is urged to carefully re-examine the above passage to fully appreciate this point: Jesus was undercutting the Mosaic law's tolerance of divorce. What the Mosaic law merely restricted, Jesus now forbids.

The disciples apparently have difficulty digesting this view so they later ask Jesus in the house if they have misunderstood Him. Jesus responds with the dramatic statement, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery" (Mark 10:11-12). Flowing out of Jesus' teaching on marriage, neither a man nor a woman was allowed to divorce and remarry, because he or she would become guilty of adultery.

Such a strict view was a radical departure from either contemporary Jewish or Greco-Roman practice.

In Judaism and Greco-Roman practice (much like the modern world), divorce entailed the ability to remarry. In Jewish practice, upon divorce the man would say to the woman, “Behold, you are free to marry any man” (*m. Git.* 9:3). For Jesus to describe remarriage after divorce as adultery was thus to undercut the first-century understanding of divorce, both Jewish and Greco-Roman. Jesus declared that divorce did not enable remarriage. Notably, this consequence naturally flows from Jesus’ appeal to the one-flesh union: because God has joined together a couple in marriage, it is outside of man’s (or society’s) jurisdiction to put asunder a marriage.

Let us illustrate Mark 10:11-12 by example. Albert is married to Jane. He divorces Jane and marries another woman. Under Mark 10:11, he is guilty of adultery. Though Albert may have obtained a legal divorce, Jesus teaches that in God’s eyes Albert still is united to Jane when he marries another woman. Conversely, if Jane divorces Albert and marries under man, she would be guilty of adultery under Mark 10:12. Taken at face value, the entire passage is quite straightforward: neither Albert nor Jane has the ability to divorce or remarry. In this compact passage, Jesus clearly answers “no” to the question of the lawfulness of divorce and describes that subsequent marriages are adulterous.

## Jesus’ teaching in Luke

Luke’s account is more brief, but no less revolutionary in the first-century (or modern) context:

Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced from her husband commits adultery. (Luke 16:18)

While Luke 16:18a is quite similar to Mark 10:11, Luke 16:18b introduces a new concept: the person who marries a divorced woman is guilty of adultery. This represents a harder teaching than Jesus’ teaching in Mark. In the case of a man who wrongfully divorces his wife and marries another, the first wife cannot marry under penalty of adultery. Whether “innocent” or “guilty,” both spouses are regarded as off-limits to new marital unions. (Sometimes the distinction between guilty and innocent is blurry or disputed, but this remains another issue.) No qualification is given in Luke

16:18b. Evidently, in Jesus' mind a legal divorce failed to sever the one-flesh union.

Let us illustrate Luke 16:18 again by example. Albert is married to Jane. He divorces Jane and marries another woman. Under Luke 16:18a, he is clearly guilty of adultery (just as in Mark 10:11). But under Luke 16:18b, if Floyd marries Jane after Albert divorces her, Floyd would be guilty of adultery also! Neither Albert nor Jane is able to marry another person. Jesus' teaching in Luke elevates the standard given in Mark, though this flows as a necessary consequence of the one-flesh union affirmed in Mark 10:5-9.

## **Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount**

The Gospel according to Matthew contains two passages of Jesus on divorce (5:31-32; 19:1-12). The first passage comes from the Sermon on the Mount:

Furthermore it has been said, "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce." But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery. (Matthew 5:31-32)

Jesus begins by referring to the Old Testament passage describing the certificate of divorce (Deut. 24:1). But as is typical in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus supersedes the Old Testament by giving a higher teaching. In Matthew 5:32a, it says that if a man divorces his wife, then this makes *her* commit adultery. While not initially obvious why this would be true, this statement almost certainly flows from the reality that social and economic forces would pressure the woman to be remarried. In this case, the man is culpable for the woman's sin by practically forcing her into remarriage, which for Jesus is an adulterous situation. This logically harmonizes with Mark and Luke, especially Luke 16:18b. Marrying a divorced woman, even though the divorce might be wrongfully instigated by the man, results in the woman committing adultery. This is because in God's eyes, the one-flesh union of a woman to her first husband persists. Jesus then confirms this understanding in 5:32b by saying that a man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Like so many of Jesus' other teachings from the Sermon on the Mount, the implications are counter-cultural and profound: women that are victims of divorce cannot be remarried, for these women and their new husbands



would both be found guilty of adultery. While shocking, this passage completely harmonizes with all the teaching covered thus far and is grounded in God's intent from the very beginning as described in Genesis.

We now turn to the so-called exception clause in Matthew 5:32. This clause has drawn much attention, where an exception for divorce is given for "sexual immorality." "Sexual immorality" is a translation of the Greek word *porneia*. The word *porneia* merits a focused examination. Thus we will look first at the exception of Jesus' no-divorce rule and second, whether the exception clause permits remarriage after divorce.

### **The exception to no divorce: the meaning of *porneia***

The sole exception to Jesus' prohibition of divorce turns on one's understanding of *porneia*. The word *porneia* is a difficult word to translate, reminding us of the need for humility and the avoidance of dogmatism where there is not strong evidence. Illustrating some of the difficulties of this word, Protestant English translations render *porneia* as "sexual immorality" (NKJV, ESV), "unchastity" (NASB, NRSV), or "fornication" (KJV). Yet two leading Roman Catholic translations offer quite different translations of Matthew 5:32:

"But I say to you, whoever divorces his wife (unless the marriage is unlawful) causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery." (Matthew 5:32, NAB<sup>9</sup>)

"But I say this to you, everyone who divorces his wife, except for the case of an illicit marriage, makes her an adulteress; and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery." (Matthew 5:32, NJB<sup>10</sup>)

In the Roman Catholic translations, *porneia* is translated as "unlawful" marriage or "illicit marriage." Given that these are obviously quite different from the Protestant translations, how should we understand *porneia*? Everyone agrees that *porneia* is not the ordinary term for adultery, which in Greek would be *moicheia*. (This word *moicheia* is employed, for example, in John

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8:3 with the woman caught in adultery.) Jesus differentiates *moicheia* from *porneia* in other settings (Matt. 15:19; Mark 7:21). So why did Jesus choose *porneia* in the context of marriage where adultery, *moicheia*, would naturally be expected?

Sometimes in the New Testament, *porneia* is used in a very wide sense. “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality [*porneia*]” (1 Thess. 4:3, see also Eph. 5:3, Col. 3:5). Yet sometimes it can also be taken in a narrow sense. In the Septuagint, *porneia* is usually translated prostitution or harlotry (the word is especially common in the famous parables of harlotry in Ezekiel 16 and 23). The New Testament can also use *porneia* in this way; for example, in 1 Corinthians 6:18, the sin of prostitution is referred to as *porneia*. But there is another meaning of *porneia* in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 5:1, *porneia* is used to describe incestuous marriage, where a man takes his father’s wife.

Corroborating such an understanding, many exegetes believe that in the Jerusalem council, *porneia* meant incestuous marriage (Acts 15:20, 29).<sup>11</sup> The list of forbidden items to the Gentiles—things offered to idols, eating blood, things strangled, and *porneia*—corresponds to a list of sins given in Leviticus 17-18, even preserving the sequence. Leviticus 17:7-9 deals with sacrifices to idols, 17:10-14 is a prohibition against eating blood and any animal not drained of blood (e.g. strangled), and 18:6-18 is a prohibition against incest. Incest thus maps onto *porneia* in this sequence.

Intertestamental literature also supports this meaning of *porneia*. Tobit 8:7 probably uses *porneia* in the sense of incest.<sup>12</sup> Drawing from the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Qumran community, “there is clear first-century Palestinian support for an interpretation of *porneia* in Matt 5:32 and 19:9 in the specific sense of *zenût* as an illicit marital union between persons of close kinship.”<sup>13</sup> Tertullian in the late second century connects Jesus’ teaching on divorce in Matthew 19 with John the Baptist’s denunciation of Herod’s marriage to his brother’s wife, an obvious case of incestuous marriage (*Against Marcion* 4:34). Tertullian paraphrases Matthew’s exception clause as “*illicitorum matrimoniorum et adulterii*,” in English, “illicit marriage and adultery.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>F. F. Bruce is the best known advocate of this position.

<sup>12</sup>See also Geoffrey Miller, *Marriage in the Book of Tobit*, De Gruyter (2011), chapter 4.

<sup>13</sup>Joseph Fitzmyer, *To Advance the Gospel*, Eerdmans (1998), p. 97.

<sup>14</sup>In context, the full sentence reads, “The Lord having therefore made mention of John, and of course of the occurrence of his death, hurled His censure against Herod in the form of **unlawful marriages and of adultery**, pronouncing as an adulterer even the man who married a woman that had been put away from her husband. This he said in order the more severely to load Herod with guilt.” (*Against Marcion*, 4.35)

Tertullian's paraphrase is quite close to the Roman Catholic translations of *porneia*. The most widely respected New Testament Greek lexicon offers as its second definition of *porneia*: "participation in prohibited degrees of marriage."<sup>15</sup>

Integrating these insights, we are left with either a broad definition of *porneia* as "sexual immorality" or two narrow options: either "except for prostitution" or "except for incest." Of the two narrow options, the incestuous marriage option offers significant advantages over prostitution. First, incestuous marriage best fits the context of Matthew's gospel, in which John the Baptist is beheaded for opposing Herod's incestuous marriage to his brother's wife (Matt. 14:1-4). If Jesus meant "incestuous marriage" in the exception clause, he was agreeing with John the Baptist's declaration that Herod end this illicit marriage. Second, the widely recognized Jewish character of Matthew's book also supports the link between *porneia* and incest:

We know that rabbis allowed an incestuous relationship to continue if a proselyte was converting to Judaism. Jesus' response could be directed not only at the Herodias situation, but also to this ongoing rabbinic practice. We thus have all the historical ingredients for Jesus to make a comment about incestuous marriages. In addition, one must take into account what D. Daube calls the prevalent view of rabbis concerning the Genesis texts to which Jesus refers. . . In B. T. Sanhedrin 58a, in the midst of a discussion by R. Akiba and others about the forbidden degrees of consanguinity and the problems created by proselytes, we have the following exegesis: 'Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother' refers to the fact that one must not marry his father's sister or wife, or his mother and her sister. . . The main thrust of this discussion is focused on the question of the forbidden degrees of marriage, though other sorts of perversion are prohibited also. It is likely that the rabbis would have understood Jesus to be specifically referring to the discussion about incestuous marriage when he quotes these texts.<sup>16</sup>

For modern Western ears living in a culture of exogamy (where marriage partners are expected to come from outside the family and marriage to

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<sup>15</sup>A *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, third edition (BDAG), Frederick Danker (ed.), Univ. of Chicago Press (2000), p. 854.

<sup>16</sup>Ben Witherington, "Matthew 5.32 and 19.9—Exception or Exceptional Situation?" *New Testament Studies*, 31, p. 573 (1985).

close relatives is forbidden), we fail to appreciate how much the biblical culture wrestled with incestuous marriage. The Jewish norm was endogamy (marriage within the family), and typical marriage involved a paternal cousin. The leaders of the Old Testament had marriages that we can hardly comprehend. Abraham married his half-sister, Isaac married his niece, Jacob married his cousins, and Amram married his aunt (Amram was Moses' father). Perhaps we should be less surprised that a professing Christian would marry his father's wife (1 Cor. 5:1). Discussions of these matters were fervent in first century Jewish debates. Of course, John the Baptist was martyred over this very issue (Matt. 14:1-12). So understanding *porneia* as incestuous marriage fits the historical period well.<sup>17</sup> Summarizing the merits of *porneia* as incestuous marriage:

This solution has numerous advantages: 1) it fits a specific historical situation; 2) it draws on and relates to known rabbinic views of certain key OT texts; 3) it allows the exceptive clauses to be true exceptions — Jesus does not think incestuous marriages are joined by God and he implicitly allows for their dissolution; 4) it draws on a known meaning of *porneia* that is found elsewhere in the NT and in other literature that circulated in Jesus' and the Gospel writers' time; 5) it does not confuse Matthew's use of *porneia* and *moicheuo* here which elsewhere he uses to refer to different things; 6) it comports with the contrast we expect in Jesus' teaching and have been prepared for by the antithesis formula and Jesus' appeal to God's original plan over and above Moses' concessions to hard-heartedness; 7) as Fitzmyer remarks, '... the exception for an illicit union ... may be said not to render the prohibition of divorce less absolute.'<sup>18</sup>

The last point is perhaps the most compelling. While we cannot reach a definitive conclusion about *porneia* on purely lexical grounds, Jesus' apparently total rejection of divorce in Mark 10:2-12 strongly favors *porneia* as being incestuous marriage. God's laws against incest can collide with his laws on divorce. Jesus, in agreement with John the Baptist, agrees that divorce in such cases is not merely permitted but demanded.

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<sup>17</sup>Others have proposed that *porneia* refers to sexual relations before marriage, similar to what Joseph first believed about Mary's conception. While possible, this solution lacks historical support and does not suit Jesus' reference to Deuteronomy 24:1 in the Sermon on the Mount, a passage about marriage, not the betrothal period.

<sup>18</sup>Witherington, p. 574.

While *porneia* here mostly likely refers to an incestuous marriage (in agreement with the Roman Catholic translations), we should acknowledge that other translations are possible. Hopefully the gravity of Herod's situation (the only biblically sanctioned divorce in the entire Bible) will, at the minimum, calibrate our attitudes and prevent hasty or unnecessary divorce. If the interpretation is correct that *porneia* refers to incestuous marriage, then this would be the only permissible reason to divorce a spouse.

Before moving on to examine the full exception clause, it should be clearly said that in no way should varying interpretations of *porneia* modify what Jesus teaches about remarriage: it is forbidden for either spouse. If a person chooses to believe that *porneia* primarily refers to adultery, the prohibition against remarriage should be no less stringent. While the conditions for divorce may be disputed, the integrity of the one-flesh union is not revoked by legal divorce.

## **Matthew 19 and the so-called exception clause that would permit remarriage**

Now it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these sayings, that He departed from Galilee and came to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. And great multitudes followed Him, and He healed them there.

The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?"

And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate."

They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?"

He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery."

His disciples said to Him, “If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” (Matthew 19:1-10)

As in Matthew 5:32, Matthew 19:9 contains a hard saying with an exception for *porneia*. Before examining the exception clause, we should note that the account in Matthew 19:1-10 shares similarities to Mark 10:2-12. Both stories occur on the eastern side of the Jordan, in Perea, where Herod Antipas governed. Both accounts involve exchanges with Jesus and the Pharisees that climax with a hard teaching by Jesus that shocks the disciples. But there are at least four important differences: (1) The question posed to Jesus is slightly different in Matthew compared to Mark; (2) The Pharisees ask Jesus about Moses in Matthew’s account while in Mark it is Jesus who asks; (3) the hard saying occurs publicly in Matthew’s account while it occurs privately in a house with the disciples in Mark’s account; (4) the hard sayings prohibiting remarriage have important differences between the accounts (cf. Matthew 19:9 and Mark 10:11-12). Since Jesus often repeated similar but slightly varying teachings at different times (i.e. the Sermon on the Mount of Matthew 5-7 versus the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6:20-49), Mark 10:2-12 and Matthew 19:1-10 most likely represent different encounters altogether during his teaching campaign in Perea. If this is the case, we should not be quick to assume that Mark and Luke omitted the exception clause when reporting the same exchanges. It is just as possible or even more likely that Jesus did not utter the exception clause in those separate teaching encounters. In fact, many exegetes today believe that the exception clause is a parenthetical comment added by Matthew and does not represent Jesus’ oral teaching. (See Matthew 24:15 for an undisputed parenthetical addition.) However, a parenthetical comment in no way detracts from Scripture’s inspiration so this should not lessen our desire to understand its meaning.

What about the exception clause? According to the customs of Greek syntax, the positioning of the exception clause after the first verb (“divorce”) strongly implies that it is modifying only the first verb and not the combined pair (“divorce” and “marries another”).<sup>19</sup> This represents how native Greek speakers of the early church understood the construction. This understanding is corroborated by the statements in Mark and Luke, and as we will see, by Paul’s understanding of Jesus’ teaching.

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<sup>19</sup>Wenham and Heth on p. 115 cite three of the premier grammars on this point: J. H. Moulton, W. F. Howard, and N. Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (4 vols.), 3:349-350; A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 419; F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and R. W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament*, §474.

By way of analogy, consider the following sentence: “Whoever captures endangered animals, except for approved scientific tracking, and sells them, breaks the law.” The “except for approved scientific tracking” modifies “captures endangered animals” and not “sells them.” Similarly, the exception clause (“except for *porneia*”) modifies the verb “divorce” and does not modify both verbs together. Thus even if a legitimate divorce occurs due to *porneia*, remarriage is still not allowed by the exception clause.

Despite much contemporary focus on Matthew 19:9, it actually provides no new teaching relative to Mark 10:10-11, Luke 16:18, and Matthew 5:32. The exception clause is positioned identically to Matthew 5:32: after “divorce” and before “marries another.” This identical placement, making a somewhat awkward sentence, strongly suggests significance to such particular placement. This significance is most easily understood by considering alternative placements of the exception clause:

1. (preceding both verbs) “Except for *porneia*, whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery.”
2. (following both verbs) “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, except for *porneia*, commits adultery.”
3. (following the conclusion of adultery) “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery, except for *porneia*.”
4. (as Jesus actually said it) “Whoever divorces his wife, except for *porneia*, and marries another, commits adultery.”

As described at the beginning, the modern view allowing remarriage after divorce came from Erasmus in the sixteenth century. *Any* of the first three statements above would make the Erasmian case for allowance of remarriage considerably stronger, perhaps even overwhelming. But twice we have the fourth wording, and only the fourth wording, recorded. If Jesus wanted to communicate the idea that the exception clause only pertains to divorce and not to remarriage, only the fourth wording fits. Such an awkward construction was likely carefully chosen, compelling us to believe that *porneia* does not enable remarriage.

The disciples’ stunned response of “it is better not to marry” again harmonizes well with the countercultural view of marriage that Jesus teaches. In Jesus’ day, remarriage was allowed after divorce. Yet here, Jesus teaches that divorce does not grant the ability to remarry (just as in Mark 10:10-11, Luke 16:18, and Matthew 5:32) because God forges in marriage a one-flesh

union that legal divorces cannot undo. Jesus was teaching that a person's marital bond persisted despite the other spouse's behavior. Jesus undercuts the Pharisees' question altogether by arguing that divorce goes against something far more fundamental, the one flesh union that God Himself has forged (19:5-6). Jesus answers that a man cannot divorce his wife except for one narrow exception, and even if that happens, remarriage would be adultery. We can understand why the disciples had such a strong reaction ("it is better not to marry") to this new teaching.

The omissions of the exception clause in Mark, Luke, and by Paul deserve additional comment. It is easy to forget that the thrust of Jesus' teachings in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 concerns divorce and remarriage. The exception clause is just that, an exception. The absence of the exception clause in Mark, Luke, or Paul gives the sense that Matthew 19:9 must be dealing with an unusual circumstance. This of course supports *porneia* as being incestuous marriage because Matthew's gospel account is uniquely concerned with Jewish issues.

But the Erasmian view tends to treat *porneia* as adultery. If that were the case, given that adultery has been a problem of every society from every era, it is curious that other writers would omit such an important exception. Explicit instruction would be helpful given that the Old Testament penalty for adultery was death. To assume that readers of Mark, Luke, or Paul should know and mentally insert Matthew's exception clause into those texts requires, at minimum, a stretch that should make us uncomfortable. In the first century, before bound Bibles even existed, it seems unreasonable to assume that Mark, Luke, or Paul would presume that their texts on divorce should be read through the lens of Matthew's exception clause. These texts should be able to be rightly understood on their own.

We may now distill Jesus' teachings:

- If a man or a woman divorces and remarries, it represents adultery against the first spouse. (Mark 10:11-12)
- If a man divorces his wife and remarries, another man who marries the divorced wife (despite her wrongly being divorced) commits adultery. Thus divorce provides neither the guilty nor the innocent spouse the ability to remarry without committing adultery. (Luke 16:18)
- If a man divorces a wife and she marries another, the man is held guilty of driving her into adultery (Matt. 5:32a). As in Luke 16:18b, anyone who marries the innocent spouse is guilty of adultery (Matt. 5:32b).



- Divorce is allowed in the case of *porneia*, but not remarriage. Consistent with some translations, the word *porneia* probably means “incestuous marriage” from the context of Herod’s marriage to his brother’s wife, other New Testament usage (1 Cor. 5:1, Acts 15:29), intertestamental usage (Tobit 8:7 and the Dead Sea Scrolls), and rabbinic context.
- By virtue of its position and customary features of Greek grammar, the exception clause applies only to the first verb “divorce” and not to “marries another.” Thus a case of *porneia* does not allow for remarriage for either spouse.

## Divorce and remarriage in the teachings of Paul

The cumulative evidence is quite strong that Jesus prohibited remarriage after divorce. Ideally, we would have first-century validation of this interpretation. Thankfully, we have exactly that in Paul, an infallible interpreter of Jesus. We will now examine two passages of Paul on the subject of divorce and remarriage. The shorter passage contains an incidental reference to marriage:

For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband lives, she marries another man, she will be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from that law, so that she is no adulteress, though she has married another man. (Romans 7:2-3)

Paul notes that death terminates the marriage relationship (Rom. 7:2). Jesus implied something similar during His ministry, “For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels of God in heaven” (Matt. 22:30). One word from Romans 7:2-3 deserves special attention: bound (Greek: *deō*). Husband and wife are bound (*deō*) to one another until death severs their marital relationship. We will revisit this word at the conclusion of Paul’s lengthy and direct address on divorce and remarriage, 1 Corinthians 7.

The truth of the lifelong bond of marriage is tightly woven into traditional Christian wedding vows, where each spouse promises fidelity until death. Most spouses take a vow of commitment “as long as we both shall live” or “until death do us part.” We should not treat this language as flighty

romantic language but as covenantal, weighty language. Those who have taken this vow before God and before man should honor their word.

While detailed exegesis of 1 Corinthians 7 is beyond the scope of our discussion, three portions merit careful attention. The first portion is:

Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife. (1 Corinthians 7:10-11)

In this passage, Paul informs us that he is relating a teaching of the Lord Jesus. (Note the expression, “not I but the Lord.”) Because Paul serves as an infallible interpreter of Jesus, this passage is especially valuable to confirm our synthesis of Jesus’ instructions. Indeed, Paul’s restatement of Jesus’ teaching in his own words fully agrees with our distillation. A wife should not divorce her husband (1 Cor. 7:10). But if there has already been a separation, there are only two options: be reconciled or remain single. Remarriage is not possible.

There is one last passage that must be addressed before claiming complete coherence among texts in the New Testament, the so-called “Pauline privilege” text:

But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her. And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy. But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace. For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife? (1 Corinthians 7:12-16)

In this passage Paul addresses a situation that Jesus did not (note the expression, “I, not the Lord”), which is that of mixed believer-unbeliever marriages. Paul urges Christians to stay in those marriages, but if the unbeliever insists upon leaving, then he or she should be allowed to depart in peace. “But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister

is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace” (1 Cor. 7:15). While some have claimed that not being “under bondage” implies the right to remarry, that would subvert the one-flesh union that Jesus upheld so vigorously and that Paul affirmed in 1 Cor. 7:10-11. Moreover, the underlying Greek word for “enslaved” (*douloō*) is never used in the New Testament or elsewhere to describe a marriage bond, so it is exegetically unwarranted to claim that by being “not enslaved” Paul is saying that the person is now free to remarry. The distinct word “bound” (*deō*) is used by Paul in Romans 7:2 to describe marriage. In fact, when summarizing his whole teaching at the end of the passage, Paul writes:

A wife is bound [Greek: *deō*] by law as long as her husband lives; but if her husband dies, she is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. But she is happier if she remains as she is, according to my judgment—and I think I also have the Spirit of God. (1 Corinthians 7:39-40)

As in Romans 7:2, the marital bound is described using the verb *deō* not *douloō*. There is no instance in Scripture or extrabiblical literature of using *douloō* to describe marriage. (Note that the NIV tragically mistranslates 1 Corinthians 7:15 by using the word “bound” as if it were the same word used in Romans 7:2 and 1 Corinthians 7:39).

Especially in the light of verses 10 and 11 where Paul requires either celibacy or reconciliation, this view makes the best sense of the passage. Thus this verse should be taken as a comfort to those who have been abandoned: they should not despair but realize that they are no longer “under bondage.” It is not, however, license to remarry. Much of the rest of 1 Corinthians 7 extols the value of singleness because it enables a less hindered life of devotion to the Lord.

Putting all the pieces together, we have coherence across all the New Testament texts. To summarize thus far:

- If a man or a woman divorces and remarries, it represents adultery against the first spouse. (Mark 10:11-12)
- If a man divorces his wife and remarries, another man who marries the divorced wife (despite her wrongly being divorced) commits adultery. Thus divorce provides neither the guilty nor the innocent spouse the ability to remarry without committing adultery. (Luke 16:18)
- If a man divorces a wife and she marries another, the man is held guilty of driving her into adultery (Matt. 5:32a). As in Luke 16:18b,

anyone who marries the innocent spouse is guilty of adultery (Matt. 5:32b).

- Divorce is allowed in the case of *porneia*, but not remarriage. Consistent with some translations, the word *porneia* probably means “incestuous marriage” from the context of Herod’s marriage to his brother’s wife, other New Testament usage (1 Cor. 5:1, Acts 15:29), intertestamental usage (Tobit 8:9 and the Dead Sea Scrolls), and rabbinic context.
- By virtue of its position and customary features of Greek grammar, the exception clause applies only to the first verb “divorce” and not to “marries another.” Thus a case of *porneia* does not allow for remarriage for either spouse.
- Marriage is a covenantal relationship that is binding until the death of one of the marriage partners (Rom. 7:2-3; 1 Cor. 7:39-40).
- In the event of separation, the Christian should remain celibate or be reconciled (1 Cor. 7:10-11). If an unbelieving spouse leaves, the Christian is not obligated to put up every possible obstacle to prevent the divorce because he or she is not enslaved (1 Cor. 7:15). Instead, the Christian is now free to live a life of devotion to the Lord.

## Critique of the modern view

The modern Protestant, or Erasmian, view teaches that divorce and remarriage are permitted under two conditions: (1) abandonment by an unbelieving spouse or (2) adultery. If there has been adultery, the guilty spouse is not permitted to remarry but the innocent spouse is permitted to both divorce and remarry.

Before critiquing the Erasmian position, we must precisely grasp how the Erasmian view understands the exception clause. Once we clearly comprehend the view, its flaws will become apparent. However most people are rushed and sloppy in reading these passages and miss crucial insights that become crystal clear upon a few minutes of reflection. So let us first carefully understand the Erasmian position on its own terms.

As we have discussed, the Erasmian view applies the exception clause to both divorce and remarriage. The Erasmian view also tends to treat *porneia* as roughly equivalent to adultery. But in the case that Jesus raises in Matthew 19:9, who is committing adultery? The man or the woman? Let us restate Matthew 19:9 both ways to find the answer:

- “If a man divorces his wife, except if she has committed *porneia*, and marries another, he commits adultery.”
- “If a man divorces his wife, except if he has committed *porneia*, and marries another, he commits adultery.”

The second option is clearly nonsensical—the exception clause is supposed to exonerate the man in his remarriage from committing adultery. It exonerates him if his wife committed adultery, not if he committed adultery! Thus we can confidently conclude that *for the Erasmian, in Jesus’ wording in Matthew, the exception clause concerns the wife committing adultery*. The significance of this statement may not be apparent yet, but we belabor the point because it represents an Achilles’ heel of the Erasmian stance.

With this perspective on the Erasmian view of the exception clause, we can now make our criticisms. The Erasmian view suffers from at least twelve biblical contradictions, logical errors, and defects. First, Matthew 5:32 and Luke 16:18b should devastate the Erasmian view. If a man wrongfully divorces his wife and marries another person, the Erasmian view teaches that the wife is now free to marry because there has been adultery committed by the husband and the subsequent divorce has made her free to remarry. She would be deemed as the “innocent” party liberated by divorce. Yet Matthew 5:32a teaches that she, though innocent, commits adultery upon remarriage! The Erasmian reads Matthew 5:32a as, “But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife, except if she has committed *porneia*, causes her to commit adultery.” But if she has not committed adultery, the exception clause becomes irrelevant. Thus, in the case of a woman’s innocence, we can omit it and say, “But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason causes her to commit adultery.” So Jesus teaches that an innocent woman commits adultery, a clear contradiction of the Erasmian position.

Thus the celebrated exception clause cannot salvage the modern permissiveness toward remarriage. The exception clause in the Erasmian view is supposed to provide license for the man to divorce and remarry if his wife has committed adultery. (We remember, as described above, the exception clause as Jesus worded it pertains to the woman’s *porneia* in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9.) But in the case where the man is the guilty party, the Erasmian view clearly contradicts Scripture. Consider the case of Albert and Betty. Albert wickedly runs off with a woman, divorces his wife Betty and remarries. There has been no *porneia* that Betty has committed. Only Albert is guilty. This is precisely the thrust of Matthew 5:32a (i.e., when the exception clause has not “kicked in”). In the non-exceptional case, the man has sinned and

the woman is not guilty of *porneia*. But in this situation, Jesus teaches that remarriage for the woman is adultery! Thus Scripture rebukes the Erasmian view which teaches that the innocent woman can remarry.

Matthew 5:32b and Luke 16:18 seal the point by saying that any man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. Both verses clearly teach against the man's wickedly divorcing and remarrying under penalty of adultery. Yet in both verses, marriage of the divorced woman is described as adulterous. The only way to have the Erasmian view fit Luke 16:18b and Matthew 5:32b is to add an "inverse" exception clause: "Whoever marries her who is divorced from her husband commits adultery, except if she is innocent of *porneia*." Thus both Matthew 5:32a and 5:32b (as well as Luke 16:18) independently teach against the Erasmian view.

To see the second error, let us suppose that the Erasmian view is correct and that the innocent party is able to be remarried but the guilty party is not. If the guilty party cannot remarry without being adulterous because he or she is still united to the former spouse (the only way to plausibly interpret the word *adultery*), then the former spouse must also still be connected to the guilty spouse. If the innocent spouse is free to remarry, then he or she becomes a bigamist after remarriage, because of the persistent bond with the guilty party! The problems and inconsistencies go on:

3. The Erasmian view fails to explain why the exception clause follows divorce alone, but not both divorce and remarriage. To assert that the *porneia* enables both violates customary Greek convention. As we have seen, out of four possible placements, any of the other three would made a very strong case for the Erasmian view. The position that we have in Matthew is the only one that supports *porneia* modifying divorce alone.
4. The Erasmian view minimizes the witness of native Greek speakers from the time period nearest to Jesus. Indeed, the Erasmian view fails to explain the essential unanimity of the early church fathers who opposed remarriage.
5. The Erasmian view is in fact quite close to Shammai's view, one of the dominant Jewish views during Jesus' time that allowed for divorce and remarriage after adultery. By allowing for divorce and remarriage after abandonment, the Erasmian view teaches that Jesus was slightly more permissive than Shammai's view. This would be surprising given the tenor of Jesus' corpus of teaching, especially the Sermon on the Mount.

6. The Erasmian view fails to explain the disciples' surprise. If Jesus agreed with Shammai's view, the disciples would not have been stunned nor said that it is better not to be married.
7. The Erasmian view does not explain well why Jesus chose the term *porneia* instead of *moicheia*. Additionally, Jesus could have said, *porneia* and *moicheia*, but He did not.
8. The Erasmian view does not adequately explain what is distinctive about Matthew that led to the exception clause being given there, and nowhere else.
9. The Erasmian view crucially depends on the assumption that Mark, Luke, and Paul require the reader to know and insert the exception clause from Matthew into all other texts. To project a dubious interpretation from one source onto three other sources is poor hermeneutics.
10. While beyond the scope of this essay to explore in detail, it is likely that Jesus' statement, "there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake" (Matt. 19:12) is about separated and divorced spouses refraining from sexual activity and remarriage after divorce for the sake of the kingdom.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, the Erasmian system has no such persons because there is no such burden.
11. The view is historically novel. Absent compelling reasons, latching onto a view unknown until the 1500s is perilous and contradicts the concept that the faith has been once delivered to the saints. We should be suspect of modern teachings that relax historically held views.
12. The modern, Erasmian view minimizes the obligations that Scripture teaches we have to keep our word. In the Psalms, the question is posed, "Lord, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill?" (Ps. 15:1 NKJV) It goes on to answer that "He who swears to his own hurt and does not change" (Ps. 15:4 NKJV). That expression simply means we should keep our word even when it costs us dearly. How much greater an obligation to we bear to our wedding vows, publicly and solemnly given, with God presiding as witness? Do we truly desire to dwell on God's holy hill?
13. The modern view minimizes the obligations that Scripture teaches we have to forgive. Jesus teaches that we should forgive relentlessly (Matt.

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<sup>20</sup>Wenham and Heth, pp. 53-65.

18:22). The theme of the book of Hosea is that God's covenant-keeping love persists despite the unfaithfulness of an adulterous wife. Far too often, spouses are unwilling to forgive, instead choosing to nurture resentment and bitterness. To not forgive that person who is bone of your bone and flesh of your flesh is a grave offense indeed. Dare we pray, "Forgive us, as we also forgive our debtors" (Matt. 6:12)?

14. The test of fruits demonstrates that the modern Erasmian view lacks the power to transform marriages even within the church. In America, approximately 35% of all married couples have been divorced, and this percentage is the identical within the Protestant church.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, churches that hold to the historic view of the church as described in this essay have divorce rates less than 0.1%.<sup>22</sup>
15. The Erasmian view contradicts the New Testament which teaches that only death severs the marital bond (Rom. 7:2-3; 1 Cor. 7:39). The bond between husband and wife may be dissolved legally (as Moses permitted), but not in God's eyes. The husband who is unfaithful to his wife is sinning precisely because the marital bond persists. If adultery dissolved the marital bond, then it could not be called adultery since adultery implies violation of an existing marital relationship. The marital union is humanly unbreakable—only God can sovereignly break it by the death of one of the spouses. This was precisely why Jesus answered the question of the Pharisees in the manner that He did; they entirely misunderstood the nature of marriage.
16. Perhaps the most important weakness of the Erasmian view is that it violates the essential nature of marriage. In the New Testament, we learn that that the "two becoming one flesh" represents Christ and the church (Eph. 5:22-33). The husband, like Christ, represents the head, and the wife, like the church, represents the body. Husbands are called to "love their wives as their own bodies" (Eph. 5:28), and wives are called to regard their husbands as "head" (Eph. 5:22). The true marital bond can be dissolved as easily as the head can be removed from the body. Can the head find a new body or the body a new head? Those who teach and practice that the marital bond can be humanly broken

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<sup>21</sup>Barna Group, "Born Again Christians Just As Likely to Divorce As Are Non-Christians" (2004), [www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org).

<sup>22</sup>Churches that hold this view include the conservative Anabaptist churches. This statistic comes from the author's research in the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite churches.



contradict the witness of Jesus' love for His church and the resulting permanent union: Jesus in the church, and the church in Him.

Thus we are left with the typical modern interpretation of these passages as being slippery and illogical. The Erasmian view contradicts individual verses as well as larger themes of the Bible. Only one interpretation of these verses remains viable: remarriage for either spouse is biblically prohibited while the other spouse lives.

## Pastoral applications

Based on the biblical witness, those who have experienced a divorce should be counseled to remain single or be reconciled with their former spouse, assuming that the former spouse is still unmarried. This counsel merely follows 1 Corinthians 7:10-11. Should reconciliation fail (or be inadvisable as in the case of persistent abuse or if the former spouse has remarried), lifelong singleness is the only option. This may seem like a bitter pill. But when wedded to the Lord, it should be a fruitful and joyful time to be in undivided ministry.

The thorniest question involves counseling a person who is already in a second marriage (while the former spouse lives) or married to a divorced person.<sup>23</sup> Many modern advocates of the "no remarriage" view advocate expressing sorrow for the remarriage but then counsel to remain in the subsequent marriage. This view is certainly more palatable than the alternative counsel to view the subsequent marriage as adulterous. But such an application betrays the very heart of the argument for not remarrying. If the subsequent marriage is truly adulterous, to stay in that marriage would be sin.

Some reject this application because it seems too extreme and too hard to ask any family to face. But God's word must not be rejected because of harsh implications, particularly when devout people across diverse traditions throughout church history have practiced those very implications. Our hearts should sorrow in contemplating the ramifications but at the same time be stirred to action: "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually

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<sup>23</sup>For a deeper treatment, see Roger Hertzler's *Dear Pastor* (2008), available at [www.watchmangospelsigns.com](http://www.watchmangospelsigns.com). Hertzler's book is perhaps the best introductory book on the subject of divorce and remarriage. His treatment of subsequent marriages is especially helpful.

immoral, nor idolaters, *nor adulterers*, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. 6:9-10 ESV).

A person is obligated to keep their promises insofar as they are not sinful. Similarly with marriage, uniting with another person while a former spouse lives is a violation of another promise and another union. This would imply that the subsequent marriage should be dissolved. This principle was apparent to Ezra, the great scribe who reformed the Jewish people who returned to Jerusalem after exile. "For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel" (Ezra 7:10). In Ezra 9-10, he takes part in dissolving the marriages of those Jews who had married with non-Jews. Ezra led the people of God into a repentance that was more than mere words. He saw this as necessary to restore the Jewish people into right standing with God (see his prayer in Ezra 9:6-15). This type of dramatic action was not confined to the Old Testament. John the Baptist, who according to Jesus was the greatest man of the Old Testament era, advocates the dissolution of Herod's marriage (Matt. 11:11, 14:3-4). The actions of Ezra and John the Baptist, as well as the logical inference from Scripture perfectly harmonize. As one author notes:

There is, to be sure, forgiveness for those who have committed adultery, wickedly divorced, and remarried. But there is forgiveness only in the way of repentance. And true repentance never goes on happily in the sin repented of (e.g. sleeping with another man's wife) but rather breaks with the sin, whatever the cost. . . Grace calls and empowers the forgiven sinner to walk in holiness of life. The divorced man may not remarry. Grace will enable him to live a single life. Grace calls those who are already remarried to stop living in that state that Jesus describes in Matthew 19:9, Mark 10:11, 12 and Luke 16:18 as continual adultery. Grace will enable the repentant, pardoned adulterer and adulteress to do this. It is the very nature of the grace of repentance itself that the sinner breaks with the sin that he sorrows over and confesses. The penitent brings forth works worthy of repentance. Only this repentance is genuine. Only this repentance finds forgiveness with God, regardless of what the churches may say.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>David Engelsma, *Marriage: The Mystery of Christ and the Church*, Reformed Free Publishing Association (1998), p. 206 and 228.

The application of this teaching may be the single most difficult expression of repentance in the entire Bible. Jesus warned that the cost of following Him would be high: "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me" (Matt. 10:37-38).

Some have claimed that when they become followers of Jesus, their sins are washed away and that they may stay in once adulterous relationships. They claim that "all things have become new" (2 Cor. 5:17) and their once adulterous marriages have become clean. Surely this is the opposite of a godly impulse that seeks restitution and setting relationships right. When Zacchaeus decided to become a disciple of Jesus, he did not claim that his sins were washed away such that he had no obligation to restore previous wrongs. He said that he would pay back fourfold any ill-gotten gain. John the Baptist does not advise Herod that he could stay with Herodias if he followed Jesus. Paul plainly teaches that conversion preserves marriage bonds, not destroys them (1 Cor. 7:12-13). Marriage is an institution that precedes Israel or the church. A change in faith status thus does not change a person's marital status. Any person sincerely following Jesus will therefore leave any adulterous relationship, whether entered into before or after professing faith. Imagine a man who wickedly runs away from his wife, marries a young girl he met, "becomes a Christian," and calls his first wife informing her that his new faith has sanctified this new marriage and he can legitimately stay with the young girl. This kind of twisted thinking is a blot on the name of King Jesus. It should be obvious to anyone with a Christian mind that his relationship was adulterous before his "conversion" and it remains adulterous after. True conversion prompts repentance, not remaining in sin.

Another related question involves whether or not a person should return to the first spouse after there has been an intervening marriage. Deuteronomy 24:1-4 clearly teaches "no" to that question on the grounds that there has been a profound defilement when the woman is remarried. Because Jesus elevated the standard of Deuteronomy 24:1-4, we should have serious doubts that this teaching has been relaxed. Also, Jesus affirmed twice to the woman at the well that she had no husband, though she had five husbands (John 4:17-18). While beyond the scope of this essay, a helpful and biblically grounded discussion of this and related issues has been presented elsewhere.<sup>25</sup> The most biblical counsel for a person in such a scenario is to

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<sup>25</sup>For a deeper treatment, see Roger Hertzler's *Dear Pastor* (2008), available at

remain single.

God has lovingly given a special grace to those who have been through a divorce. Jesus draws attention to this grace: "For there are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake" (Matt. 19:12). Some "have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake," possibly in reference to those who had experienced divorce (v. 10) and then chose to remain celibate. God can be a husband to the lonely woman, and the source of consolation to the lonely man. Children are often implicated in such a situation, and thinking of them may present the greatest temptation to abandon this position. But God provides the grace to meet any situation in which we sacrifice in order to obey His word. If done with God's grace, then could this not give children a deeper understanding of the binding nature of marital commitment and God's love for His church? Moreover, in Christian community and service, the advantages of being single can come to fruition, expressed in a life wedded to the Lord. Ultimately all earthly marriage is transitory (Matt. 22:30), and only the marriage of the King to His bride endures. May the church conduct herself in this world in light of that enduring union.