

DIVORCE:
A CONCISE BIBLICAL ANALYSIS

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That the question of divorce is not only complicated but sensitive, few will deny. With divorce rates on the rapid increase, the evangelical minister confronts a plethora of complex problems, both legal and moral. What answer is to be given when the son of a godly man on the Board of Deacons wants to marry a divorcee? Not only is there some difference among biblical exegetes as to what the Scriptures teach on this subject, it seems to me that the water is further muddied when some evangelicals attempt to make a difference between the case of the divorced person who wants to remarry and who has made profession of faith in Christ, and his counterpart who remains oblivious to the knowledge of the grace of God. To introduce such a distinction can produce a double moral standard — the lower one being applied to the Christian.

Of course, no brief paper is going to solve all the problems. Nevertheless, I shall attempt to present biblical arguments and obvious implications. To a large extent, I shall avoid the more technical aspects of the subject; but at two or three points certain textual arguments have a large bearing on the conclusions to be drawn, and must therefore be incorporated into the paper. Throughout the argument, of course, I assume that the fundamental intention of the Godhead is expressed in the words, "What God hath joined together, let no man put asunder" (Matt. 19:6). "For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that He hateth putting away" (Mal. 2:16). Having recognized this truth, we must acknowledge that the idyllic perfection of the original creation has been engulfed in sin and rebellion; and therefore it is imperative that we come to grips with what God decrees and permits in order to limit the foulness and infidelity of this sinful world.

Cardinal Scriptures on the Subject of Divorce

1. Deuteronomy 24:1-4

(1) When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favor in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house.

(2) And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife.

(3) And if the latter husband hate her, and write her a bill of divorcement, and giveth it in her hand, and sendeth her out of his house; or if the latter husband die, which took her to be his wife;

(4) Her former husband, which sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after that she is defiled; for that is an abomination before the Lord; and thou shalt not cause the land to sin, which the Lord thy God giveth thee for an inheritance.

This passage provoked considerable comment in Rabbinical Judaism, the school of Hillel going so far as to suggest that “She find no favor in his eyes. . .” implied that a man could divorce his wife for having inadequately prepared a meal. This completely misses the point; but so also does the King James.

Every “if” sentence is composed of two parts: the protasis and the apodosis. For example: “If I eat little green apples, I get a miserable tummy-ache.” The protasis is the “if” part: “If I eat little green apples.” The apodosis forms the conclusion: “I get a miserable tummy-ache.” Again, “If I itch, then I scratch.” The protasis is “If I itch,” and the apodosis is “then I scratch”. In the KJV, there is both a protasis and an apodosis in 24:1; roughly, “If a man marries a woman, and because of some uncleanness in her (not further defined) he is dissatisfied, then he ought to divorce her.” This would mean that divorce was mandatory under the posited conditions, whatever they are construed to mean. However, the majority of the ablest scholars, including Calvin, Keil & Delitzsch, and, in our own day, writers such as John Murray, insist that there is really only one protasis covering the first three verses, and the apodosis is in verse four. We might roughly translate as follows:

When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her, and that he write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house, and she departeth out of his house, and goeth and becometh another man's wife, and the

latter husband hateth her and writeth her a bill of divorcement, and giveth it into her hand, and sendeth her out of his house, or if the latter husband die, which took her to be his wife; (then) her former husband, which sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after that she is defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD: and thou shalt not cause the land to sin, which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance.¹

It is worth noting that this is essentially the rendering of the Septuagint.

This is clearly something quite different from sanctioning divorce; yet it concedes that divorce was practised (*cf.* Lev. 21:7, 14; 22:13; Num. 30:9, 10; Deut. 22:19, 29), and even tolerated. Yet toleration is neither divine approval nor divine sanction. There is no OT evidence that divorce was morally sanctioned; it was tolerated because of the hardness of men's hearts. Apparently, the bill of divorcement was mandatory in the case of separation — there was, apparently, no separation from bed and board only, as Roman Catholic theologians call it, without a bill of divorcement; nevertheless, divorce was not automatic and flip-pant. In fact, the insistence upon a “bill of divorcement” served as protection for the woman; contrast the Arab practice in some Muslim sects where the man needed only to say “I divorce thee” three times in a row in order to secure the divorce. The “unseemly thing” was far more serious than merely messing up domestic chores such as cooking. “The phrase itself when viewed in the context of the Old Testament usage surely requires something shameful.”² Nor can the “unseemly thing” be adultery, for the punishment for this is prescribed in Lev. 20:10 and Deut. 22:2. Nor can it be suspicion of adultery, for the procedure to be followed in such cases is given in Num. 5:11-31.

The thrust of this passage, then, is that a woman who has been divorced for some shameful thing not further defined, and who marries someone else, must not, under any circumstances, return to her former spouse. The reason is that “she has been defiled” —

¹See John Murray, *Divorce* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961), pp. 6f.

²*Ibid.*, p. 12. The Hebrew is *cerwaṭ dāḅār* lit. “nakedness of a thing.” This precise expression is used in only one other place in the OT, namely Deut. 23:14(15), where it entails the failure to bury human excrement as prescribed by the preceding law.

and in the Old Testament this word is usually associated with the grossest types of sexual immorality or idolatry. Note that the woman is not thus restricted if she does not marry anyone else; it is the second marriage which effects an irreversible and utter separation from her first mate. Observe also that she could marry a third man after being divorced by the first two.

2. Matthew 5:31-32

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

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

Note that Jesus is here not abrogating Old Testament law; He has asserted this quite clearly (5:17). He is simply showing the sweep and force of the intent behind the Old Testament law. However, this does abrogate the Mosaic *penalty* for adultery, which was death by stoning. This text deals only with divorce initiated by the man, and does not discuss the rights of the woman, nor the question of remarriage for the man who puts his wife away — *i.e.* divorces her — for fornication. However, “fornication is unequivocally stated to be the only legitimate ground for which a man may put away his wife.”³ “Jesus recognizes only one sufficient ground for divorce.”⁴ Fornication (*porneia*) implies, in fact, all illicit sexual intercourse. The emphasis here is that if a man divorces a woman for any other reason than fornication (which fornication would most likely, but not necessarily, be adultery), he is likely to cause his wife to commit adultery — *i.e.* he is encouraging her to marry someone else (or to have sexual relations with someone else), when their marriage has not been dissolved in the sight of God. The latter marriage, however legal before the state, is adulterous in God’s eyes, because the former union was not broken. It is therefore obvious that the man who divorces his wife, except for the cause of fornication, likewise ought not to remarry, even as he ought not to have divorced his spouse. Note, too, that this text does not attempt to answer the question of the right of remarriage for the woman who has been

³*Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁴John A. Broadus, *Matthew*, part of *An American Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Alvah Hovey (Valley Forge: American Baptist Publication Society, 1886), p. 111.

divorced for fornication. This is so because, grammatically speaking, the exceptive clause may carry over its force to the final clause. The Greek participle for “her that is divorced” does not have the article which would *require* that the woman referred to in 5:32b must be the same as the one in 5:31a. Hence, the view propounded here is allowable, even if not exegetically demanded. The other factor which favours this view is bound up with the OT *toleration* of remarriage (Deut. 24:1-4), even though such toleration was a permission granted because of the hardness of men’s hearts; and since Christ has just finished affirming that He did not come to destroy OT law (Mt. 5:17), we may be sure that He would not proceed to contradict it. To put it another way: Mt. 5:32a talks about a man *causing* his wife to commit adultery by divorcing her and thus encouraging her to marry or have an affair with someone else. But there is an exception: the case of fornication. In that case, the implication is that a man who divorces his wife (*i.e.* because she has been guilty of fornication), is *not* causing his wife to commit adultery — she already has! The bond is severed, and her husband *may* — but is not required to — divorce her. There is nothing in this text which therefore flatly forbids her to marry again; for otherwise, the exceptive clause is meaningless. Mt. 5:32b must be interpreted in conjunction with Mt. 5:31-32a. If this interpretation be allowed, then the woman divorced on legitimate grounds *may* have the right to remarry, although her adultery, which provided adequate grounds for the divorce, is not to be condoned. The text does not plainly grant such a woman the right to remarry; but neither does it plainly forbid it.

Finally, it is important to observe that fornication provides adequate grounds for divorce, but in no way requires it.

3. Matthew 19:3-9

(3) The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?

(4) And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female,
(5) And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh?

(6) Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.

(7) They say unto him, Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?

(8) He saith unto them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.

(9) And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.

First consider vs. 3-8. Essentially, the question the Pharisees asked the Lord was, "Why did Moses command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?" In vs. 3 we are told that the Pharisees were tempting Christ. Whether therefore they intentionally confused Deut. 24:1-4 or actually construed it in error, their prime purpose was to "ensnare Jesus by the form of the question."⁵ Christ's reply is that Moses' permission was granted because of the hardness of the Israelites' heart. Secondly, He shows that Moses merely "permitted" the putting away of wives; and this is a far cry from what the Pharisees referred to as "commandment". The thrust of our Lord's reply, however, is the original plan and purpose of God: "From the beginning it was not so." Therefore, divorce of all kinds is to be deplored. It remains to be seen under what conditions divorce may be permissible nonetheless.

Matthew 19:9 is one of the most important New Testament passages on divorce. Jesus says,

And I say unto you, whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery; and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.

As Murray (among others) points out, "It is the only passage in the New Testament in which we have the combination of two clauses, namely, the exceptive clause... [except for fornication], and the remarriage clause... [and marries another]."⁶

Observe, first, that the man who divorces his wife for something other than fornication, and marries another, is specifically guilty of adultery. However, the question of the guilt or innocence of the man who divorces his wife for reasons other than fornication, but who does not remarry, is not answered here; Christ dealt with

⁵Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 33.

that in Matt. 5:32.

The crucial issue in Matt. 19:9 is whether or not the exceptive clause refers to both divorce and remarriage, or just to divorce. In other words, does the liberty included in the exceptive clause extend to both divorce and remarriage or to divorce only? Here, commentators are sharply divided. The Roman Church, of course, insists that the exceptive clause refers only to divorce, and not to remarriage; therefore it endorses separation from bed and board without dissolution of the marriage itself. This view must be rejected on several grounds. First, it results in a very awkward, though admittedly possible, rendering of the Greek text.⁷ Second, the crux of the passage is the relationship between putting away and remarriage, and this coordination ought not to be tampered with. Third, we have seen that divorce under the Mosaic code involved more than separation from bed and board, but actual dissolution of the marital tie, as evidenced by the permission granted to remarry under certain conditions. Christ here specifies these conditions in more detail, but He in no way abrogates the principle that remarriage after legitimate divorce is *not* to be regarded as adultery (unless, of course, it is to return to a previous spouse: Deut. 24:1-4). Fourth, if the man may legitimately put away his wife, it is rather superficial to suggest that the "legitimacy" is not sufficiently "legitimate" to involve legal remarriage! There are other considerations to prove that the exceptive clause must refer to remarriage as well as to divorce; but these will suffice. Any other view is eisegesis, called upon to support a pre-conception.

There is another matter to be clarified in this text. What is fornication?

Fornication and adultery are *synonymous* (not identical) terms in the Scriptures and they are *often* interchangeable... In Hebrew and Greek, the word fornication includes incest, sodomy, harlotry, perversion, and all sexual sin, both before and after marriage.⁸

There is excellent lexical backing for Duty's assertion. Accordingly, he renders Matt. 19:9 as follows:

⁷Adequate justification for this point may be obtained in the commentaries, or in Murray, *op. cit.*

⁸Guy Duty, *Divorce and Remarriage* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1967), p. 52.

Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for all sexual sin, and shall marry another, committeth adultery.⁹

This has important ramifications. For example, it implies that a spouse has divorce and remarriage rights if his or her mate is found to be guilty of homosexuality.

Let it be noted emphatically, however, that such “right” is a liberty, not an injunction or command. The victimized spouse may, but is not required to, divorce the mate who is guilty of explicit sexual sin. But and if that victimized spouse does go through with the divorce, he or she is given the unequivocal right of remarriage.

4. Mark 10:2-12; Luke 16:18

(2) And the Pharisees came to him, and asked him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife? tempting him.

(3) And he answered and said unto them, What did Moses command you?

(4) And they said, Moses suffered to write a bill of divorcement, and to put her away.

(5) And Jesus answered and said unto them, For the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept.

(6) But from the beginning of the creation God made them male and female.

(7) For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife;

(8) And they twain shall be one flesh: so then they are no more twain, but one flesh.

(9) What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.

(10) And in the house his disciples asked him again of the same matter.

(11) And he saith unto them, Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another committeth adultery against her.

(12) And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery.

(Luke 16:18) Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery: and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband committeth adultery.

These are the passages most frequently advanced by the proponents of the essentially Roman view (though a few non-Roman Catholics adhere to it) that there are no biblical grounds for divorce leading to remarriage. The problem is compounded

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 62.

when we observe that the exceptive clause of Matt. 19:9, examined in the last section, has a textual variant in a significant number of early manuscripts, which removes the remarriage clause and makes Matt. 19:9 resemble Matt. 5:32 — *i.e.* “except for reason of fornication, he makes her to commit adultery”, instead of “except for fornication, and marries another, he commits adultery”. If such were the case, a man could divorce his wife for fornication (only) but under no condition would he have warrant to remarry.

Yet this is a superficial conclusion. The majority of scholars assert that the present reading of Matt. 19:9 is the original, for a number of excellent reasons, which include the following. (1) It should be admitted that the decision is difficult. Codex Sinaiticus gives the present reading, the reading mirrored in the AV; Codex Vaticanus gives the alternate. But both Sinaiticus and Vaticanus are fourth century uncials, even though they are witnesses on opposite sides of the question. Among textual critics, the following have all preferred the present (AV) reading: Tischendorf, Westcott, Hort, Von Soden, Nestle, Souter, so also AV, ERV, ASV, RSV. (2) A large variety and quantity of textual evidences attest to the present reading. (3) The alternate reading must be evaluated in two parts, and not as a unit. Codex Vaticanus has both parts which can be translated “except for reason of fornication” and “he makes her to commit adultery”. The latter part, however, does not have as strong a support as the former — *eg.* Codex Bezae attests the former, but not the latter. The same difference is found in many Latin MSS as well. And note that it is the *second* part of the disputed text which is crucial to the argument! (4) The present (AV) reading is a much more difficult variant “from the viewpoint of transcriptional probability.”¹⁰ This is an important argument in the science of textual criticism. (5) There is some evidence of assimilation to Mt. 5:32, not only in the clauses being considered, but also in the last clause (in AV) of Mt. 19:9 in the reading supported by Codex Vaticanus. Thus, as Murray observes, there seems to be “a sustained pattern of assimilation to Matthew 5:32 in this reading. This feature. . . is a count against its genuineness. . . .”¹¹

¹⁰Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 50. Murray discusses the Greek text of the passage in some detail.

¹¹*Ibid.*

We may conclude with considerable confidence, therefore, that the reading of AV, ASV, RSV is correct. This returns us to the problem of harmonizing Mark 10:2-12 and Luke 16:18, with Matt. 19:9.

We note the following.¹² In both Mark and Luke, the attention is focused on the fact that our Lord provides no possible exception to His abrogation of the permission implied (but not commanded or openly granted) by Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Therefore the absolute form of the statement is stressed by both Lucan and Markan accounts, since this is the point under discussion by them. Secondly, neither Mark nor Luke make mention of any legitimate divorce whatever; yet some divorce on legitimate grounds is granted by both Matt. 5:32 and the undisputed part of Matt. 19:9. Therefore Markan and Lucan silence regarding remarriage is no more conclusive than their silence regarding divorce. A corollary follows: since they “do not refer to divorce for adultery they could not in the nature of the case refer to the right of remarriage in the event of such divorce.”¹³

The Markan account is especially important, however, because it envisages the possibility of divorce proceedings initiated by the woman. It is not unjustifiable, then, to assume that in the mind of the Lord, the same rights, privileges, and responsibilities belonging to the man also belong to his wife. This is an important observation.

5. I Corinthians 7:10-15

(10) And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband:

(11) But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife.

(12) But to the rest speak I, not the Lord: If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away.

(13) And the woman which hath a husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him.

¹²Again, I am largely indebted to Murray, *op. cit.*, pp. 43-54. It is worth noting that some modern Roman Catholic writers modify the official Church position. For example, Victor J. Popishil, *Divorce and Remarriage* (New York: Harper, 1967), asserts that the unique ground for divorce *and remarriage* is adultery. He ignores I Cor. 7:15 in his study, making no comment on it.

¹³Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

(14) For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean: but now are they holy.

(15) But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace.

The wealth of material written about these difficult verses is enough to scare off the researcher. This paper only attempts to present the view which the writer feels most consistent with sound hermeneutical principles of interpretation of the written divine revelation.

Verses 10-11 must refer to married couples in the Church, who would, because regenerate, be bound to the word of the Lord Jesus Himself (note vs. 10). The clause “yet not I, but the Lord”, does not depreciate Paul’s apostleship, but stresses the fact that this was the teaching of the Lord during His earthly ministry. Therefore, verse 12a does not weaken the authority of the succeeding injunction as from God, since it was not discussed by Christ. (Compare also the teaching of I Cor. 7:17; 14:37).

Paul, in vss. 10-11, is definitely not considering cases involving adultery. He is discussing marriage among believers (vss. 2, 5) and he is answering a problem particularly common in immoral Corinth: easy separation and divorce initiated by either side. Further, Paul would not refer to the Lord as authority and then contradict Him (Matt. 5:32; 19:9). The inescapable conclusion is that vss. 10-11 here refer to separations or divorces on non-legitimate grounds, between believers.

Murray spends considerable time trying to prove that “depart” here means separation, not divorce.¹⁴ He asserts that Paul is teaching that there must be no such thing as separation from bed and board; yet if it should occur, there must be no remarriage. He concludes:

The prohibition, therefore, of even the least drastic form of separation emphasizes all the more the wrong of the more drastic forms, namely, “putting away” of “divorce”.¹⁵

Guy Duty, however, disagrees with Murray’s interpretation of “depart”, and comes up with a more likely exposition. Let him

¹⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 58-61.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 61.

speak for himself, more fully:

The word “depart” in vss. 10-11 signifies divorce. The standard Greek lexicons define depart. . . as “. . . to leave a husband or wife: of divorce. I Cor. 7:11, 15. . .”¹⁶ The woman in the case of vs. 11 had obtained a divorce according to Greek law, which was easy to get, but Paul refused to recognize the validity of the divorce. The fact that the woman had obtained a divorce is indicated by his command for the woman to remain “unmarried”. She was commanded to remain unmarried or to be reconciled to her husband because the decree she obtained did not dissolve the marriage. She was still the wife of the man she divorced. The divorce had left her marriage undissolved as in the case of Matthew 5:32. If she had divorced her husband the case would have been different.¹⁷

It may be added that others agree with Duty, whose views are shared by the present writer. Grosheide states more succinctly, “After an illegitimate divorce the first marriage is not considered annulled.”¹⁸

The second part of the Corinthian passage may now be considered, vss. 12-15. This is patently speaking to the question of mixed marriages. Obviously such a marriage is “mixed” because one of the pagan spouses of an originally pagan union has been converted, not because the marriage was entered upon as mixed, for Paul elsewhere condemns such (eg. II Cor. 6:14).

The teaching here is straightforward in vss. 12-14: The Christian partner is neither to leave the other, nor to put the other away, assuming that the other is willing to live with the Christian spouse. The reason is given in verse 14. Grosheide comments:

“Is sanctified” here cannot mean: holy in Christ before God, because that kind of holiness cannot be predicated of an unbeliever (cf. 1:2; 3:16, 27). Paul uses “sanctified” here as in I Timothy 4:5, i.e. more liturgically than ethically.¹⁹

¹⁶The reader may verify this in Thayer, Arndt and Gingrich, Abbot-Smith, Westcott and Hort.

¹⁷Duty, *op cit.*, pp. 92f.

¹⁸F. W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, part of *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. by F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), p. 163.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 164. Note that this use of “sanctification” is a key argument in covenant theology, and part of the typically Reformed defense of infant baptism. Although this paper is not a forum for such discussion, it is clear nevertheless that at very least there are certain soteric implications.

Now we come to verse 15, the most disputed verse among Evangelicals in the knotty question of divorce. The question is raised: “But suppose the unbeliever *does* depart? What then? Where does that leave the believing spouse who is left behind?” Paul says, “Let him (the unbelieving partner) depart. A brother or sister (*i.e.* the Christian; and note: of either sex!) *is not bound* in such cases.” The question revolves around the strength of the verb, “is not bound” (AV reads “is not under bondage”). Does this verb mean divorce is permitted in the case of desertion where the deserter is a non-believer, and the one deserted is a Christian? Murray²⁰ gives a dogmatic affirmative, under excellent authority. Guy Duty agrees strongly with Murray, and quotes authorities ranging through Luther, Wuest, the Lambeth Conference (1908), Trench, and Deissman, and a variety of Church Fathers, in support of this position. Grosheide agrees.²¹

The question naturally arises whether this contradicts the Lord’s unique exception: namely, fornication. Several things may be said in reply. Vs. 12a implies Paul is discussing a question which the Lord did not touch. Further, Jesus was dealing with “putting away”; Paul’s subject is here limited to what the Christian should do after his (her) unbelieving spouse has “gone away”. Thirdly, there is a real difference between terms used in the two issues discussed by Paul (*i.e.* in vss. 10-11 and vss. 12-15). Murray sums up:

In other words, the outcome and the ensuing obligations of the situation contemplated in verse 15 are so different from the outcome and ensuing obligations of the case with which our Lord’s teaching was concerned that, to say the least, we must refrain from dogmatism to the effect that our Lord’s unambiguous exclusion of every reason for divorce except adultery necessarily excludes the dissolution of the marriage bond in the case of desertion by an unbelieving partner.²²

It must be observed, however, that the divorce in view is not simply on the grounds of desertion *per se*. Certain limitations are imposed. Both partners are not Christians together. The Christian must not leave, nor goad the other into doing so by making life unbearable. Wilful separation by the unbelieving

²⁰*Op. cit.*, pp. 62-78.

²¹*Op. cit.*, p. 166.

²²Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

partner of a mixed marriage, is in view here.

It is cause for lament that within the circle of professing believers desertion has been regarded as sufficient ground for divorce and I Corinthians 7:15 has been wrested to do service in the defence of a cause that Paul never sanctioned.²³

6. Romans 7:1-3

(1) Know ye not, brethren, (for I speak to them that know the law,) how that the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth?

(2) For the woman which hath a husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband.

(3) So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man.

A few teachers attempt to expound this text at the expense of all other biblical references to divorce, and assert thereby that there are no grounds whatsoever for divorce. This is patently either foolish or blind, in the light of the entire biblical revelation pertaining to this subject. The point is, Romans 7:1-3 is not dealing with marriage at all, except by way of illustration as to the way a man is bound to observe the law. It would have been ridiculous for Paul to introduce here the extraneous question of divorce. Suffice it to recall that I Cor. 7:10-15 and Romans 7:1-2 are equally Pauline. The case of adultery, or wilful desertion by the unbeliever of a mixed marriage, does not abrogate the principle inherent in the illustration of Romans 7:1-3, but merely introduces a new set of conditions under which the principle is no longer applicable with respect to the innocent party. "We must not fall into the mistake of loading his illustration with more significance than reasonably belongs to it in the context."²⁴

Obvious Implications

Because of limitations of space, it will be impossible to introduce detailed situations which would serve as examples of the principles here enunciated. Nevertheless, I shall here list several important implications of this study.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 78.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 79.

1. It is frequently argued that the situation is largely changed if, for example, a couple is divorced illegitimately according to the Word of God, but one spouse becomes engaged to a third party; and then these latter two are converted and desire to be married. Clearly, they are entering into adultery, according to the Scriptures. Yet the question is raised, "Yes, but these are now Christians. Christ has forgiven them. Who am I to hold anything against them?" "One thing seems clear — such a solution would set up two standards of morality: one for the unsaved couples; and another, a lower standard, for the saved couples."²⁵ Yet, someone insists, "This couple is now under the Blood." But surely the Blood of Christ does not cover the practice of sin, but only its *guilt*. "Shall we sin, that grace may abound? God Forbid" (Rom. 6:1f). The answer is emphatically negative, the proposal abominable and repelling.

2. We have seen that the non-guilty party of a legitimate divorce has the right to remarry. What about the guilty party from a legitimate divorce — *i.e.* the woman who commits adultery, is divorced by her spouse, and who then wants to remarry? If all the texts are examined, it will be seen that Scripture neither expressly gives sanction to such a course, nor explicitly condemns it. We do not have sufficient evidence to declare the second marriage adultery (although the woman's first promiscuity *was* adultery), nor sufficient evidence to declare the marriage to be legitimate.

3. There is no clear teaching in Scripture which sanctions wilful separation *sans* divorce, and some evidence to condemn it as immoral. As an expedient increasingly common in evangelical circles, wilful separation must be condemned. Perhaps the exception will occur when physical cruelty demands that the victim escape for her (his) own safety, or as a *temporary* device watched over by a competent counsellor in an effort to assist one partner suffering from drug addiction, or from some other extreme affliction.

4. It is apparent that many of our problems re divorce arise out of the fact that the laws of most states do not coincide with the teaching of the Word of God. It appears advisable and even

²⁵Alva J. McClain, *Divorce, Remarriage, and the Doctrine of Sin*, a paper printed but not published, from the 1953 meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, p. 60.

necessary therefore to grant ecclesiastical divorces under certain circumstances. For example: X and Y are married, only Y is a Christian. X secures a divorce which is biblically non-legitimate, but sanctioned by the state. X then marries; and this marriage, from a biblical perspective, is adulterous. Y now wants to marry Christian Z. The Church, however, has not recognized the state divorce between X and Y, because it was biblically non-legitimate; but since X is married, he (she) *has* committed adultery and Y now has grounds for a legitimate divorce. The state won't grant it because it has already granted a biblically non-legitimate decree. Therefore, it seems to me, the Church has the responsibility of issuing an ecclesiastical divorce to Y.

5. In many cases, no matter what course is followed, there is moral evil involved. The injunctions of Scripture do not cover every case, and pastors do well to refuse to dogmatize beyond the clear teaching of Scripture. They must rather in such cases exercise Spirit-given judgment with much compassion. For example: A and B indulge in pre-marital sex, and A becomes pregnant. A is a Christian, B is not. Should A and B marry? Any decision involves moral evil. Analogous situations which concern divorce are increasingly arising to plague the Church of God, the souls of men, and the society in which God has placed us. I know of a girl (call her Mary) who was married in her teens, and was legally separated from her husband after three months. At the end of seven years, she secured a divorce. During that interval of time, she did not see her husband, who had been running around with other women; but during the same period, Mary bore four children, all by different men. She traveled the drug scene from one end to the other and back. Eventually the Lord touched her, and to all appearances she was converted. A fellow, also from the drug scene, was likewise converted, and the two started seeing each other. Associated with a group from which they received abysmal teaching, they started living together. Naturally they soon felt burdened and guilty, and began to wonder what had happened to the smile of the face of God. At that point, I entered the picture, as they came to me for assistance. To make matters worse, Mary's divorce decree was not due for another three weeks; but the couple did intend to get married after the absolute decree was received in hand. Let's face it: the mess by this point

was so big and dirty that clear answers were just not to be found.

6. The best study text on the subject is the work of Murray, referred to below in the footnotes. An excellent volume for the layman would be: Loraine Boettner, *Divorce* (Maryville: Rush Printing Co., 1960). Boettner essentially agrees with Murray, but he does not broach the technical aspects of the subject. In addition, he is not as certain as Murray about separation (as limited by I Cor. 7:15), as grounds for divorce.

7. So far the related subject of church discipline has been avoided; but it seems to me that discipline must be exercised precisely along the lines determined by exegetical exposition of the passages here considered; with the added condition, of course, that the suspected offender first be given private opportunity for repentance and restitution. Let us never turn aside from justice; but may justice be tempered with mercy.