

# **Divorce And Remarriage In The Bible**

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### **Dear Members of the Endtime Issues Newsletter:**

Less than a month after the close of the 57th General Conference Session on July 8, 2000, in Toronto, Canada, the ASI (Adventist-laymen's Services and Industries) held its 54th convention in Grand Rapids, Michigan from August 2-5. Having attended both conventions, it comes natural to compare the two events.

In terms of attendance, The General Conference session was attended by over 60,000 Adventists from all over the world and all walks of life. The ASI convention, on the other hand, was attended by about 2000 Adventists, coming mostly from North America, though there was a fair representation from overseas. ASI members represent various professions, industries, business enterprises, and/or services.

The two gatherings have different objectives. While the primary purpose of General Conference Session is to deal with the business of the church in terms policies, doctrinal resolutions, and election of church leaders, the goal of the ASI is to report on how lay Adventists are sharing Christ in the market place.

An inspiring aspect of both the GC session and the ASI convention is the report on the outreach endeavors of the Adventist church in different parts of the world. However, one notices a differences in listening to these thrilling reports at these two conventions. While at the GC session the reports were presented by the various world Divisions of the church, at the ASI convention the reports came mostly from self-supporting individuals or institutions, who are actively involved in fulfilling the Global Mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Frankly, I must confess that I was inspired and moved by the degree of commitment manifested by lay-Adventists in sharing the Gospel in the market place and in a variety of projects across North America and overseas. A clear indicator of their commitment is the special offering that was taken on Sabbath, August 5, which amounted to over four million dollars. This offering will finance 37 projects during the coming year.

### **INVOLVEMENT OF ADVENTIST YOUNG PEOPLE**

What caught my attention at the ASI convention is the involvement of the Adventist young people in the mission of the Adventist church. Sometimes we hear that Adventist young people today no longer respond to traditional preaching, music, and worship style. We are told that the only way to keep them in the church is by entertaining them with drama, puppet shows, beat music, and fun programs. The Adventist young people who participated at the ASI convention proved otherwise. They played sacred music, sang reverently, and shared their gripping testimonies of how the Lord has blessed their evangelistic crusades in such remote places as Siberia, China, Eastern Europe, the Philippines, and Grand Rapids itself.

To drive home the unique contribution that Adventist youth are making to the Adventist church today, on Sabbath morning there was a special report on the Evangelistic Crusade conducted in Grand Rapids by about 80 students, under the leadership of David Asscherick, a 27 years old teacher from the Black Hills Mission College of Evangelism, in Black Hills, North Dakota. The crusade is largely financed by ASI. With the exception of 10 students from our own Andrews University Religion Department, the remaining 70 students involved in the crusade were mostly from various self-supporting Adventist institutions in North America.

For me it was heartwarming to see how the Lord has richly blessed the efforts of these dedicated young people. They told me that they are giving Bible studies in Grand Rapids to over 200 families. In fact, 100 persons have already been baptized. A good number were baptized on Sabbath morning, August 5, during the ASI meeting. By the end of the crusade they hope to see at least another 100 people baptized.

All of this is taking place, not in a developing country, but in Grand Rapids, which is a rather conservative American city—the center of the Christian Reformed Church. In fact, Christian Reformed Churches are the most numerous in the city. I happen to be familiar with Grand Rapids, because I spend a summer canvassing in that city, when I was a student attending our Andrews University Theological Seminary. I recall visiting many families in Grand Rapids who had strong Calvinistic beliefs. The point I am trying to make is that Grand Rapids is not the most promising place for a Summer evangelistic crusade conducted by young people. Yet the success of our young people shows that the Lord can bless the commitment and dedication of our youth even in places that may seem less promising for evangelism.

Truly I can say that I was greatly inspired by what I saw and heard at ASI. For me it was reassuring to see that there are many committed Adventist laypersons who are eager to share their faith and reach sincere people with the endtime message of salvation. It was particularly impressive to see the Adventist youth in action. I spoke with many of these young people who came at my BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES exhibition booth. They told me how desperately they wanted my books, but they did not have enough money to buy them, even at a substantially reduced price. I gave away many copies free to them.

One young man who is participating in the Grand Rapids crusade told me that he desperately needed the whole set of my 16 books for his own personal Bible study, but he could not afford it. I discounted the set of books three times, hoping to make them more affordable to him. But still he could not afford them. Finally, he told me: “Do not discount them any more. I am going to find a sponsor who will buy the books for me.” Half an hour later he came back at the booth with a professionally looking Adventist gentleman who offered to buy the set of books for this young man. I was moved by both the persistence of the young man and the generosity of the sponsor.

## THE SABBATH IN THE NEWS

Al Gore's choice of Joseph Lieberman, senator from Connecticut, as his running mate for the presidential democratic ticket of the United States, has stirred up considerable discussion about the Sabbath. The reason is that Senator Lieberman is an Orthodox Jew who observes the Sabbath scrupulously from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset. Orthodox Jews represent only about 3% of the Jews. The vast majority of Jews treat the Sabbath as a regular business day, just like most Christians treat Sunday.

This is the first time in American history that a Jew is chosen as a vice-presidential running mate. If elected, Lieberman's Sabbath observance would restrict his involvement in politics on Saturday. In his interview with Larry King, Lieberman made it clear that he will not campaign on Saturday for Al Gore, but, if elected, he will attend important meetings affecting the well-being of the people.

Lieberman said: "When it comes to governmental responsibility, I have always felt—and the Rabbis have encouraged me in this — and Jewish tradition does — that when you have a responsibility to people that can protect or advance their well-being or their lives, then you have got to do it. If the Sabbath is about respecting creation and honoring and protecting human life, then how could you let the specific prohibitions of the Sabbath stop you from doing that?"

One senses a double standard in the discussion of Lieberman's Sabbathkeeping. Why should Sabbathkeeping be an issue for Lieberman on whether or not he can fulfill his duty as Vice-president, when no one is questioning "born again" George Bush on whether or not he will be able to serve as President for his Sundaykeeping? Perhaps, Mr. Bush is exempted from this kind of interrogation by the media, because for the Texas governor, as for most Christians, Sunday is not the "Lord's DAY," but the "Lord's HOUR." After attending Sunday church services, they are free to pursue secular activities.

The reduction of the principle of Sabbathkeeping to the "Lord's HOUR," is causing many Christians to reexamine the validity and value of the Sabbath commandment as 24 hours consecrated to God. Many Christians are coming to realize that the Sabbath as a 24 hours day of rest, worship, fellowship, and service, can provide a divine remedy to their tension filled and restless lives.

## RECENT SABBATH PUBLICATIONS

The interest for a rediscovery of the Sabbath is evident in the numerous publications coming off the press. Just today I received on the mail the latest issue of **RESTORE**, a magazine committed to "restoring the biblical Hebrew heritage to the Christian believer." Scholars of all persuasions contribute articles to this magazine. This latest issue is exclusively devoted to the Sabbath, with 10 insightful articles, including my own, which is entitled, "The Good News of the Sabbath." If you wish to receive a copy of **RESTORE**, you can call the editorial office at (423) 472-7321 or email your request at <Restorationfoundation@csi.com>

This week I received the latest catalogue of P & R Publishing, announcing a new book entitled **CELEBRATING THE SABBATH: FINDING REST IN A RESTLESS WORLD**, by Bruce A. Ray. It is favorably reviewed by some scholars and I plan to order a copy. Last week I received two tapes and a booklet entitled "The Seventh Day," by Chuck Missler. He has a popular radio ministry in the North West. His tapes are distributed by Koinonia House (1-800-546-8731). I have not had the chance to listen to the tapes.

Another recent example of the rediscovery of the Sabbath is the book **CATCH YOUR BREATH: GOD'S INVITATION TO SABBATH REST** (1997), authored by Don Postema who serves as pastor of the Campus Chapel at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. I found this book very refreshing. The book, which is published by CRC (Christian Reformed Church), provides a practical and creative study of the meaning of the

Sabbath for today. In his spiritual search for inner peace and rest, Postema tried various resources including Eastern mediation until he was struck by the fact that “Jews and Christians have a practice as near as our Bible, as close as our tradition, as available as the next ten minutes or weekend: the Sabbath.”

Postema explains that “The Sabbath is a gift from God given to humanity right from the beginning. An attitude waiting to be lived ever since Moses received the Ten Commandments and Jesus declared the Sabbath was made for us! A promise that unfolds the more we participate in it. A vacation with God planned from the beginning to be enjoyed into eternity.”

Contrary to other authors who study the Sabbath as a role model for Sundaykeeping, Postema focuses exclusively on the biblical seventh-day Sabbath. I found no attempts in the book to apply the values of the Sabbath to Sunday.

A most unlikely place to find an article discussing the rediscovery of the Sabbath is **HEMISPHERE**, the magazine of United Airlines. I was surprised on a United Airline flight to the West Coast to read in the July 1997 issue of **HEMISPHERE** a delightful article entitled “Ancient Wisdom,” written by Nan Chase, a contributor to *The Washington Post*. Chase tells the story of how she discovered the Sabbath by reading about it.

She decided to begin observing the Sabbath from “sundown Friday until sundown Saturday:” “ No cooking, no shopping or paying of bills, no pulling of weeds or pruning shrubs, no cleaning or repairing the house, nor even talking about or thinking about work and the office. The Sabbath is a day without labor, a time to savor the sweetness of life.” She says that the result was that “My personal life, my professional life, and my family life have all improved, and I plan to go on celebrating the Sabbath.”

What an inspiring testimony to be found, of all places, in an airline magazine. This is but one example of how different people today are rediscovering the blessings of Sabbathkeeping for their families, marriages, and personal lives.

The weekend edition of **USA TODAY** of April 2-4, 1999 carried a two page article “Remember the Sabbath?,” excerpted from Wayne Muller’s book **SABBATH: REMEMBERING THE SACRED RHYTHM OF REST AND DELIGHT**. The article is an excellent presentation of how to keep the seventh-day Sabbath. I plan to buy the book which has just been published by Banthan Press.

Recently Prof. Muller was interviewed in a popular radio-talk show in Los Angeles. An Adventist lady heard him on her car radio and called me with her cellular phone, encouraging me to call in and participate in the conversation with Prof. Muller. I did it. There were several callers ahead of me, but they decided to give me priority because I am also an author of Sabbath books. We had a marvellous conversation for 20 minutes on the relevance of the Sabbath for America today.

More examples could be given of recent publications exploring the relevance of the seventh-day Sabbath for today. Any one interested to read further on the rediscovery of the seventh-day Sabbath, even within mainline denominations, will find an informative account on chapter 7 “Rediscovering the Sabbath,” of my recent book **THE SABBATH UNDER CROSSFIRE**.

The above examples suffice to show that there is a growing interest for a rediscovery of the Sabbath. This past week I received orders for my Sabbath books from Presyterian, Baptist, and Lutheran ministers, all of whom had read sample chapters at my website. Michael Miller, Religion Editor of the **JOURNAL STAR**, in Peoria, Illinois, also interviewed me this past week on the Sabbath. He showed a keen interest for the rediscovery of Sabbathkeeping. The interview is scheduled to be published in a couple of weeks.

In the light of the growing interest for the Sabbath, one wonders if the choice of Senator Joseph Lieberman, a Jewish Sabbathkeeper, may not spark a renewed discussion of the Sabbath/Sunday question. Perhaps, more Americans may be led to investigate why most Christian churches have abandoned the Sabbath day, though it was observed by Jesus, the apostles, and the primitive church. These developments offer to our Adventist Church a unique opportunity to “proclaim the Sabbath more fully” (EW 33).

### **AUSTRALIAN RADIO INTERVIEW**

Some of our subscribers may be interested to listen to the radio interview on “The Bible and Alcohol,” to be aired on Sunday, August 20 at 8:00 p.m. US Eastern standard time, from the Wesley Mission Radio station in Sydney, Australia. The interview can be heard via the internet by logging to the web site: [www.wesleymission.org.au](http://www.wesleymission.org.au) and then entering into SNL (Sunday Night Live). By following the instructions people can listen in to the interview from anywhere in the world.

The interview will be conducted by Dr. Gordon Moyes, who is a well-known radio speaker and director of the Wesley Mission in Australia. He has read my book ***WINE IN THE BIBLE: A BIBLICAL STUDY ON THE USE OF ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES***, and interviewed me on this subject when I was in Sydney about five years ago. At this time he wishes to interview me again in conjunction with the “Alcohol Awareness Week” in Australia. You are welcome to listen in to the interview.

## EXTENSION OF GC SESSION BOOKS OFFER

A number of our subscribers living overseas have asked me if I would extend the deadline beyond August 15, 2000 for the special GC session offer on all my **16 books for only \$100.00, postage paid**, instead of the regular price of \$305.00. The reason is that they need to obtain a bank draft in dollars and mail it to us, because they do not have a credit card to order the books online. This requires more time for their orders to reach us.

To accommodate, especially our overseas subscribers, I have decided to extend the deadline until August 31, 2000. This means that anyone can still order until August 31 the **16 volumes that I have authored at the special offer of \$100.00, postage paid**. The special price includes the mailing expenses, even for overseas, which usually runs about \$15.00 for the set. A listing and description of the 16 books is found at my website: <http://www.biblicalperspectives.com> The response has surpassed our fondest expectations. I consider a privilege to be able to share my research on timely Biblical truths with believers around the world.

Several have asked me if I would extend the special offer also on the 20 cassettes and 8 videos, containing my popular lectures, where I summarize the highlights of the research contained in my books. The answer is "YES." Until August 31, 2000 you can order the complete set of the 20 cassettes, containing 20 one-hour presentations on the Sabbath, Second Advent, Temperance, Women's Ministry, and the Prophetic Role of Pope John Paul II, **for only \$50.00, postage paid, instead of the regular price of \$100.00**.

You can also order the **8 one-hour video programs on the Sabbath for the same price of \$50.00**, postpaid, instead of the regular price of \$120.00. Six of the video programs have been professionally recorded in a television studio in South Bend, Indiana. **If you choose to order the complete set of the 20 cassettes and 8 videos tapes, your special price until August 31, 2000 is ONLY \$70.00, POSTAGE PAID, instead of the regular price of \$225.00**. Feel free to take advantage of this special offer which expires on August 31, 2000.

## **DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE IN THE BIBLE**

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The last newsletter (no. 50) reported on the controversial document that was approved by the GC delegates on the "Biblical Teachings on Divorce." The problematic part of the document is the one dealing with the "Grounds for Divorce," which says: "Scripture recognizes adultery and/or fornication (Matt 5:32) as well as abandonment by an unbelieving partner (1 Cor 7:10-15) as ground for divorce."

The approval of this controversial statement, has sparked a renewed interest for a closer examination of what the Bible really teaches regarding divorce and remarriage. This is an important subject that touches the lives of many people. In an effort to contribute to the ongoing study of this timely subject, I would like to share the findings of my investigations in two installments. In this newsletter I will focus exclusively on the Biblical teachings regarding divorce and remarriage. In the next (Endtime Issues no. 52) we will reflect on the application of the biblical principles to today's situations.

Some readers may be unhappy with my interpretation of the exceptive clause of Matthew 19:9 ("except it be for fornication"), but may I urge you to save your comments until you have read both installments. You will find that at the end my conclusion supports the "adultery" ground for divorce, but not on the basis of Matthew 19:9. May I remind all my readers, that I view myself as a Biblical scholar and not a denominational apologist. If a careful study of Biblical texts necessitates a modification of our Adventist position, we must have the courage to stand for Scripture and not tradition.

For the sake of brevity, I am omitting some sections of my study. Feel free to contact me if you wish to receive the complete unabridged version of this study.

Divorce is no longer a disease contracted only by Hollywood movie stars. People from all walks of life, including Christians, are affected by divorce. There is hardly a Christian family that, directly or indirectly, does not know the pain of divorce.

An important factor contributing to the alarming escalation of divorce among Christians is the growing acceptance of the societal view of marriage as a social contract, governed by civil laws, rather than as a sacred covenant, witnessed and guaranteed by God Himself. Instead of promising each other faithfulness "till death do us part," many couples are adopting the modern version of the marriage vow, by pledging to remain together "as long as we both shall love."

We live today in a time of cultural transition when old values are being challenged both within and without the church. "They have been pulled up by the roots, thrown up into the air, and are now beginning to come down like tossed salad."<sup>1</sup> The result is that many Christians today are confused and do not know what to believe, especially in the area of divorce and remarriage.

Many are asking, "Are there Biblical grounds for divorce and remarriage? Is a person who remarries guilty of continuous adultery? Why do some denominations prohibit their ministers from marrying divorced persons and yet allow them to receive divorced people into their membership after they have been married by ministers of other denominations? Isn't it better to suffer the pain of divorce than the tragedy of a marriage without love?"

This essay seeks answers to some of these questions by taking a closer look at what the Bible teaches on divorce and remarriage. The reader must decide whether or not I have succeeded in "rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15).

## DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

No one knows how divorce began. The Biblical record shows that, unlike marriage, divorce was not instituted by God. There is no indication in the Bible suggesting that God introduced and institutionalized divorce after the Fall as part of His order for human society. Divorce is “man-made,” not divinely ordained. It represents human rejection of God’s original plan for the indissolubility of the marriage bond.

In His comments on divorce, Jesus explained that divorce represents a change in God’s order because “from the beginning it was not so” (Matt 19:8). He further observed that it was because of the “hardness” of human heart that Moses “allowed” divorce (Matt 19:8). To allow a practice is not the same as instituting it. When divorce first appears in the Bible, the practice was already in existence. What God did through Moses was to regulate divorce in order to prevent its abuse. This does not mean that God winked at divorce. Rather, it means that God acknowledged its existence and regulated it to prevent a bad situation from becoming worse.

The fact that God did not lay down a specific law in the Pentateuch prohibiting divorce reveals His realistic approach to human failings. It shows God’s willingness to work redemptively on behalf of those who fail to live up to His ideal for them. Before considering the implications of God’s attitude toward divorce in the Old Testament for us today, we want to examine the most explicit Old Testament passages concerning divorce.

### 1. The Teaching of Moses

In the pre-Mosaic period, divorce was common among the heathen nations. A man could divorce his spouse for any reason simply by telling her before witnesses, “You are no longer my wife.” The divorced wife would have no recourse but to leave her home with only the few belongings she could carry on her back. This explains why women wore all their rings, jewelry, and coins on their bodies, since these provided a financial resource in the case of divorce.<sup>2</sup>

The practice of easy divorce became common among the Hebrews, encouraged by the absence of regulations restricting it. “Men were divorcing their wives for a ‘weekend fling’ and then taking them back again when the dirty laundry had piled up and the house needed cleaning.”<sup>3</sup> It was this situation that occasioned the legislation found in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. The chief concern of the law is to discourage hasty divorce by preventing remarriage after divorce. The law contains three elements: (1) the grounds for divorce (Deut 24:1a), (2) the process of divorce (Deut 24:1b), and (3) the result of divorce (Deut 24:2-4).

**The Grounds for Divorce.** “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 bill of divorce . . .” (Deut 24:1a). Note that the law does not prescribe or encourage divorce. It simply assumes the course of action a husband would take if he found “some indecency in her.”

The precise meaning of the phrase “some indecency” (literally, “the nakedness of a thing”) is uncertain. Rabbinical interpretation of this phrase was sharply divided. The school of Shammai interpreted it as unchastity, while the school of Hillel as anything displeasing to her husband. Neither of these two views is supported by the evidences. Shammai’s view is discredited by the fact that in the Old Testament, divorce was not granted for adultery (Lev 20:10; Deut 20:22-24) or for morally defiling one’s wife before marriage (Deut 22:28). This suggests that the “indecency” of Deuteronomy 24:1 must refer to something other than adultery or sexual uncleanness.

Hillel’s looser interpretation is also devoid of Biblical support. The Hebrew word *erwath* (generally translated, “indecency” or “uncleanness”) is often used to refer to shameful exposure of the human body (Gen 9:22,23; Ex 20:26; Lam. 1:8; Ezek 16:36, 37). In Deuteronomy 23:13-14, the word is used to describe the failure to cover human

excrement. We would conclude, then, that according to Deuteronomy 24:1, divorce was allowed for some kind of shameful act or indecency other than illicit sexual intercourse.

**The Process of Divorce.** The procedure required of a man intending to divorce his wife was for him to write out a bill of divorce and give it to her: “he writes her a bill of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house . . .” (Deut 24:16). The wording of the bill of divorce was probably similar to the one generally used by the Jews of the Diaspora which reads: “On the \_\_\_\_\_ day of the week, the \_\_\_\_\_ day of the month \_\_\_\_\_, in the year \_\_\_\_\_ from the creation of the world, in the city of \_\_\_\_\_, I, \_\_\_\_\_, the son of \_\_\_\_\_, do willingly consent, being under no restraint, to release, to set free, and to put aside thee, my wife, \_\_\_\_\_, daughter of \_\_\_\_\_, who has been my wife from before. Thus I do set free, release thee, and put thee aside, in order that thou may have permission and the authority over thyself and to go and marry any man that thou may desire. No person may hinder thee from this day onward, and thou art permitted to every man. This shall be for thee from me a bill of dismissal, a letter of release, and a document of freedom, in accordance with the laws of Moses and Israel.

\_\_\_\_\_ the son of \_\_\_\_\_, witness  
\_\_\_\_\_ the son of \_\_\_\_\_, witness.”<sup>4</sup>

The bill of divorce served several purposes. It deterred a hasty action on the part of the husband by restraining frivolous and rash dismissal. It testified to the woman’s freedom from marital obligations from the husband who sent her away. It protected the woman’s reputation, particularly if she married another man.

The process of divorce that Moses required was not a license to repudiate the wife at will, but rather “a stringent requisition that whoever did so should secure his wife from injury by certifying that she was not chargeable with unchaste conduct, but divorced upon some minor pretext.”<sup>5</sup> What Moses required was that a divorce document be written to discourage hasty divorces and to mitigate the hardship of divorce. Even when the divorce document was given, the way for reconciliation was still open as long as the woman did not form a second marriage.

**The Result of Divorce.** The primary purpose of the divorce procedure was to close the way forever for the man to remarry his former wife once she had remarried: “And if she goes and becomes another man’s wife, and the latter husband dislikes her and writes her a bill of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies, who took her to be his wife, then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the Lord, and you shall not bring guilt upon the land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance” (Deut 24:2-4).

The main point of this legislation is to prohibit a man from remarrying his former wife if she had married another man. Even if her second husband divorced her or died, she could not return to her first husband. To do so would be an “abomination before the Lord” (Deut 24:4) on the same level as fornication. The reason is that if a husband could easily remarry the same woman, divorce would become a “legal” form of committing adultery. Later prophetic writings confirm this truth set forth by Moses. For example, the prophet Jeremiah says: “If a man divorces his wife and she goes from him and becomes another man’s wife, will he return to her? Would not that land be greatly polluted?” (Jer 3:1).

It is significant to note that what the Mosaic legislation strongly condemns is not the remarriage of a divorced woman, but her remarriage to her first husband after the termination of her second marriage. This suggests that remarriage per se in the Old Testament was not stigmatized as adulterous nor was a remarried woman regarded as an adulteress. The Pentateuch did not require that a divorced woman and her second husband be put to death, as was the case with adultery. This consideration should lead us to exercise caution before stigmatizing remarriage as adulterous.

**Conclusion.** Divorce was not instituted by Moses, nor was it approved as an intrinsic right of the husband. Deuteronomy 24:1-4 indicates that Moses sought to curb the

evil of divorce by requiring the husband to give a bill of divorcement to his wife to protect her after her marriage to another man. The Mosaic concession does not alter God's original plan for marriage to be a sacred, permanent covenant. It simply provides protection for the divorced wife when sinful hearts violate God's original plan for marriage.

## 2. The Teaching of Malachi

Many of the Jews who returned from the Babylonian exile married unbelieving heathen women living in the land of Judah. Such marriages were strictly forbidden by the Mosaic law because they would inevitably lead to the worship of heathen gods (Deut 7:1-4; Judg 3:5-6; 1 Kings 11:1-8). The problem was met head-on first by Ezra (Ezra 10:2-3) and then by Nehemiah (Neh 13:23-24) during their tenure as governors. They ordered the offenders to separate from their foreign wives (Ezra 10:10-11; Neh 13:30).

It was at this time that God raised up the prophet Malachi to expose the causes of the spiritual decline and to lead the Jewish community into a restored fellowship with God. Malachi exposes not only the sin of hypocrisy (Mal 2:17), neglect of tithes (Mal 3:7-9) and mixed marriages (Mal 2:10-12), but also the sin of divorce: "And this again you do. You cover the Lord's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor at your hand. You ask, 'Why does he not?' Because the Lord was witness to the covenant between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Has not the one God made and sustained for us the spirit of life? And what does he desire? Godly offspring. So take heed to yourselves, and let none be faithless to the wife of his youth. 'For I hate divorce,' says the Lord the God of Israel and covering one's garment with violence, says the Lord of host. So take heed to yourselves and do not be faithless" (Mal 2:13-16).

In this passage, Malachi (whose name means "my messenger") clearly identifies and condemns the sin which had caused God to reject the offering and worship of His people, namely, the violation of the marriage covenant with the wife taken in one's youth in order to marry foreign idolatrous women. Here Malachi informs us that God sees marriage as a sacred covenant binding two persons in a permanent relationship before God (Gen 31:50; Prov 2:17). Since "the Lord was witness to the [marriage] covenant," breaking it by divorcing one's wife meant to be faithless not only to one's spouse but also to God.

Verse 15 is difficult to translate and interpret. If one follows the marginal reading of the Revised Standard Version ("Has he not made one?"), the text would refer to the original institution of marriage when God made and united two beings into one (Gen 2:24). In other words, God intended that marriage be the covenant union of one man to one woman in order for them to raise up godly offspring. Divorce, then, threatens not only the institution of marriage but also the security needed to raise a godly family.

In verse 16, Malachi concludes by expressing God's attitude toward divorce: "For I hate divorce, says the Lord the God of Israel, and covering one's garment with violence, says the Lord of hosts. So take heed to yourselves and do not be faithless." It is noteworthy that God hates *divorce* and not the *divorcée*. As Christians, we should reflect Christ's caring and compassionate attitude toward those who have experienced the trauma of divorce. Christ dealt graciously with the Samaritan woman who had been married five times (John 4:6-26).

**Conclusion.** Malachi strongly emphasizes that divorce violates not only God's original plan for marriage but also the sacred marriage covenant to which the Lord Himself is a witness. Divorce is a grievous sin which God hates because it represents a betrayal of life's most intimate companion, a betrayal profoundly affecting the well-being of the family and community.

## DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

### 1. The Teaching of Jesus in Mark and Luke

The teaching of Jesus is fundamental to the study of the Biblical view of divorce and remarriage because Jesus clarifies the reason for the Old Testament concession (Deut 24:1) and reaffirms God's creational design for marriage to be a permanent, indissoluble covenant. The two major passages containing the teaching of Jesus on divorce and remarriage are found in Mark 10:1-12 and Matthew 19:1-12. Both passages report the same incident and are placed in the same geographical setting (Matt. 19:1; Mark 10:1). Both passages record the same questions asked by the Pharisees and the same response given by Christ (Matt 19:3-9; Mark 10:2-9).

In spite of the essential similarities, there is one crucial difference between the two passages, namely the exception found in Matthew 19:9 which teaches that divorce and remarriage "except for fornication" is adultery. Whereas Matthew includes twice what has come to be known as the "exception clause" (Matt 19:9; 5:32), Mark and Luke exclude it entirely.

The test question the Pharisees posed to Jesus centered on the significance of the phrase "some indecency" found in Deuteronomy 24:1. There was a major debate among the rabbis over the meaning of this phrase. The Mishna, which contains the oral traditions of Judaism, tells us how the conservative school of Shammai and the liberal school of Hillel interpreted the phrase: "The school of Shammai said: A man may not divorce his wife unless he has discovered something unchaste about her, for it is written, 'Because he has found some unseemly thing in her' (Deut 24:1). But the school of Hillel said: He may divorce her even if she spoiled a dish for him for it is written, 'Because he has found some unseemly thing in her.'"<sup>6</sup>

It is remarkable to see how the same Biblical text (Deut 24:1) was interpreted in two radically different ways. The Pharisees wanted to force Christ to choose between the two schools so that they could use His answer to accuse Him either of laxity or narrow rigorism. Jesus, however, chose not to take sides. Instead, He answered by calling attention to God's original plan for marriage: "He answered, 'Have you not read that he who made them from 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 they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder" (Matt 19:4; cf. Mark 10:6-9).

Christ's answer is characteristic. He immediately calls attention to God's original plan for marriage, almost chiding them for failing to realize that divorce is totally alien to such a plan. God's original plan consists of a man and a woman being united in a marriage bond so strong that the two actually become one flesh (Gen 2:26; Matt 19:6; Mark 10:8). The "one flesh" unity of the couple is reflected especially in their offspring who partake of the genetic characteristics of father and mother, and the two are absolutely inseparable. Jesus affirms that it is God Himself who actually joins together a couple in marriage and what God has joined together no human being has the right to separate.

**Moses' Permission.** It is significant that Christ answered the Pharisees' question as to whether it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife by affirming the permanence of the God-ordained marriage union. Such an answer, however, provoked another question on the part of the Pharisees: "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?" (Matt 19:7). By this question the Pharisees apparently intended to challenge the position Christ had just enunciated by assuming that Moses did command divorce. The argument of the Pharisees could be paraphrased as follows: if according to its original institution, marriage is a permanent union that cannot be dissolved by human authority, why then did Moses command divorce? Is not Your teaching contradicted by Moses' commandment?

Christ's answer is of fundamental importance because it clarifies the whole question of the Old Testament Mosaic provision. "He said to them, 'For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so'" (Matt 19:8; cf. Mark 10:5-6).

Two features of Christ's reply should be noticed. First, the phrase "for the hardness of your hearts" implies that the Mosaic permission was occasioned by the insubordination and stubbornness of the Israelites. The latter did not invalidate the original institution of marriage as a permanent union. The bill of divorce was intended to regulate a perverse situation and not to abrogate the divine institution of marriage.

A second significant element of Jesus' reply is the distinction between the verb He used to describe Moses' provision and the verb used by the Pharisees. Jesus said that Moses "allowed" divorce while the Pharisees said that Moses "commanded" divorce. The verb Jesus used implies sufferance or tolerance of divorce but not a sanction of its practice. In the Mosaic economy, divorce was permitted because of the hardheartedness of the Israelites, but from the beginning there was no such permission. This means that the Mosaic permission was a departure from the creation ordinance of marriage which no man has the right to put asunder.

**A Clarification for the Disciples.** Christ's condemnation of divorce as a violation of God's original plan for marriage apparently perplexed the disciples. Presumably they were wondering what would be the moral consequences if a man divorced his wife. Later that day when Jesus had found lodging ("in the house"), the disciples began questioning Him on this subject. And Jesus said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery" (Mark 10:11-12).

The unconditional form of Christ's statement in Mark 10:11-12 (and Luke 16:18) where no exceptions are allowed for divorce serves to emphasize the abrogation of the Mosaic permission for divorce (Deut 24:1-4). Jesus declares to His disciples in no uncertain terms that, contrary to the Mosaic concession, divorce and remarriage by either the husband or the wife is a sin of adultery clearly condemned by God's law. A man who divorces his wife and marries another woman is sinning not only against God but also against his former wife. He "commits adultery against her" because by marrying another woman, he is violating his covenant of commitment to his wife.

Mark applies the same rule to both the husband and the *wife*, a truth not expressed in Matthew's Gospel (cf. Matt 19:9). The reason is that Matthew was writing for Jews among whom it was most uncommon for a wife to divorce her husband. But what was most uncommon among the Jews was common in the Graeco-Roman world where, in matters of divorce, wives enjoyed equal rights with their husbands. Since Mark writes for a predominantly Gentile readership, he records the application of Christ's teaching to both the husband and the *wife*.

With a few simple words in Mark, Jesus overrides the Mosaic concession and its rabbinic interpretations by pointing back to the great marriage charter of Genesis. In view of the fact that in the beginning when God established marriage, divorce was not permitted, for a husband or a wife to divorce his/her spouse means to act against the will of the Creator for marriage.

Jesus envisions marriage not as a mere social or civil contract that can be terminated through a legal proceeding but as a sacred and lifelong covenant. Those who divorce and remarry are guilty of adultery. Such a radical teaching, as Hugh Montefiore points out, "was revolutionary to Jewish ways of thought. So far as we know, Jesus was alone among Jewish teachers when He asserted that marriage was intended by God to be lasting and permanent."<sup>7</sup>

It is important to remember that Jesus was primarily a *teacher*. He came to reveal God's *ideal* for our lives. He did not have the face the challenge of applying God's *ideal* to

*real* marital problems existing in a metropolitan church like Corinth. This was the challenge that a *pastor* like Paul faced, when he tried to apply Christ's *ideal* to *real* marital situations. We shall see that the Apostle exercised his own apostolic authority and inspiration ("I say, not the Lord" — 1 Cor 7:12) when dealing with marital problems not contemplated by Christ's ideal. To this we shall return later.

## 2. The Teaching of Jesus in Matthew

**The Contribution of Matthew.** Matthew makes three significant contributions about Jesus' teachings on divorce which are not found in Mark or Luke. Before looking at them, we must understand why Matthew provides some of the Lord's teaching on divorce not found in Mark 10. The apparent reason is the different readership. Mark wrote for Gentile readers while Matthew for Jewish readers. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, each writer recorded those elements of the teaching of Jesus that would apply to their audiences. This is indicated by the fact that Matthew frequently quotes Old Testament scriptures while Mark cites them only in a few instances, obviously because the Gentiles had little appreciation for the sacred Scriptures. Mark takes pains to explain certain Jewish tradition and terms unfamiliar to Gentile readers (cf. Mark 7:2, 11,34; 5:41; 9:43; 14:12, 36).

We noted earlier that only Mark mentions the possibility of a woman divorcing her husband (Mark 10:12) because that was common in the Graeco-Roman world. Matthew omits that part of Jesus' teaching because Jewish law made no allowance for a woman to divorce her husband. It is evident, then, that each gospel writer selectively recorded those elements of Jesus' teaching that would apply to his Christian community. Since Matthew is writing to Jewish-Christian readers he mentions three significant aspects of Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage which are omitted by Mark and Luke.

The first significant Matthean contribution regarding Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage is found in the context of the Sermon on the Mount. Here Jesus encourages living in conformity to the spirit of the law rather than to its letter. Contrary to the Pharisees who allowed divorce by appealing to the letter of the Mosaic concession (Matt 5:31; cf. Deut 24:1-4), Jesus disallows divorce but for one exception (Matt 5:32) by revealing the true intent of God's law.

The second significant Matthean contribution is the response of the disciples to Jesus' teaching: "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry" (Matt 19:10). Apparently, the disciples had been following either the rabbinical view of Shammai which allowed divorce only on the ground of adultery or of Hillel which permitted divorce for any reason. When they understood that Jesus in essence made no allowance for divorce, they responded in astonishment, "If one cannot get out of marriage, then it is better not to marry in the first place." Jesus then declared that not all can accept a celibate life (Matt 19:11-12). This brief dialogue between Jesus and the disciples recorded by Matthew reveals, indirectly and yet forcefully, that Jesus taught the permanence of the marriage relationship.

**The Exception Clause.** The third significant Matthean contribution is the exception clause of Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 which teaches that to divorce and to remarry, "except for unchastity [*porneia*]" is adultery: "But I say to you that every one who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery" (Matt 5:32). "And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another, commits adultery" (Matt 19:9).

The exception clause found in these two texts has been the object of countless studies. A major reason is that many find in this clause the only legitimate grounds for divorce and remarriage. Scholarly opinion on the meaning of the exception clause is divided, reflecting the lack of unanimity among scholars about the precise meaning of the key word of the clause, namely *porneia*. The word is generally translated as "fornication" (KJV), "unchastity" (RSV), and "marital unfaithfulness" (NIV).

The Greek word *porneia*, from which we derive the word “pornography,” comes from the root word *pernemi*—“to sell.” The original idea was to offer one’s body for a price. The word was used especially of slaves and meant “a harlot for hire.”<sup>8</sup> Historically, *porneia* has been used with wider and narrower meanings. The wider meaning includes unlawful extra-marital intercourse such as prostitution, fornication, and adultery. The narrower meaning can refer to sexual aberrations such as homosexuality (cf. Rom 1:29), incest (cf. 1 Cor 5:1), and unlawful marriages within the forbidden degrees of relationship (Acts 15:20, 29). The question then is, what is the exact meaning of *porneia* in the exception clause (Matt 5:32; 19:9)? Is Jesus using the term in its wider or narrower meaning? Scholarly opinion differs on this matter as indicated by the numerous interpretations of the exception clause. For the sake of brevity, we consider only the two most significant interpretations.

**Adultery or Sexual Misconduct.** The traditional and most popular interpretation of the exception clause takes *porneia* in its wider meaning of sexual misconduct. This is also the prevailing Adventist interpretation, according to which Jesus allows divorce when one party has been guilty of marital unfaithfulness. This view is reflected in most translations where *porneia* is translated as “fornication” (KJV), “unchastity” (RSV), or “marital unfaithfulness” (NIV). Advocates of this view maintain that the exception clause allows for the divorce and remarriage of the innocent party, on the ground of adultery of the guilty party. In this case, Jesus would be siding with the conservative school of Shammai which allowed divorce when the wife was convicted of serious sexual misconduct.

**Problems with the Sexual Misconduct View.** In spite of its popularity, even in our own Seventh-day Adventist Church, this interpretation has several problems. In the first place, it contradicts the immediate context where Jesus rejects the Mosaic provision of divorce as being against God’s creational plan for the permanence of the marriage union: “What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder” (Matt. 19:6). The present imperative of the verb (*kovizeto*) “let not put asunder” enjoins the cessation of a practice in progress, namely, the severing of marriage unions permanently established by God.

In the light of Christ’s refusal to accept the Mosaic provision for divorce, it is hard to imagine that He would make allowance for the dissolution of marriage in the case of sexual misconduct. If the latter were true, Jesus would be contradicting what He had just affirmed regarding the permanence of the marriage union. His teaching would represent not a rejection of the Mosaic concession but merely an interpretation essentially similar to that of the Shammaites. But the Pharisees certainly understood Jesus’ teaching to be in conflict with Moses (“Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?”—Matt 19:7). The clear conflict between Jesus’ teaching on the permanence of the marriage union and the Mosaic concession, logically rules out the wider meaning of *porneia* as sexual misconduct.

A second problem with interpreting *porneia* as sexual misconduct is posed by the teaching of Jesus in Mark 10:1-12 and Luke 16:18 where divorce and remarriage are condemned as adultery without any exceptions. While today we can bring together the teaching of Jesus on divorce as found in all the three Synoptic Gospels, the Gentile readers of Mark’s or Luke’s Gospels, who did not have access to Matthew’s Gospel which circulated primarily among the Jewish-Christians, had no way of knowing that Jesus made allowance for divorce and remarriage in the case of marital unfaithfulness.

A third problem with interpreting the exception clause as sexual misconduct is that it contradicts Paul’s “no divorce” teaching in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11. In this passage, Paul claims to give Christ’s own command by enjoining the wife not to separate from her husband and the husband not to divorce his wife. The total prohibition of divorce by Paul reflects the teaching of Jesus found in Mark and Luke.

A fourth problem with the interpretation of *porneia* as sexual misconduct (adultery) is that this term is not the normal word for adultery, though it may include it. The normal Greek term for adultery is *moicheia*, a term used by Jesus in all the divorce texts to describe the

outcome of divorce and remarriage, namely, “commits adultery.” If Jesus intended to permit divorce specifically in the case of adultery, He would probably have used the explicit term *moicheia*. The fact that He used another term suggests that *porneia* may refer to something other than adultery.

This conclusion is supported by the fact that there is no provision in the Pentateuch for divorce in the case of adultery. The penalty for proven adultery was death (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22, 23-27) and not divorce. The same was true in the case of a woman who had engaged in premarital sex before marriage (Deut 22:13-21). She was stoned to death and not divorced. There are no indications in the Pentateuch that divorce was ever allowed for sexual misconduct.

A fifth problem with interpreting the exception clause as sexual misconduct is that it fails to take into account the astonishment of the disciples at the saying of Jesus. As Edward Schillebeeck points out, “If Matthew 19:9 is taken to mean that Jesus was siding with the followers of the school of Shammai, who permitted divorce on grounds of adultery, then the astonishment expressed in the apostles’ answers would be incomprehensible—‘then it is not expedient to marry’ (19:10). Their astonishment is only explicable if Christ in fact rejected all possibility of the dissolution of marriage. His rejection is reinforced by the statement: ‘Not all men can receive this precept, but only those to whom it is given’” (19:11).<sup>9</sup>

In the light of the foregoing considerations, we are bound to conclude that it is most unlikely that by the exception of *porneia*, Jesus meant to allow for divorce and remarriage on the grounds of adultery or sexual misconduct. Respect for the astonishing and radical teaching of Matthew 19:3-9 requires that *porneia* be interpreted in a narrower sense.

**Marriages Unlawful According to Mosaic Law.** The interpretation that makes most sense to me is based on a narrower meaning of *porneia* as referring to an incestuous marriage to a close relative (Lev 18:6-18).<sup>10</sup> In His call to practical holiness, God prohibited His people from marrying near relatives. Such marriages are condemned presumably because they are the result of sexual passion rather than of genuine love.

According to this interpretation, Jesus allows for divorce only where a marriage should not have taken place in the first place, namely, within the degrees of prohibited relationships. Consequently, in Matthew, Jesus does not envisage any exception to the absolute ban on divorce but only allows for the dissolution of a marriage which was validly contracted according to Greco-Roman laws but which was in conflict with the Mosaic law of prohibited relationships.

It may be objected that the Mosaic prohibition against incestuous marriages precludes any provision on the part of Christ for a legitimate divorce. This objection, however, as Carl Laney points out, “does not hold up under close scrutiny, for the Israelites were commanded not to marry foreign women (Deut 7:3-4), but when the command was violated in Ezra 9-10, the unlawful marriages were dissolved. The prohibition would not preclude the possibility of violation and the need to deal with an illegal incestuous situation.”<sup>11</sup>

This view appears to me as the most satisfactory and enjoys considerable scholarly support. Four major arguments support this view of the exception clause.

**(1) New Testament Use of *Porneia*.** One of the possible lexical meanings of *porneia* is “incest” or “incestuous marriage.”<sup>12</sup> We find this meaning in 1 Corinthians 5:1 where Paul demands the expulsion of a Christian who has married his stepmother, a clear violation of Leviticus 18:8. The same meaning of *porneia* appears in Acts 15:20, 29 where the Jerusalem Council recommends that Gentile converts should abstain from idol sacrifices, blood, meat of strangled animals, and *porneia*. It is significant to note that the sequential order of these restrictions respects the order given in Leviticus 17-18 (Acts 15:29).

In the light of the correlation existing between the four recommendations of the Jerusalem Council and the regulations of Leviticus 17-18 which appears to be the source of the Council's recommendations, it seems plausible to conclude that *porneia* refers not to sexual immorality in general, but to the forbidden marriage relationships of Leviticus 18:6-18 in particular.

There was no need for the Jerusalem Council to require Gentile converts to abstain from sexual immorality in general for they were required to abstain from it anyway. Since the recommendations of the Council were designed to reduce tension between Jewish and Gentile Christians, the requirement to abstain from *porneia* must be, like the others, based on levitical laws still respected by Jewish Christians.

The Jews who became Christians continued to obey the Mosaic laws of prohibited relationships, but Gentile converts did not feel bound to such laws as indicated by the case of a Corinthian Christian who had married his step-mother (1 Cor 5:1). This inevitably led to a conflict which the Jerusalem Council solved by exempting the Gentiles from the law of circumcision while expecting them to obey the laws relating to idol sacrifice, blood, things strangled, and illicit marriage to a near relative.

"Since," as Lowther Clark points out, "the first three articles of the compromise are concerned with practices which were abhorrent to the Jews but seemed innocent enough to the Gentiles, the fourth must be of a similar nature. The passage of 1 Corinthians gives us the clue. *Porneia* here means *marriage within the prohibited Levitical degrees*"<sup>13</sup> Applying this meaning of *porneia* to the exception clause, the Lord in Matthew allows one exception to the universal rule of no-divorce, namely, in the case of an illicit marriage to a near relative.

**(2) Jewish Context of Matthew's Gospel.** Matthew wrote his gospel principally for Jewish converts to Christianity. Jewish-Christians continued to follow the Mosaic marriage laws which prohibited marriage with a near relative (Lev 18:6-18). The possibility of marrying a near relative was very real in the tribal Jewish society which consisted of large blood-related families.

Gentile converts to Christianity kept the Greco-Roman laws of marriage. This would explain why Matthew, in writing to a Jewish-Christian audience familiar with the prohibitions against marriage to a near relative, includes the exception clause ("except for *porneia*"). Mark and Luke omit the clause presumably because Gentile Christians were less likely than Jewish Christians to marry a near relative. Gentile people were not as tribally related as Jewish people.

Support for this interpretation of *porneia* in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 is provided by first century Palestinian literature. Joseph Fitzmyer has shown that *porneia* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew *zenut* (cf. LXX Jer 3:2,9) which is used in the Qumran material to refer to marriage within the forbidden degrees of relationship.<sup>14</sup> The same use is found in later Jewish literature.<sup>15</sup>

**(3) Historical Setting.** The narrower interpretation of the *porneia* exception as referring to incestuous marriages prohibited in Leviticus 18:6-18 is supported also by the historical setting of Christ's dispute with the Pharisees. Since the dispute occurred in Perea (Matt 19:1; Mark 10:1), the territory governed by Herod Antipas, it is quite likely that the Pharisees wanted to trick Jesus into making a statement against the incestuous marriage of Herod Antipas. John the Baptist was imprisoned and executed for condemning Herod Antipas for divorcing his wife in order to marry the wife of his brother Philip (Matt 14:4). Antipas had violated the Mosaic law which stated, "You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife; she is your brother's nakedness" (Lev 18:16; cf. 20:21).

The Pharisees presumably hoped that Jesus would follow John in openly condemning the incestuous marriage of Herod Antipas. Jesus, however, chose not to condemn directly Herod Antipas, but rather to state the principle that divorce is only permitted in the case of an unlawful marriage. Thus, the historical and geographical setting

of the exception clause supports the interpretation of *porneia* as a reference to marriage within prohibited relationships (Lev 18:6-18).

**(4) Immediate Context.** The immediate context supports the narrower interpretation of the *porneia* exception as a reference to the prohibited relationships of Leviticus 18:6-18. In Matthew 19:4-8, Christ rejects the Mosaic provision for divorce as a mere concession to human rebellion running contrary to God's original plan for marriage. In this context, it would be inconsistent for Jesus to proceed to make a concession of his own for divorce in the case of sexual misconduct.

The whole purpose of Christ's argument which moved from Deuteronomy to Genesis, that is to say, from the Mosaic letter of the law which allowed divorce to the creational design of the law which excluded divorce, would be nullified if in the end He simply returned to Deuteronomy again.

On the other hand, it would be consistent with what Christ had just declared for Him to say that God's plan for marriage allowed for divorce only in the case of an illegally contracted marriage to a near relative. In all other instances, marriage is a lifelong and binding covenant commitment.

Another aspect of the immediate context, which indirectly supports the unlawful marriage view of *porneia*, is the reaction of the disciples: "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry" (Matt 19:10). Such a reaction is only explicable if Jesus rejected the possibility of divorce, except in the rare cases of marriage among near relatives where marriage should not have taken place in the first place.

Had Jesus permitted divorce for sexual misconduct, He would have hardly provoked such a reaction on the part of His disciples, since such a view was widely known and promoted by the rabbinical school of Shammai. The astonishment of the disciples indirectly proves that they understood Christ's standard for marriage to be immeasurably higher and more exacting than that of the stricter rabbinical school of interpretation.

**Conclusion.** Our study of the Jewish setting, historical and geographical background, and the immediate context of Matthew 19:1-12 suggests that by the exception clause ("except for *porneia*") Jesus permitted divorce only in the case of an unlawful marriage to a near relative. By means of the *porneia* exception, Christ did not intend to impose the Levitical norms for legitimate marriage, but simply to declare that when such norms were violated, there was a valid reason for the dissolution of marriage.

This view is consistent with the absolute value that Mark, Luke, and Paul place on the saying of Jesus. We are bound to conclude that by the exception phrase about *porneia*, Jesus did not intend to open the way for divorce and remarriage in the case of sexual misconduct. Rather, He wished to reaffirm the creational principle of the permanence of the marriage union by allowing for divorce only in the case of an unlawful marriage. In the light of this conclusion, Matthew 19:9 would read: "whoever divorces his wife, unless his union with her is illegitimate, and marries another, commits adultery."

The teaching of Jesus in the Gospels can be summarized in two points. First, divorce is forbidden because it violates God's intention that marriage be a permanent union of two persons. Second, remarriage after divorce is adultery because divorce does not dissolve the marriage union. As the Teacher sent from God, Christ articulated the *divine ideal* for the permanence of marriage. Applying this divine ideal to difficult marriages between a believing and an unbelieving spouse, proved to be a major challenge, which church pastors like Paul had to face.

### **3. The Teaching of Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:10-16**

Next to Jesus no other person influenced early Christian thought and practice as much as Paul. His teaching on divorce and remarriage are most significant since they

represent the earliest Christian interpretation and application of Christ's teaching to concrete situations. The two main passages where Paul speaks on marriage and divorce are Romans 7:2-3 and 1 Corinthians 7:10-16.

For the sake of brevity we limit our study to Paul's treatment of the divorce question in 1 Corinthians 7:10-16. This passage is most significant because it reveals how the teaching of Jesus on divorce was understood and applied to certain concrete marital situations in the apostolic church. Paul begins the chapter by setting forth some general principles about marriage. To avoid the temptation to sexual immorality, "each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband" (1 Cor 7:2). Both husband and wife should fulfill their respective conjugal rights (1 Cor 7:3-5).

The unmarried and the widows who have the gift of celibacy should remain single as himself (1 Cor 7:7-8). Next Paul discusses three different divorce situations: (1) the divorce of two believers (vv. 10-11), (2) the divorce of a believer and an unbeliever where the unbeliever does not want to divorce, and (3) the divorce of a believer and an unbeliever where the unbeliever wants to divorce.

**Divorce of Two Believers.** Paul first speaks to married believers who might consider divorce as a means to resolve their marital conflicts: "To the married I give charge, not I but the Lord, that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, let her remain single or else be reconciled to her husband)—and that the husband should not divorce his wife" (1 Cor 7:10-11).

Appealing to the teaching of Christ (cf. Mark 10:9, 11, 12; Luke 16:18; Matt 19:3-9), Paul declares in absolute terms that a Christian couple should not seek divorce. Twice he affirms the no-divorce principle: ". . . the wife should not separate from her husband . . . and the husband should not divorce his wife" (1 Cor 7:10-11). The basis of Paul's prohibition is Christ's teaching that husband and wife are one flesh and what God has joined together no man should put asunder.

Paul recognizes, however, that human nature is perverse and that even a Christian husband or wife can make marriage intolerable for the other partner. A spouse who is out of fellowship with God can become intolerant, abusive, unfaithful, domineering, inconsiderate. Undoubtedly, Paul had run into situations of this kind and recognizes that sometimes separation may be inevitable. However, if separation becomes a necessity, Paul leaves Christian partners with two options: (1) to remain permanently unmarried, or (2) to be reconciled to one's partner.

It is important to note that Paul appeals to the teaching of Jesus ("not I but the Lord") in ruling against the possibility of divorce for a Christian couple. To appreciate the revolutionary nature of such teaching, it is important to remember that divorce and remarriage was allowed in both the Jewish and Roman society. Yet Paul affirms the no-divorce principle for Christians as a word of the Lord which will be accepted without challenge. This goes to show that within twenty-five years of the crucifixion itself, the Apostolic Church believed and taught that Christ had proclaimed the permanence of the marriage union. This belief played an important role in the Christian mission to revolutionize the values of the existing society.

In Paul's day, there was no provision for a wife to be legally separated from her husband without being divorced. Fortunately today, the law provides for legal separation as an alternative to divorce. Legal separation offers to a Christian the protection of the law while leaving the door open for reconciliation. Such a door must be left open because Christians believe that no marital conflict is impossible for God to solve.

Since there was no legal separation in Paul's day, the apostle recommends a legal separation—type of divorce. This is indicated by his use of the verb *koridzo* ("to separate") rather than the normal verb for divorce *apoluo* used by Jesus. By recommending a legal separation-type of divorce, Paul respects the spirit of Christ's

teaching while at the same time providing protection for the believing wife until a reconciliation with her husband can be realized.

**Divorce of a Believer Married to an Unbeliever Who Does Not Want a Divorce.** The second situation that Paul addresses is that of a believing spouse married to an unbeliever: “To the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consent to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him” (1 Cor 7:12-13).

Since the Lord had not given instruction concerning marriage between believers and unbelievers, Paul exercises his own apostolic authority and inspiration (“I say, not the Lord”) in enjoining again the principle of *no separation*. The personal nature of Paul’s instruction does not weaken its binding authority because he speaks as one who had received mercy of the Lord to be faithful (1 Cor 7:25) and one who had the Spirit of God (1 Cor 7:40). Cognizant of this divine mandate, Paul openly declares without fear of presumption: “This is my rule in all the churches” (1 Cor 7:17).

The instruction of Paul is clear: if the unbeliever does not want a divorce, the believer should not seek for it. The reason given for preserving the marriage union is the sanctifying influence of the believing partner upon the unbelieving spouse and children: “For the unbelieving husband is consecrated through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is consecrated through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is they are holy” (1 Cor 15:14).

The reason given by Paul for maintaining the marriage union is pertinent to the fears entertained by Corinthian converts regarding a possible defilement contracted by being married to an unbeliever. Paul puts such fears to rest by revealing the sanctifying power of the Christian faith. The faith of the believing spouse becomes a channel of saving grace to the unbelieving partner. The presence of a believer in the home sets it apart (“sanctifies”) and gives to it a Christian influence that can bring the unbelieving partner and children to Christ. As Paul puts in verse 16: “Wife, how do you know whether you will save your husband? Husband, how do you know whether you will save your wife?”

**Divorce of a Believer Married to an Unbeliever Who Wants a Divorce.** The third situation that Paul addresses is that of an unbelieving partner who wants a divorce. His instruction in this case is: “But if the unbelieving partner desires to separate, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound. For God has called us to peace” (1 Cor 7:15). Paul is not commanding the unbelieving partner to separate.

The permissive imperative “let it be so” (*kopisesto*) presupposes that the unbelieving spouse has already willfully initiated or accomplished the separation. Consequently, Paul advises to let the separation take its course and become an accomplished fact. The believer need not pursue the deserting spouse and is free from all marital obligations. The Greek verb *ou dedoulotai*, literally “no longer enslaved,” implies that cohabitation with such a person is slavery for the believing partner. Since Christ has called us to peace, the believer may withdraw from slavery in such a case.

This introduces us to one of the most debated questions in the interpretation of a New Testament passage. The question centers on the exact meaning of the verb “is not bound” or “is not enslaved” (*ou dedoulotai*). Does it mean that the believing party is free in the sense of being permitted to remarry after the separation, or in the sense of being free to separate but not remarry? In other words, is Paul granting to the believing spouse only the right to separate from bed and board or the right to separate and marry another? Does desertion give to the innocent partner the right of divorce with the liberty to remarry?

Some maintain that Paul grants to the deserted believer only the freedom to separate but not to remarry. They appeal to the fact that “Paul says nothing in verse 15 about a second marriage for the deserted spouse.”<sup>16</sup> They interpret the silence of Paul as

indicating that he offers to a deserted believer the same two alternatives given to separated believers, namely, reconciliation or lifelong single life (1 Cor 7:11).

This view ignores the striking difference between the conditional separation of believing spouses mentioned in verses 10 and 11 and the unconditional separation caused by the desertion of an unbelieving spouse envisaged in verse 15. In the former case, Paul strictly enjoins the spouse who has separated to remain unmarried or be reconciled. In the latter case, Paul recognizes the finality of the separation caused by the deserting party by saying, "Let it be so." In other words, "let the case be closed and the separation take place."

"In verse 15," as John Murray points out, "we find a terseness and severity of terms which, viewed from the standpoint of the separation envisioned, are indicative of decisiveness and finality—'let him (or her) depart,' that is, 'let him (or her) be gone.'"<sup>17</sup> Because the separation is final, it is unconditional. That is to say, there is no injunction to remain unmarried or be reconciled. Instead, there is the affirmation that the deserted spouse "is not bound" (1 Cor 7:15).

The phrase "not bound" (*ou dedoulotai*) presupposes the dissolution of the marriage bond and consequently the freedom of the deserted spouse to remarry. This conclusion is supported by Paul's affirmation in verse 39 of the same chapter that a husband's death releases the wife from the marriage bond and frees her to marry again: "A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. If the husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord" (1 Cor 7:39).

The dissolution of the marriage bond by a willful and obstinate desertion is somewhat similar to the dissolution of the marriage bond by death. In both instances, the marriage relationship is terminated by the permanent departure of a spouse. Whether such a departure is caused by death or by the obstinate desertion of an unbelieving partner, the outcome is the same. The surviving spouse is released from the marriage bond and is free to remarry.

Some argue that if Paul taught that the desertion by an unbelieving partner dissolved the marriage bond, then he would be setting up a double standard of ethics: one which excludes the dissolution where two believers are involved and one which includes dissolution where an unbelieving partner deserts the believing spouse.

This apparent contradiction can be resolved by recognizing the substantial difference that exists between the two cases. In the first case, the initiative in the separation is taken by a Christian who knows that marriage is a sacred, lifelong covenant that can and must be preserved. In the second case, the initiative in the separation is taken by a non-Christian partner who does not accept the Christian view of marriage as a sacred, lifelong covenant.

To a believer, marriage has a deeper and more radical meaning than to an unbeliever. A believer marries "in the Lord" (1 Cor 7:39), that is, according to the will of God who joins together two partners into a sacred, lifelong covenant, enabling them to become "one flesh." An unbeliever marries "in the pagan society" which views marriage as a civil or social contract that can be terminated through a legal proceeding. Since a believing spouse cannot impose his/her Christian view of marriage upon the unbelieving partner, if the latter is obstinately determined to desert his/her believing spouse, then the marriage union is dissolved.

The difference that Paul makes between the marriage of two believers which cannot be dissolved and the mixed marriage of a believer to an unbeliever which can be dissolved, when the latter deserts the believing partner, offers perhaps the strongest biblical evidence for the sacred, permanent nature of the Christian marriage. This does not mean that a mixed marriage is automatically less sacred than a Christian marriage. Paul explains that a believing partner exercises a sanctifying influence upon the marriage relationship (1 Cor 7:14). What it means is that marriage has a special character for two

believing partners. Their common faith and commitment to God unites them in a real, objective, and lifelong marriage bond. Such a permanent commitment is possible because their faith in Christ offers them the means for fulfilling God's original design of marriage: the two shall be one flesh.

**Conclusion.** Paul's teachings on the question of divorce in 1 Corinthians 7:12-16 not only closely reflects Jesus' teachings concerning the permanence of marriage, but also reveals its full depths. It does this by showing how the Christian faith causes the marriage covenant to become a sacred and lifelong relationship. There is for Paul an intimate connection between the permanence of the marriage bond and the Christian faith.

A Christian couple who marries "in the Lord" accepts the responsibility to honor by divine grace their covenant commitment both to God and to one another. It is the sacred and permanent nature of the Christian covenant commitment to God that makes a Christian marriage sacred and permanent. On account of this fact, a Christian couple experiencing marital problems may separate with the hope of reconciliation but may not divorce and remarry. This condition does not apply to a mixed marriage where the unbelieving partner deserts his believing spouse, because by the very act of desertion the unbeliever rejects the Christian view of marriage as a sacred and permanent union.

Summing up, like Jesus the apostle Paul affirms the principle that Christian marriage is a union binding and permanent for life. If a separation should occur, Paul presents only two alternatives to believing partners: be reconciled to one another or remain single. The purpose of the separation is to provide an opportunity for the couple to work toward a possible reconciliation. It is only when reconciliation is no longer possible that divorce and remarriage are permissible.

In the next newsletter we shall discuss how the church, in faithful obedience to the Word of God can uphold and apply its teachings on divorce and remarriage today. We shall endeavor to be both specific and practical while recognizing the complexity of the subject. We will consider how the church today can practice "the interpretative freedom" of Paul in dealing with difficult marriage situations not contemplated in the Scriptures.

## ENDNOTES

1. Jay E. Adams, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage* (Phillipsburgh, New Jersey, 1980), p. xiii.
2. See Fred H. Wight, *Manners and Customs of the Bible Lands* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1953), p. 125.
3. J. Carl Laney, *The Divorce Myth* (Minneapolis, 1981), p. 29.
4. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1971 ed., s.v. "Divorce."
5. Joseph Addison Alexander, *The Gospel According to Matthew Explained* (London, 1884), p. 145.
6. Talmudic Tract *Gittin* 9:10.
7. Hugh Montefiore, "Jesus on Divorce and Remarriage," in *Marriage, Divorce and the Church: The Report of the Archbishop's Commission on the Christian Doctrine of Marriage* (London, 1971), p. 37.
8. Friedrich Hauck and Siegfried Schulz, "*Porne, Pornos, Porneia, Porneuo, Ekporneuo*," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, eds. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, (Grand Rapids, 1968), vol. 6, p. 580.
9. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Marriage, Human Reality and Saving Mystery* (London, 1965), p. 153.
10. See Joseph A Fitzmyer, "The Matthean Divorce Texts and Some New Palestinian Evidence," *Theological Studies* 37 (1976): 213-221.
11. J. Carl Laney (n. 3), p. 72.
12. Edward Robinson, ed., *Greek and English Lexicon of the New Testament*, new and revised ed., s.v. *Porneia*, p. 609.
13. W. K. Lowther Clarke, "The Exceptive Clause in Matthew," *Theology* 15 (1927): 167.
14. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "The Matthan Divorce Texts and Some New Palestinian Evidence," *Theological Studies* 37(1976), pp. 213-221.
15. *Testament of Judah* 13:6; *Testament of Reuben* 1:6.
16. See, for example, J. Carl Laney (n. 3), p. 87.
17. John Murray, *Divorce* (Phillipsburgh, New Jersey, 1961), p. 74.

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As a service to our subscribers, I am listing the date and the location of my upcoming weekend SEMINARS on the Sabbath, Second Advent, and Christian Life-style. Each seminar consists of three presentations: Friday evening at 7:30 p. m., Sabbath morning at 11:00 a. m., and Sabbath afternoon at 5:00 p. m. Feel free to contact me at (616) 471-2915 for a special seminar in your area.

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