
What Does the New Testament Say About Divorce?

by John C. Brunt

Not long ago I attended a church board meeting that lasted for two and a half hours. Two hours were spent on two items: two cases of divorce. After these two hours of sometimes vigorous discussion, the board was unable to reach a conclusion and referred both cases to other committees (one of which it had to create) for further study. This situation is hardly atypical. Divorce and remarriage present the church with some of its most difficult dilemmas.

As local churches respond to the problem of divorce, they want to be consistent with what the New Testament counsels and requires. Consequently, it is relevant, indeed crucial, that the New Testament passages discussing divorce be examined. We will look briefly at the context and teaching of each passage before drawing several conclusions concerning their relevance for the church's understanding and treatment of divorce. The most important of these conclusions is that in the New Testament, the presumption against divorce, while very strong, is not absolute. We will study the

passages according to the generally accepted chronological order in which they were written.¹

1 Corinthians 7:10–16

As we will see, there are several difficulties in fully understanding these verses, but it is clear from the passage that Paul knew a saying of Jesus forbidding divorce. In spite of this, Paul also recognized that divorce might occur (although we do not know in what context) and admonished against remarriage (verse 11). In addition and more remarkably, Paul was willing to advise divorce in one situation—that of the unbelieving spouse who wished to separate.

Paul's advice concerning divorce appears within a longer discussion where Paul answers questions relating to sexuality and marriage. Apparently there were Christians in Corinth who went to opposite extremes. Some believed that in sexual matters all things were lawful (Paul refutes them in 1 Cor. 6:12–20), while others thought that even sexual relations in marriage were wrong (Paul refutes them in 7:1–7). The discussion on divorce follows Paul's refutation of the latter and may even be related

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to it; some may have felt that because sexual relations were wrong Christians should divorce.²

In 7:10–11 Paul argues that Christians should not divorce and bases his advice on a saying of Jesus.³ According to Jesus a wife should not separate from her husband, and a husband should not divorce his wife. Paul adds a parenthesis between these two pieces of advice, however, which says that if the wife does separate from her husband, she should remain single.

In verse 12 Paul moves from divorce in general to a specific, difficult marital situation. What should a Christian do who is married to an unbeliever? Paul answers that such mixed marriages are legitimate and therefore the Christian should remain with the unbelieving spouse, unless the unbelieving spouse wishes to leave. In the latter case Paul makes an exception. (Notice that the exception is Paul's and is not a part of Jesus' saying.) God has called us to peace; therefore, the Christian should not force the reluctant, unbelieving spouse to continue the marriage.

“What is certain is that in these verses Paul makes an exception to the prohibition on divorce, and he does so on principle. God has called us to peace.”

Several problems emerge from the passage. First, why does Paul sometimes use the word “divorce” and sometimes use “separate”? Is he attempting to make a distinction? Probably not; the two terms appear to be synonymous and interchangeable.⁴

Second, what is the meaning of the “Pauline parenthesis” in verse 11? If the Lord said there should be no divorce, why does Paul seemingly allow for the possibility but then deny remarriage? A number of possibilities have been suggested:⁵ Paul is simply recognizing the reality that divorces will occur; he is thinking of a specific case in

the church where separation may have already occurred; he wants to leave open the possibility of divorce for sexual ascetics who cannot conscientiously remain married (even though Paul opposes that position himself); or the parenthesis is a later interpolation. The first of two possibilities are best, but it is impossible to answer this question with certainty.

The third problem in understanding this passage involves the meaning of the two questions in verse 16. Is Paul speaking to the positive possibility of saving the unbelieving spouse, or is he arguing that one should not hold the reluctant spouse in the relationship by emphasizing that the Christian cannot be certain of winning him or her? In other words, is he saying, “Stay with the unbelieving spouse; you might convert him or her,” or is he saying, “Let the reluctant spouse go; how do you know you can convert him or her?” In a recent article Sakae Kubo has persuasively argued for the latter.⁶

Finally, does Paul allow remarriage for the Christian who has been divorced from an unbelieving spouse? Some point to verse 11 and believe that it is decisive for this situation as well. Thus no remarriage is permitted.⁷ Others point to the words “is not bound” in verse 15 and argue that Paul allows for remarriage.⁸ Paul is not explicit, and on this specific point no definite conclusion is possible.

What is certain is that in these verses Paul makes an exception to the prohibition on divorce, and he does so on the basis of principle. God has called us to peace. To compel an unbelieving spouse to continue in an undesired marriage violates this principle of peace.

Mark 10:2–12

We now move to the gospel material, which is, in many ways, more difficult because of the differences between parallel accounts in different gospels. Several things

are clear from the passage, however. Jesus upholds an ideal, based on creation, that there should be no divorce. In addition, as the passage stands in Mark, there is a definite advancement of the standing of women. A man who divorces his wife commits adultery *against her*. Finally, adultery is put at the point not of divorce but of remarriage.

Our analysis begins with Mark since it is generally assumed that it was written first. This passage provides the first explicit quotation of Jesus' teaching on divorce, although it follows Paul's reference to this teaching by more than a decade.

The Pharisees open the discussion with a question: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" Jesus responds by referring to Moses and pointing out that the certificate of divorce Moses allowed was given because of the hardness of their hearts; God's ideal is that there should be no divorce. At marriage two people are joined by God into a permanent unity. Jesus appeals to the creation as the foundation for this ideal.

Jesus then privately gives further advice to his disciples. A man who divorces a wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and a woman who divorces her husband and marries another commits adultery.

The chief interpretive difficulties here involve the comparison of this passage with the parallel account in Matthew. We shall reserve comment on most of these difficulties until we have surveyed the parallel.

There are several elements unique to Mark that have caused problems for some because they do not seem to reflect the milieu of Palestinian Judaism. The Pharisee's initial question, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" seems somewhat strange since the debate among Pharisees was not over divorce as such, but over the grounds for divorce. The School of Shammai argued that divorce was only permissible in cases of adultery while the School of Hillel countered that a man could send his wife away for any reason, even if she burned his dinner.⁹ As we shall see,

Matthew's account reflects this Pharisaical debate.

The words "against her"¹⁰ are also not in keeping with usual Palestinian practice, where adultery was considered to be a sin against another man, whose property rights to his wife were violated by adultery.¹¹ Is Jesus redefining adultery or does the Markan passage reflect later influence?

A similar question emerges when Mark is the only gospel in which Jesus speaks of a woman divorcing her husband. This was common in the Gentile world but was forbidden in a Jewish context. Does this element go back to Jesus, or does it reflect Mark's Gentile milieu? Such questions are extremely difficult to answer with certainty. However, it is obvious that the passage hews closely to the prohibition against divorce, never acknowledging any exceptions. While the Pharisees speak of what is permitted and want to know about their rights, Jesus continually turns the discussion to God's will and his ideal for marriage.¹² Indeed, for Jesus marriage is so absolute that divorce does not necessarily end the marriage relationship. That relationship continues on so that remarriage is considered a violation of the marriage commitment.

Matthew 19:3-9

This is clearly an account of the same incident recorded in the previous passage. Yet there are several striking differences. The most important of these are:

1. The initial question by the Pharisees has to do with the grounds for divorce rather than divorce itself. (The words "for any cause" are added.) This puts the discussion in the context of the Hillel-Shammai debate.

2. There is no mention of a woman divorcing her husband or of adultery being against the woman.

3. An exception, not present in Mark (or Paul), is found. A man who divorces his wife

except for infidelity and marries another commits adultery.

In each of these cases the Matthean version more closely reflects a Jewish milieu. Is this because he is closer to the original situation or because he is writing in a Jewish context and modifies his material to suit it? Debate on this topic is complex, technical, and vigorous.¹³ At least for numbers one and two, it is probably impossible to say with certainty which is closer to the original.

In actual fact, if we believe that all the accounts are inspired presentations of God's will, determination of which is the closest to Jesus' actual words is unnecessary. But neither should we overlook the diversity among the accounts and engage in a simplistic harmonization. It appears that the gospel writers, under inspiration, have modified their material to communicate God's will to their particular audiences.

This seems to be the case where number three is concerned. There is good reason for believing that the so-called exception clause, "except for infidelity" is added by Matthew and does not reflect the original words of Jesus, since of the four writers who refer to Jesus' saying, only Matthew mentions this exception. Apparently Matthew, writing under inspiration, makes an exception to the general negation of divorce that is particularly appropriate to the more strongly Jewish context in which he writes;¹⁴ just a quarter of a century earlier, Paul had made a different exception appropriate to a different social setting. In a sense, Matthew, with the words "except for infidelity," is adding a parenthesis within Jesus' remarks. He, of course, had no punctuation marks with which to make this clear to us.

But what is the exception Matthew makes? This question is complicated by the fact that although some of our English versions read, "except for adultery," Matthew does not use the regular Greek word for adultery. Instead he uses the word *porneia*, which is often translated "fornication" and is used with a variety of meanings. Usually it refers to any illicit sexual activity

in a very general sense. Unfortunately, Matthew uses the term elsewhere only in 15:19, where it is merely one of a list of vices, and there is no context to help us.

This use of *porneia* has led to a number of suggestions for the meaning of the exception clause. The most common view is that Matthew is referring to adultery.¹⁵ But it is also seen as referring to premarital sexual relations,¹⁶ or marriages that were not legal to begin with because kinship lines were too close and incest taboos had been violated.¹⁷ Others, in one way or another, argue that Matthew is not really making an exception at all.¹⁸ While adultery is the most probable interpretation, it must be admitted that the meaning of *porneia* in this context cannot be definitely determined.

What is clear from the Matthean passage is that Jesus is again seen as holding up the ideal, based on creation, that there should be no divorce. But Matthew, writing under inspiration, adds an exception that is probably his own.

Matthew 5:31-32

Since this passage from the Sermon on the Mount is both brief and closely related to the one we have just studied, we will not need to devote much attention to it. Here Jesus says that a man who divorces his wife, except for *porneia*, makes her an adulteress and that a man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

The chief difficulty is the phrase "makes her an adulteress." Some hold that this differs from the other gospel passages by putting adultery at the point of divorce rather than remarriage.¹⁹ Others are probably correct in holding that Matthew is presuming that the divorced woman will either have to remarry or turn to prostitution, which in either case would be adultery.²⁰

Here again the same exception appears with the same word, *porneia*. One new element is the teaching that a man who marries a divorced woman commits adul-

tery. As in other gospel passages, the marital union is seen as continuing beyond divorce.

Luke 16:18

The final passage seems to be parallel to the previous one but with some variation.²¹ It omits the reference to making the divorced wife an adulteress and states that a man who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and that a man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. The former point has already been seen in Mark 10 and the latter in Matthew 5. Many view this as the most original form of Jesus' saying.

Conclusions

Undoubtedly this brief survey of the New Testament material on divorce is complex and confusing. What does it all mean for our attitude toward divorce and our actions with regard to it? I tentatively set forth the following conclusions.

First, no "divorce policy" for the church can be attained from the New Testament material. Never does the New Testament explicitly connect divorce with church discipline. The New Testament writers did not intend to set down a church policy; rather they related Jesus' teachings to various situations that their communities faced. As a result there is some degree of diversity of detail among the New Testament writers, which makes harmonization into a single "biblical" policy impossible. In addition, the interpretive problems in these passages are too great to permit us to draw a detailed policy from them. There is simply too much that we don't know. For example, we cannot be absolutely certain whether Paul allows for remarriage after the divorce he permits, or precisely what *porneia* means in Matthew. If we were to have a precise biblical policy, we would certainly need to have definite answers to both of these

questions. This is not to say that the church should have no policy, nor is it to say that it cannot be informed by the New Testament. But when we formulate a policy we will have to accept responsibility for its content. We cannot simply call it *the* biblical policy.

Second, although the material does not provide us with a policy, it is useful for us. It not only sets forth some things that are quite clear, in spite of interpretive difficulties, but also gives us examples of inspired, moral reasoning in relationship to the divorce issue. Close attention to the material is therefore helpful in allowing us as individuals and as a church to reflect on this issue. We need not despair simply because there are difficult elements in the text. We can concentrate on what is clear. The recognition that we cannot draw clear-cut policies from the material does not render it irrelevant.

Third, the New Testament presents a consistent and clear presumption²² against divorce. All of the New Testament writers agree that Jesus opposed divorce and that God's ideal is that there should be no divorce. God intends that marriage should be permanent. He himself joins husbands and wives together, and humans are called upon to preserve his work and not undo it. This is the basic core of Jesus' teaching on divorce. Divorce thwarts God's will and misses his ideal.

This is by far the most important conclusion of the New Testament material on divorce, and it flies in the face of much of our contemporary culture. In an age when "till death do us part" all too often means "as long as everything goes well," the New Testament challenges us with God's will from creation for the permanence of marriage. Every attempt on our part to look for grounds that we might use to justify divorce misses the point. The goal is no divorce. When we truly listen to the New Testament, we are responsible to do everything we can to reach that goal.

Fourth, in the New Testament, particularly in Paul and Matthew, there is a realization that in a less than ideal world

humans will not always meet God's ideal. In fact, at times this ideal may conflict with other values and ideals, such as the ideal that God has called us to peace. The New Testament expresses a gracious realism that attempts to relate God's will to actual circumstances that are sometimes less than ideal. This is most apparent in Paul.

Paul's exception in the case of mixed marriages is based on a principle—God has called us to peace. This would seem to imply that Paul believes that other values, in addition to God's ideal for the permanence of marriage, are important and must, in at least some cases, be considered. As Furnish says of Paul:

He would appear to be unwilling to sanction the idea that marriage is an end in and of itself that must be maintained at any cost. Here Paul shows a sensitivity to the *quality* of a marriage relationship, for which he is seldom given credit.²³

Thus Paul presents us with an inspired example of principled, moral reasoning in relationship to a specific marital situation. Rather than legalistically making Paul's (or Matthew's, for that matter) specific exception the only possible exception, it would seem more in keeping with the spirit of the New Testament material to engage in the same type of moral reasoning with regard to specific cases, asking, for example, what would be most in keeping with God's ideal for marriage and his call to peace, and recognizing that the strong presumption against divorce would make any exception bear a very strong burden of proof.

Fifth, although no policy can claim to be the biblical policy, certain requirements would seem necessary for any church to be able to claim that its decisions concerning divorce were consistent with the New Testament. What would such a policy need to do?

It would affirm and give witness to God's ideal that marriages are to be permanent. Anything less would dilute the clear and consistent teaching of the New Testament.

It would also attempt to mediate God's redemptive grace and healing in those situations where this ideal is not met. This would include the same gracious realism found in the New Testament.

It would be sufficiently flexible to allow for principled moral reasoning, such as we find in Paul, to be applied to specific cases. All too often, in an attempt to be consistent, the Matthean exception has been absolutized into a hard-and-fast law, with little if any reference to the Pauline approach. While this may satisfy our need to have cut-and-dried answers for every situation, it loses the richness of the New Testament's moral thinking.

These criteria do not establish a policy, but they do aid in evaluating any policy's consistency with the New Testament.

Finally, the affirmation of God's ideal for marriages must be seen not only in the church's divorce policy but in its total ministry. Even more important than how we treat cases of divorce and remarriage is what we do to promote good marriages and help troubled ones. More than once I have heard it said that it would be better if ministers did not know how to counsel, since they should spend their time in evangelism and not with people having marital difficulties. While we recognize the importance of evangelism, if Adventist churches are to affirm God's ideal for marriage, they must recognize that their evangelistic mission includes helping to establish and support good marriages. Only as we take this task more seriously will we reduce the tragic dilemmas that we so often face and move closer toward God's ideal.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. This paper can in no way be exhaustive or thorough. Entire books have been written on di-

vorice and the New Testament. These include Myrna and Robert Kysar, *The Asundered: Biblical Teachings on*

Divorce and Remarriage (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978), and Donald W. Shaner, *A Christian View of Divorce According to the Teachings of the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1969).

2. Thus Victor Paul Furnish, *The Moral Teachings of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), p. 42, emphasizes that the subject of I Cor. 7 is not divorce but sex, and that Paul is not advising people whose marriages are in danger of falling apart, but those who wonder if marriage is a legitimate status for the Christian.

3. It is generally agreed that when Paul distinguishes between what he says and the command of the Lord, the latter refers to a specific saying of Jesus during his earthly ministry.

4. See Kysar, p. 67

5. For an elaboration of these possibilities see Furnish, pp. 41–46. Support for the view that Paul has a specific case in mind is given by Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, O.P., "The Divorced Woman in 1 Cor. 7:10–11," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100(1981):601–606.

6. Sakae Kubo, "1 Cor. 7:16: Optimistic or Pessimistic?" *New Testament Studies* 24:539–544. Kubo bases his argument on context, showing that the structure of the passage is as follows: verses 12 and 13 give instruction to those who wish to break with their unbelieving spouses, while verse 14 shows why they should stay (such marriages are legitimate); verse 15ab gives instructions to those whose partners wish to leave, and verses 15c–16 give reasons why the Christian should let the unbelieving spouse go (God has called us to peace and one cannot be sure of converting the spouse).

7. See David Dungan, *The Sayings of Jesus in the Churches of Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), pp. 97–98. Kysar, pp. 74–79, holds that Paul did not allow remarriage, but probably would have had he realized that the parousia was not imminent.

8. See William Orr and James Arthur Walther, *I Corinthians*, "Anchor Bible" (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), p. 214, and Hans Conzelmann, *I Corinthians: A Commentary*, trans. James W. Leitch, ed. George W. MacRae, "Hermeneia" (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), p. 123.

9. *Mishnah*, "Gittin" 9:10. Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, S.J., "The Matthean Divorce Texts and Some New Palestinian Evidence," in *To Advance the Gospel: New Testament Studies* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), pp. 79–111, argues that Qumran evidence shows that the Essenes prohibited all divorce and that this provides a believable Palestinian background for the originality of the Pharisees question as recorded in Mark.

10. Although there is minor manuscript support for omitting "against her," the words are certainly part of Mark's original text.

11. Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), p. 120, finds this so curious that he calls the saying a "parable" that is not talking about divorce at all, since it makes no sense at all as it is. He points out that already in Old Testament times adultery had been used as a metaphor for idolatry. But it also seems possible that Jesus is creating new definitions to communicate a new and radical message.

12. See Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark*, trans. Donald Madvig (Atlanta: John Knox, 1976), p. 203.

13. There are at least four positions: (1) Mark presents that more original account throughout, (2) Mark's account is primary, but Matthew preserves some elements that are more original, (3) Matthew's account is most original throughout and gives evidence for the chronological priority of the gospel of Matthew, and (4) Both accounts have been so heavily edited that it is impossible to tell what the original looked like. Most Commentators reflect either (1) or (2). For (3) see Dungan, pp. 102–113, and for (4) see Bruce Vawter, C.M., "Divorce and the New Testament," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 39(1977): 528–542, p. 532.

14. Although the traditional view that Matthew was written for Jewish Christians is now questioned by some, there can be no doubt that there is some kind of "Jewish connection" in this gospel that is closer than in the other synoptics. Jewish practice demanded divorce in cases of adultery and certain other sexual irregularities.

15. See, for example, Kysar, pp. 48–49, and W.F. Albright and C.S. Mann, *Matthew*, "Anchor Bible" (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971), p. 65.

16. See M. Geldard, "Jesus' Teaching on Divorce: Thoughts on the Meaning of *Porneia* in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9," *Churchman* 92(1978): 134–143.

17. See Fitzmeyer, *passim*, especially pp. 94–97.

18. See Vawter, pp. 531, 535, and Dungan, p. 113f.

19. Kysar, p. 50.

20. Albright and Mann, p. 65.

21. Thus Luke 16:18 and Matthew 5:31–32 are quite possibly drawn from the hypothetical teachings source labeled Q. Here again opinion is divided as to which gospel preserves the Q saying most accurately.

22. I use the term "presumption" in the sense that it is set forth by James F. Childress, "Scripture and Christian Ethics: Some Reflections on the Role of Scripture in Moral Deliberation and Justification," *Interpretation* 34(1980):371–380.

23. Furnish, p. 45.