

Whom God has Joined...

New Testament Teaching on Marriage and Divorce

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An Essay presented as part of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Divinity with
Honours in New Testament within the University of Queensland

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I. Introduction

Since the home is basic to society and marriage is basic to the home, it is clear that the accepted view of marriage affects the well-being of society as a whole. Where marriage is basically unstable, the whole structure of society must of necessity be to some extent unstable. It is commonly thought that marriage is merely a matter of social convenience and the proper ordering of society. It has therefore tended to be accepted that, since marriage is entered by mutual agreement according to the laws of the state, it should also be broken quite simply by mutual agreement within the regulating principles of the state.

This loose concept of marriage is no novelty, but may be paralleled, not only throughout the world, but across the centuries. However, the Christian teaching concerning marriage as a divine ordinance and not merely a social convenience to be regulated by the state has stood in marked contrast to this common view. Yet within Christian teaching there have been areas where the issues have not been clear-cut. Thus, while it has been quite clear that marriage is to be seen as in principle indissoluble, it has not been clear whether “indissoluble” should be taken as meaning “cannot be dissolved” or “ought not to be dissolved”, whether the marriage bond may in fact be considered to have been broken in certain circumstances.

Obviously, the teaching of our Lord and of the New Testament as a whole on this subject is of considerable importance. The pattern here must follow that which motivated our Lord’s teaching on this subject – *viz.* divorce is only seen in terms of the true nature of marriage. Only in this way can the idea of divorce be seen in perspective.

2. Marriage as a Divine Ordinance

Key to the New Testament teaching of marriage is the concept of marriage as a divine ordinance, and therefore not merely a matter of social convenience or state law. The essence of marriage comes from creation itself, and the Christian teaching on marriage is not a matter of a high ethical ideal for Christians but sets forth the very basis of marriage itself. If marriage itself is in fact a divine ordinance, then true principles of its nature must have universal validity.

Thus, when Jesus was questioned on the subject of divorce by the Pharisees, he immediately referred the matter to the principles involved in creation itself. The permissive legislation of divorce was not something which was “from the beginning”. Alluding to the declaration of Gen. 2.24, which enunciates unconditionally the nature of the marriage relationship, he gives as the conclusion of the matter, “What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate” (Mt.19.3-8; Mk10.2-9). P. Bonnard has pertinently commented, “It is not the antiquity of the institution of marriage to which Jesus calls attention, but the priority, in right as well as in fact, of the creative design of God”. That they can and ought to become thus bound together in marriage is so “by the will of the creator inscribed in their physical differences”.¹

That marriage is to be seen as a divine ordinance leads to another factor, the sanctity of marriage. This is implicit in the first creation narrative – “And God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply...’ ” (Gen.1.28). It is also implicit in our Lord’s teaching on the indissolubility of the marriage bond and in Paul’s teaching which likens the marriage bond to that between Christ and the Church (Eph.5.31-32). However, there are two sections of teaching which demand consideration in this connection – Christ’s teaching on eunuchs (Mt.19.10-12) and Paul’s teaching in 1 Cor. 7.

The strict teaching of Jesus on the subject of marriage evoked from his disciples the comment that “it is better not to marry” (Mt.19.10). Jesus’ reply did not endorse this comment. He enumerated three classes of people who are continent and therefore celibate – those born impotent, those made impotent by men and those who for the sake of the kingdom have chosen not to marry. It is those who have thus exercised their freedom of will to whom it is given to accept this. But it is by no means regarded that all would thus become eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom, nor that those ‘to whom it is given’ have received some superior vocation, There is no suggestion that marriage is a second-rate expedient for those who cannot attain to the highest virtue of celibacy. The teaching only deals with special instances in which the needs of the Kingdom would have to take precedence over the desire for marriage.

¹ *L’Évangile selon Saint Matthieu* (Delachaux & Niestlé, Neuchâtel, 1963), *in loc.*

The teaching of Paul in 1 Cor. 7 has also been taken by some to indicate that celibacy is to be commended and that marriage is basically for the weak. “Good” (*καλοῖν*) in v.1 does not refer to moral goodness in the sense of what is commanded by the law of God (this is expressly clear in v.26), but to what is commendable under the circumstances. These circumstances are the imminence of the End, in view of which Paul had no interest in the continuance of the race,² as is clear in vv.23-31. However, other circumstances also pertained in Corinth – notably the temptations to unchastity were particularly strong and had already received comment from the Apostle (6.12-20). In ch.7, he acknowledges that what he considers laudable in view of the imminent End is not expedient as a general rule, especially in Corinth. Because of temptations to immorality (v.2), the statement of v.1 cannot be taken as an absolute, universally valid rule, but is to be seen in terms of a gift of God (*χάρισμα* – v.7). Again, in v.8, Paul cannot make his *καλοῖν* a universal principle, for if not to marry involves one in consuming passions then it is better (*κρεῖττον*) to marry (v.9).

The question naturally arises whether Paul’s view of marriage is not rather low, seeing its only purpose in preventing immorality. However, Paul is not here speaking of the purpose of marriage, but is rather dealing with the exigencies of a practical situation. Robertson and Plummer have the useful comment on v.2, “The Apostle is not discussing the characteristics of the ideal married life; he is answering questions put to him by Christians who had to live in such a city as Corinth. In a society so full of temptations, he advises marriage, not as the lesser of two evils, but as a necessary safeguard against evil.”³ The teaching of v. 3ff makes it clear that the view of marriage here is not as low as is sometimes supposed. These verses make it clear that those who are married have a duty not to withhold conjugal rights⁴ from one another. Indeed, continence might be maintained for the specific purpose of devoting themselves to prayer, but this was to be but “for a season” (v.5). Prolonged asceticism may in fact give Satan opportunity to lead one or other into sin.⁵ While he speaks very much in terms of a particular situation, the marriage relationship involves a “debt” (*ὀφειλήν* – v.3) concerning which the husband and wife are not to defraud (*ἀποστερεῖτε*) one another (v.5). It can hardly be said that he does not see in the marriage relationship something which is good in itself, and it is noteworthy that in Ephesians, when the feeling of the nearness of the End was not so strong, the teaching on marriage takes a much more positive line (5.22ff).⁶

Thus, these two sections of teaching do not remove the conclusion that marriage is not merely the lesser of two evils, but that, having been instituted in the goodness of the Creator, it is itself good and sacred. It is in fact the very sacredness of the bond which makes its perversion so reprehensible. On the other hand, these sections have emphasised that even the matter of marriage is to be subservient to the Kingdom, not that the married must live as ascetics, but that some few may be called in the purpose of God to remain unmarried and be given the grace to do so.

3. “One Flesh”

Fundamental to the New Testament concept of marriage is the teaching that in marriage the man and wife are “joined together” by God so as to constitute “one flesh”. This is quite clear in Mt. 19.4-6 (= Mk 10.7-9). It is the basis of a very serious warning against being joined to a harlot (1 Cor. 6.16) and of an illustration of the relationship between Christ and the Church (Eph. 5.29-32). However, it is of great importance that the significance of the concept, “one flesh”, be clearly understood.

² J. Moffatt, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1938) on ch.7; A. Robertson and A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of S. Paul to the Corinthians* (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 2ed 1914), on 7.2.

³ *ibid.*, *loc.cit.*

⁴ In v. 3, the reading *τὴν ὀφειλήν* is undoubtedly the right one. It is clear that the “debt” referred to is the conjugal duty of husband and wife (RSV – “conjugal rights”). The reading of the Textus Receptus, *τὴν ὀφειλομένην εὐνοίαν*, was perhaps a euphemism for the same thing.

⁵ The clause, *ἵνα μὴ πειράζῃ ... ὑμῶν* could be taken with the exceptive clause rather than with that which immediately precedes it. In this case the meaning would be that, while normal marital relations are to be maintained, constant and unrelieved indulgence may have a debilitating effect on the spiritual life and hence provide an opportunity for temptation to arise. However, since it is incontinence outside the marital bond that is sinful, the other interpretation seems the more likely.

⁶ Cf. C.L. Mitton, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (O.U.P., Oxford, 1951), p.22.

Thus, J.C. Fenton has interpreted “one flesh” as meaning “as closely related as the members of one family, or as the limbs of one body”.⁷ F.V. Filson, however, sees the phrase as pointing to “a new creation that has its life only in their union”.⁸ E.P. Gould considers that the union is the physical one to which the sexual relation points to and involves a “structural unity” between the two persons.⁹ C.L. Mitton asserts that the sexual powers become the strong bond binding man and wife together in a lasting union in which a new entity, a new kind of personality has come into being.¹⁰ C.E.B. Cranfield queries whether the reference is to one personality or to one kindred.¹¹ D.E. Nineham favours the latter.¹² While there are a number of variations and combinations, the basic question is that raised by C.E.B. Cranfield.

In the passages noted above in Matthew and Mark, the nature of the marriage relationship is seen to be inherent in creation itself. In Matthew, ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς is to be taken with ἐποίησεν (19.4),¹³ and thus corrects the more difficult expression of Mark (ἀπό δέ ἀρχῆς κτίσεως – 10.6).¹⁴ The meaning, however, is similar – the permanent bond which is marriage originates in the will of the Creator and is set out in the physical differences between the sexes from the beginning (Gn. 1.27; 5.2). Both accounts then proceed to quote from Gn. 2.24. This latter in context seems to refer to the creation of the woman from the man’s rib (v. 23). Nevertheless, the force of ἐνεκα τούτου is to refer the teaching on marriage back to creation itself. This point is not lessened by seeing the relation through a different angle. The pertinence of our Lord’s teaching lies not in the origin of the woman – this might tend to emphasise a woman’s status as inferior – but rather in the creative design of God.

Because in both accounts the quotation from Gn. 2.24 is thus set in relation to the creative design of God, the concept of “one flesh” would seem to involve much more than a new family relationship. It is true that each marriage does in fact involve the latter, but the significance is not simply that husband and wife belong to the one family – it is rather that, leaving the family of father and mother, they together form the basis of a new family. Thus, they are described as having been “yoked together” (συνέζευξεν) by God (Mt. 19.6; Mk 10.9). The verb used here refers to a working team rather than to a unit of creation, as its usual translation might be taken to imply, although functionally this team may well be regarded as in fact “a unit of creation”, being the means to the continuance of the race. However, in attempting to understand correctly the import of New Testament teaching caution needs to be exercised with such terms as “new creation” and “structural unity” as used above. That the physical relationship is important in the union is beyond doubt, but the new creation and the structural unity need not thereby be seen solely or basically in physical terms. From an external point of view, indeed, there is the yoking together, the creation of a new family unit and the physical union of two persons as, one might say, a creative organism. But these aspects do not give the full significance of “one flesh”.

The marriage bond is seen to be a continuous one, though the physical sexual relations are intermittent. The aorist (συνέζευξεν) seems to imply that a definitive act of God has taken place. The yoking together is no mere matter of convenience, a divine sanction for a time. What God has yoked together, no person is to separate. The question whether this implies that persons can and do separate or whether no matter what happens in human sinfulness the bond remains must be considered later with respect to divorce. The point here is that something deeper than a physical relationship is involved. There is a union of personality, though this is best seen in a complementary sense. This may give added significance to the reference to Gn. 1.27; 5.2, for the creation of “male and female” does not merely point to the difference between the sexes but more notably to their complementariness, their need one of the other. This is more than a physical need requiring sexual completion, for more than the latter is involved. Having been created complementary, man and wife together form a “super-personality”, in which there is a blending of their individual personalities, the latter not thereby being subordinated or negated but finding in the union their true identity. The omission of καί προσκολληθήσεται πρὸς τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ from Mk 10.7 by S, B and

⁷ *The Gospel of St. Matthew* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1963), on 19.5.

⁸ *A Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew* (A. & C. Black, London, 1960), on 19.3-9.

⁹ *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1896), on 10.8.

¹⁰ *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Epworth, London, 1957), on 10.5.

¹¹ *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (C.U.P., Cambridge, 1963), on 10.8.

¹² *Saint Mark* (Penguin, Middlesex, 1963), on 10.7. 7.

¹³ cf. A.H. McNeile, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Macmillan, London, 1915), on 19.4.

¹⁴ cf. P. Bonnard, *op. cit.*, on Mt. 19.4-5.

Syr^{sin} does not seem to have any particular significance. The awkwardness thus given to the sense justifies the conclusion that it was perhaps omitted by inadvertence.¹⁵ The verbs *κολλάω* (as Mt.) and *προσκολλάω* (as Mk and LXX) both refer to a close bond, whether the passive is to be understood reflexively here or not. Thus, RSV renders “and be joined to his wife”, avoiding the suggestion that the bond is only an emotional tie.

It is important to consider when man and wife are constituted “one flesh” – whether in the marriage contract, however conceived, or in the physical consummation, or in conception. It is clear that while the union is not merely physical its ground in a physical relationship cannot be denied. It may indeed be the importance of this relationship which undergirds the term “one flesh”. It is striking to note Paul’s teaching in 1 Cor. 6.15ff on this point.

Physical intercourse outside the legal bond of marriage is seen to create the “one flesh” relationship, constituting man and woman one *σῶμα*, one organism (*cf.* Eph. 5.28-31). Outside marriage, however, this involves a man in sin against his own body (v.18). This is because the relationship is entered with no intention that it should be exclusive and for life – this is inherent in the nature of the case. This, indeed, is why the external regulations of a marriage contract are not irrelevant to the discussion. While the marriage contract may not constitute the “one flesh” relationship, it nevertheless initiates and safeguards it, involving a solemn covenant between man and woman that they will in fact enter this relationship exclusively and for life. This is to some extent true of marriage within different cultural settings, though the exclusiveness and permanence of the relation may be widely divergent from the Christian teaching. In Paul’s teaching the relation of conception and the procreative purpose of marriage does not enter into the question. The union takes place irrespective of whether the physical relationship has produced children who would then symbolise its reality as “one flesh”. Our Lord’s teaching does not specifically touch on this question, though it is clear that the union transcends the legal and social regulations since it cannot be dissolved by the latter.

Some note has already been taken of Paul’s understanding of “one flesh” as “one body”. While it is evident in 1 Cor. 6.15ff, it is developed more clearly in Eph. 5.28ff. As “one body”, husband and wife are complementary and fulfil one another’s needs. Thus, as each person has a strong instinct to preserve, care for and nourish his own body, so now this is to be the practical expression of his love towards his wife. The teaching of Paul concerning the differing roles of man and woman in marriage has sometimes been passed by as if he taught that women are to have an inferior status. The difference, however, is one of *role* rather than *status*. Paul had written that “... there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3.38), but this statement of women’s equality with men in Christ Jesus is not to be taken as meaning that there are no differences of role within marriage. “The body” implies that these roles are complementary and hence necessary to each other. While acknowledging some cases to be contrary, it would be true to say that the psychological differences between men and women seem to fit them for the roles that Paul sets out. The husband is the head to whom the wife is to be subject in everything; the husband, for his part, is obliged to nourish and cherish his wife. The husband’s position is not to be seen primarily in terms of authority, but rather of responsibility. While the wife is to be subject *ἐν παντί*, the authority of the husband is subject to the obedience he owes to Christ and is to correspond to the relation of Christ and the Church.¹⁶ There is no question of domination but rather of the complete harmony of mutual love between those who are “one flesh”. “It is the function of the head to plan the safety of the body, to secure it from danger and to provide for its welfare”.¹⁷ Paul states marital responsibilities similarly in Col. 3.18-19 (*cf.* Tit. 2.5; 1 Pet. 3.1).

However, this statement of the marriage relationship seemed to raise problems with respect to the marriage of believers and unbelievers. To what extent could the close bond of “one flesh” exist between those who did not have common faith in Christ? To this it must be answered that the purely physical bond can exist, as in fact in relations with a harlot (1 Cor. 6.16), and beyond this the union on the personal level can take place, but there can hardly be the deeper spiritual union. For this reason, believers are not to be “mismatched with unbelievers” (2 Cor. 6. 14, RSV). This expression (*ἐτεροζυγοῦντες*) may not, it is true, refer exclusively to the yoke of marriage,¹⁸ but it would seem to have considerable reference to the latter.

¹⁵ V. Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Macmillan, London, 1952), on 10.6-9.

¹⁶ Cf. T.K. Abbott, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians* (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1897), on Eph. 5.24; E.F. Scott, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians to Philemon and to the Ephesians* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1930), on Eph. 5.23.

¹⁷ J.A. Robinson, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians* (Macmillan, London, 2ed 1904), Exposition on 5.23.

¹⁸ Cf. P.E. Hughes, *Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Marshall, Morgan & Scott, London, 1962), on 6.14.

The sharing (*μετοχή*) and fellowship (*κοινωνία*) are on the deepest possible level. Paul is not advocating isolationism (cf. 1 Cor. 9.20-23), but speaks rather of the closest relationships of life. Account needs to be taken of the significance of *μὴ γίνεσθε* here followed by a present participle. The sense seems to be given well by P.E. Hughes – “do not go on becoming unequally yoked with unbelievers, as you are already doing”.¹⁹ The command seems to forbid entry by a Christian into a relationship with an unbeliever rather than to give counsel to those who, on becoming Christians, find themselves yoked with unbelievers. Thus, a woman whose husband has died may marry again, but it must be “in the Lord” (1 Cor. 7.39). However, where only one partner has become a believer, the Christian is not to precipitate separation – if such action is taken by the unbeliever, the believer is not to be held under bondage in such a case (1 Cor. 7.12,13,15). Whether this implies freedom to remarry must be considered later. It is clear that the marriage relationship is not without meaning in such a case. While the deepest reality of “one flesh” may not be possible, it is true that the unbeliever is sanctified through the believing partner (v. 14) and may in fact be led to salvation (v. 16), and that the children of the relationship are holy (*ἅγια* – v. 14). Just as sexual union with a harlot involves degradation (as 6.16), so within marriage, union with a pure Christian results in the enriching of the unbeliever.²⁰ With this may be compared the teaching of 1 Pet. 3.1ff, in which, however, the influence is not so much through the union in itself but by the wife’s taking up consciously and deliberately the role which is hers within marriage and so winning her husband to the faith by her chaste and respectful behaviour. It should be noted in this passage that although the wife has a different role and is hence “a weaker vessel” she is nonetheless to be seen as an equal, “fellow-heir (*συνκληρονομίος*) of the grace of life” (v. 7). This principle, of course, had special significance where both husband and wife were Christians.

The insistence on the doctrine of “one flesh” clearly implies monogamy. The teaching of Jesus nowhere assumes that marriage can ever be otherwise. Paul in writing to a pagan situation assumes likewise. The statement, “let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband” (1 Cor. 7.2), requires monogamy. This is true whether or not Paul implies any difference in the use of *ἑαυτοῦ* and *ἰδιον* here and elsewhere (as Eph. 5.22,28,33; *et al.*).²¹

The question of what was to be done where people polygamously married became believers was bound to arise at some stage, as indeed it does today in a missionary situation. There is no clear direction that marriage relations with all but the first wife are to be ceased, although it might be inferred that the succeeding relationships would be adulterous. However, the situation is not a simple one, for the marriage relationship might have been regarded as sacred and permanent, though not monogamous. Further, if such action was to be taken, there would be grave economic and social complications for the women concerned, with the additional problem of forcing them into further adultery should they be desiring to remarry. Of course, if some wives did not become believers and sought freedom, the principle of 1 Cor. 7.12 would apply, though it should be noted that the other complications of the case still remain. There is no indication in the New Testament that a clear-cut solution was ever given. However, it was clear that those in authority in the Church should exemplify the Christian ideal of monogamy – this was a rule by the time the Pastorals were written (1 Tim. 3.2,12; Tit. 1.6).

The concept of “one flesh” thus involves a deep union of man and wife based on the creative will of God, the covenant between the two persons and the physical relationship thus established. The relationship, however, is not merely physical, though the depth of the bond may depend on other factors. Within this bond, the two personalities complement one another and fulfil different roles though equal in status. The relationship is meant to be exclusive, permanent and monogamous.

4. Divorce

It has already been noted that our Lord, in dealing with the subject of divorce, treats it in relation to the true nature of marriage. In the foregoing discussion, it has been noted that the marriage contract initiates and safeguards the “one flesh” relationship. However, just as it has been clear that the latter is far more than

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ Cf. J. Moffatt, *op. cit.*, on 1 Cor. 7.12; J. Héring (tr. A.W. Heathcote & P.J. Allcock), *The First Epistle of Saint Paul to the Corinthians* (Epworth, London, 1962), on 7.12.

²¹ Cf. F.W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Marshall, Morgan & Scott, London, 2ed 1954), n. on 7.2.

just a legal contract, so it is also clear that the essential bond of marriage cannot by its very nature be dissolved by legal agreement. The formal divorce may, indeed, repudiate the marriage covenant, but cannot remove the unity of being which the marriage has brought into existence.

The Mosaic law is stated as having “permitted” divorce “because of your hardness of heart” and seeking by the “certificate of divorce” to protect the woman from her former husband (Mt. 5.31; 19.7-8; Mk 10.4-5). Marriage, however, is not to be understood in terms of a permissive legislation but in terms of the will of the Creator in the beginning (Mt. 19.8; Mk 10.6). Jesus in his teaching was concerned with the various sins which violate the ordinance of marriage. The sin which is especially accounted for in the Mosaic law was “hardness of heart” (σκληροκαρδία – in LXX usage it corresponds to “uncircumcision of heart”, Dt. 10.16; Jer. 4.4), especially the hardheartedness of the husband who in any case was taking the divorce. The woman did not have any particular rights in the matter and could not herself initiate a divorce. Vincent Taylor has rightly stated, “The implication is that the words express a merciful concession for the woman’s sake”.²² However, this hardheartedness which pursues divorce is itself sinful. Its cruelty was somewhat mitigated by provisions which protected the woman. The teaching of Jesus on divorce, therefore, is not a condemnation of the Mosaic legislation, but of the hardheartedness which necessitated it. This legislation could thus not be taken as the ideal since its aim was to prevent a worse sin.

However, against the sin of hardheartedness which led to divorce must be seen the sin of adultery which followed it on the remarriage of either of the partners. For the moment, the teaching of Christ will be considered apart from the Matthaean exceptive clauses which receive fuller consideration later. Apart from these clauses, the teaching of the gospels states quite clearly that remarriage after divorce involves adultery, the responsibility for which may be seen in several aspects: the man who divorces his wife makes her commit adultery (Mt. 5.32); the man who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against his wife (Mk 10.11; Mt. 19.9; Lk. 16.18); the woman who divorces her husband and marries another (as was allowed under Roman but not under Jewish law) commits adultery (Mk 10.12); the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery (Mt. 5.32; Lk. 16.18).

The clear implication is that, serious though the repudiation of the marriage vows surely is, the formal divorce does not dissolve the essential marriage union. The sexual relations entered into within the second marriage are thus an infringement of the bond of the first marriage which, in fact, still exists – hence, they involve adultery. E.P. Gould has written, “Any formal sundering of the tie leaves it really whole; the union being of this natural, physical kind, not accomplished by any formal procedure, but in the sexual act uniting man and woman, no formal procedure can break it, but simply leaves it as it was”.²³ The second marriage is thus a mere formality which makes no real difference to the fact that “the deepest and holiest element in the physical life of man” is thus desecrated.²⁴ Divorce is wrong, because it seeks to dissolve a bond established by God himself (Mt. 19.6; Mk 10.9) and because it sanctions adultery on the false assumption that the marriage bond has been so dissolved.

The Pauline teaching is based on that of Jesus. The marriage tie is dissolved by death – “A wife is bound (δεδέται – cf. v. 27) as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord” (1 Cor. 7.39). This agrees with the teaching of Rom. 7.2,3 – “For the married woman is bound (δεδέται) by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning her husband. So then if, while her husband is living, she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is not an adulteress, though she is joined to another man.” The second marriage is valid because the former marriage has been terminated by death.

In Cor. 7.10-11, Paul sets out as the command of the Lord to the married, “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”. It is clear that the Christian solution to marital problems is to be reconciliation, not divorce. However, while divorce itself is discountenanced, no thought of remarriage to another after divorce is to be entertained. The fact that reconciliation is to be sought suggests that the formal divorce has not severed the marriage bond, whatever the reason for the separation in such a case may have been.

²² *op. cit.*, on 10.4f.

²³ *op. cit.*, on Mk 10.11

²⁴ T.H. Robinson, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1928), on 5.31-32

J. Héring affirms that “the commandment of the Lord applies to Christian marriages. The indissolubility of Christian marriage is affirmed, as well as the prohibition of a second marriage for the wife who even so may have been divorced”.²⁵ However, this statement is open to very serious question. Paul is **applying** the Lord’s command to Christian marriages, in which the divine ideal should be realised, but, since this command has to do with the essence, and not merely the convenience, of marriage, its application is universal. That the Christian ideal is not always realised elsewhere is an indication, not that this ideal does not have universal validity, but that the marriage relationship is complicated by human sinfulness, even where this does not manifest itself in adultery.

At this point, however, account should be taken of the consideration earlier in which it was stated that the deepest reality of the union of “one flesh” is only possible where both parties are believers and the union hence involves the spiritual dimension, but the bond on the physical and personal levels still exists in other cases. The stability of the marriage from other points of view certainly depends on personal and spiritual factors, but deficiencies at these levels can hardly be said to **dissolve** the bond.

However, Paul evidently considers that the case where a Christian is married to an unbeliever may not be dealt with in terms of a specific commandment of the Lord (v. 12ff). While he is careful to distinguish his own opinion as such, he later states that he thinks he has the Spirit of God in such judgments (v. 40, *cf.* v. 25). While there is a radical difference between Christian believer and pagan partner in such cases and it may be affirmed that there can hardly be spiritual union, there are still no grounds for breaking the marriage covenant. The Christian is not to seek divorce from the pagan partner, but evidently is to live fully in the marriage relationship, if the partner so consents.

Because the marriage union is real, the unbelieving partner is “consecrated” through the believer and may in fact be brought through to salvation, though some in Corinth may have thought the reverse would be the case. But the question arises concerning the attitude of the Christian where the unbelieving partner has sought divorce. Paul answers this question, “let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace” (v. 15). There has been considerable debate over this so-called “Pauline-Privilege”. The matter hinges on the sense in which the believer is seen to be “not under bondage” (*οὐ δεδούλωται*).

A. Robertson and A. Plummer consider that “the Christian partner is under no slavish obligation to refuse to be set free”.²⁶ There is, however, no indication what implications this may have concerning freedom or otherwise to remarry, unless the phrase “to be set free” infers on other grounds that the divorce has actual validity in such cases. F.W. Grosheide similarly states that “the Christian is under no obligation to prevent his departure”, but further affirms, “If the believing party were under obligation to prevent the departure he would be subject to the unbeliever and would virtually be forced to abandon his or her faith since only by doing that could divorce be prevented”. If the divine peace cannot be maintained in a reconciliation which does not deny the Christian’s faith, “divorce is permissible” though “Paul does not state that he should seek or even desire it”.²⁷ However, there is no consideration that “divorce” may justify remarriage.

J. Moffatt interprets quite differently at this point. He considers that the prohibition of divorce does not hold where the pagan insists on divorce. “Naturally it is implied,.. that he or she was now free to remarry (v. 39).²⁸ J. Héring takes a similar approach – “the rule formulated by the Apostle allows of an exception: if the pagan leaves the Christian partner the marriage is nullified, and the Christian can marry again – that is, of course, with a member of the Christian Church (*ἐν Κυρίῳ*, v. 39)”.²⁹ This needs to be seen in the light of Héring’s affirmation noted earlier that it is Christian marriage that is indissoluble. The terms of the present statement should be noted – remarriage is possible because the former marriage is “nullified”. Evidently, only in Christian marriage is there thought to be the divine union which cannot be dissolved. Presumably other marriages involve the formal contract, which, when terminated by divorce, frees the parties for further marriage, the former marriage not having been valid in the sight of God. Some such view as this seems to be implied by Héring’s interpretation.

²⁵ *op. cit.*, on 1 Cor. 7.11.

²⁶ *op. cit.*, on 7.15.

²⁷ *op. cit.*, on 7.15.

²⁸ *op. cit.*, on 7.15.

²⁹ *op. cit.*, on 7.15-16.

There are a number of points in the passage which require fuller consideration. It may be questioned whether, in fact, *χωρίζω* is intended to refer to **divorce** and not merely to **separation**. It is true that the more usual New Testament word is *ἀπολύω*. There is evidence in the Greek writers for the use of both of these words with reference to “divorce”. The idea of “loose, set free” is most clearly present in *ἀπολύω*, which would therefore seem to imply such a severing of the marriage contract as to make way for remarriage. Further, while in a number of New Testament instances it seems fitting to render it “send away” (as, e.g., in Mt. 14.15), it nonetheless derives this meaning from the sense of “release, dismiss”. It is thus not parallel in these instances to *χωρίζω* in the sense of “go away, depart”. However, the latter quite graphically signifies division and in Mt. 19.6 (= Mk 10.9) is set in direct contrast to *συνζεύγνυμι*. It seems unlikely that, within the cultural context of the epistle, “separation” would be taken to mean a division between the married parties which would not permit them to remarry. This is at least clear in v. 11, where it is stated, however, that the Christian is not to remarry. Whatever Paul expects of the Christian in v. 15, it is hard to deny that this “separation” may well involve the remarriage of the non-Christian.

Closer attention needs to be given to the phrase *οὐ δεδούλεται*. There is no evidence that the verb *δουλόω* was ever used in Greek literature of the marriage bond. When Paul clearly refers to the latter, he uses the verb *δέω* (as Rom. 7.2; 1 Cor. 7.27,39). The verb here may be taken to mean “be under constraint, under compulsion”, presumably to take a particular course of action, though what this may be is not immediately evident.

A great deal of the teaching of this chapter must be seen in the context of Paul’s strong sense of the imminence of the end of the world. In view of “the present distress” he considers it good for men to remain in the condition in which they now are, married or unmarried (vv. 26-27). “The time has been shortened” (v. 29), he says, “the form of this world is passing away. But I want you to be free from concern” (vv. 31-32). This in fact is why he advocates celibacy – he does not want them distracted by rightful marital responsibilities but seeks their undistracted devotion to the Lord (v. 35).

It may well be that v. 15 also needs to be viewed in terms of this emergency situation. The Christian partner is not to seek divorce, nor, however, can he afford to spend time and energy seeking reconciliation with a pagan spouse who seeks divorce. Far from implying that the Christian would remarry, the consistent advice of Paul in this context, though not expressed here, would be that the divorced Christian in such a case should remain unmarried. The question of whether the Christian could in good conscience remarry in spite of the pressures of emergency (as v. 2) is not specifically answered at this point. Some difference from the case of v. 11 is certainly implied.

Apart from the exceptive clauses, then, the teaching of the New Testament is categorically against divorce since this does not recognise the deep bond involved in marriage and remaining after divorce, and hence leads to adultery. Even where divorce by an unbelieving partner must be suffered by a Christian in view of the present distress, it is not clearly stated that this dissolves the marriage bond and hence makes way for remarriage. While the principle of the matter is left open, in the light of the New Testament teaching on marriage such a conclusion would be hard to sustain.

5. The Exceptive Clauses.

There are two sayings in Matthew which have been taken to modify or contradict the general teaching of the New Testament on the subject of divorce by introducing an exception to the absolute rejection of divorce. “Every one who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery” (Mt 5.32). “Whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery” (Mt 19.9).

Some scholars consider that the exceptive clauses are interpolations which directly contradict the teaching of Jesus as stated in the Gospels and in the Pauline Epistles. Thus, T.H. Robinson considers that the words have been inserted by the evangelist as an interpretation of the words of Jesus. However, he doubts whether Jesus really limited the application of his law since “no legal formula or judicial act could affect what was fundamentally a spiritual relation... If adultery is the desecration of the deepest and holiest element in the physical life of man, no mere scrap of paper can make the slightest difference to it”.³⁰ This acknowledges the seriousness of the adultery involved in a second marriage after divorce (which, because it

³⁰ *op. cit.*, on Mt.5.31-32.

does nothing to the essential marriage union is a “mere scrap of paper”), but does not consider the effects on what is “fundamentally a spiritual relation” of adultery itself.

B.H. Branscomb regards Mark’s account as the correct one, since the evidence of Luke’s account and of Paul’s reference does not allow exceptions, and the rest of the answer in both Matthew and Mark appeals to the teaching of Genesis against the law of divorce in Dt. 24. Further, among a people with whom divorce was easy, he was emphasising permanence; and his teaching here and elsewhere shows him not interested in classifying and listing exceptional cases.³¹ Again, the unanswered question is whether adultery does anything to the permanence of marriage.

Robertson and Plummer state categorically that “St Paul, like our Lord, forbids divorce absolutely; *πορνεία* in the wife is not mentioned here as creating an exception; and it is possible that this exception was unknown to the Apostle because it had not been made by Christ.”³²

Some scholars view the words as representing the later legislation of the Church, legitimate or not, under the authority to “bind” and “loose” (Mt. 16.19; 18.18). Thus, A.H. McNeile states, “The Christian Church, with its authority to bind and loose..., early made the exception to meet a pressing ethical need; and since the need has not ceased, the exception is valid today”.³³ J.C. Fenton concludes similarly that “the permission to allow divorce in certain circumstances seems to be one example of the use of this authority by the early Church”. Here, however, “the distinction between the original command of the Lord and the Church’s legislation has been obscured”.³⁴

F.V. Filson thinks that what Jesus said about divorce is not so clear as the fact that he did speak strongly against it. He concludes that the exceptions must be Church decisions – “Apparently the Church had to decide what to do when married couples failed to fulfil the purpose of the Creator. ‘Matthew’, or his source for this teaching, evidently held that the Church must hold divorce to a minimum, but that the spirit of Jesus’ teaching could best be realised by permitting divorce where the wife was guilty of unchastity”.³⁵

S.E. Johnson affirms that Jesus made no exceptions, but that the Church had to legislate for hard cases as Matthew believed it had the power to do. Johnson seems unsure of the result – “Whether the church was justified in taking this stand is a question of theology, not of scientific exegesis.”³⁶

C.E.B. Cranfield thinks that, while the dissolving of the marriage union inevitably stands under divine judgment, “it may nevertheless be proper for the state and also the Church to make provision for situations in which because of human sinfulness divorce may be the lesser evil.”³⁷ G.B. Caird makes a similar point and concludes that “it is only in the kingdom, where there is a cure for hardness of heart, that the ideal becomes practicable”.³⁸

There are other scholars who consider that the exceptive clauses are merely the addition of what is implicit in our Lord’s teaching elsewhere. There, J.M. Creed considers that though an interpretative gloss it is nonetheless probable that it “preserves the actual purport of the teaching of Jesus.”³⁹

Some scholars under this category hold that adultery is the one sin which destroys the marriage bond. A.W. Argyle states that it was taken for granted by all including Jesus “that unchastity was the only possible ground for divorce because it destroyed the unity between man and wife”.⁴⁰ E.P. Gould considers that the exception is implied “because adultery is the real dissolution of the marriage tie, as distinguished from the formal divorce. Precisely as divorce does not break the marriage tie, adultery does break it.”⁴¹ Likewise D.E. Nineham, “It may be held that in the case of adultery, the union has *ipso facto* been dissolved.”⁴²

³¹ *The Gospel of Mark* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1937), on 10.2-12.

³² *op. cit.* on 1 Cor. 7.11.

³³ *op. cit.*, on Mt.5.32.

³⁴ *op. cit.*, on Mt.5.32.

³⁵ *op. cit.*, on Mt.5.32.

³⁶ *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* in *The Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. VII (Abingdon, New York, 1951), on 5.32.

³⁷ *op. cit.*, on Mk 10.9.

³⁸ *Saint Luke* (Penguin, Middlesex, 1963), on 16.18.

³⁹ *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (Macmillan, London, 1930), on 16.18.

⁴⁰ *The Gospel According to Matthew* (C.U.P., Cambridge, 1963), on 5.32.

⁴¹ *op. cit.*, on Mk 10.12.

⁴² *op. cit.*, on Mk 10.9.

Other scholars under this category consider that the clause is an interpolation in 19.9 but in 5.32 simply states that a man cannot make his wife an adulteress by divorce if she is one already. Thus, G.E.P. Cox has, “If the wife is already an adulteress, her husband by divorcing her does not make her one”, but he considers the clause in this sense superfluous.⁴³ W.C. Allen views the matter similarly: “If a man divorced his wife for *πορνεία*, he would not then cause her to commit adultery, because she would already be guilty of this crime”, but he thinks that the exception, though obvious, confuses the issues.⁴⁴

It is thus clear that there is a wide range of views on this subject. At this point there are a number of issues requiring clarification. In particular, there is the exact significance of *πορνείω* and its effect on the marriage bond. This has been noted in connection with those scholars who see the clauses merely as interpolations contrary to the spirit of the teaching of Christ.

The normal word for “adultery” is *μοιχεία*, not *πορνεία* which is a more general term for illicit sexual intercourse. The two terms are evidently to be seen in distinction in Mt. 15.19 (= Mk 7.21) and in Gal. 5.19 (in D and a number of later MSS). However, because *πορνεία* is broad in application, it may nevertheless include the specific case of *μοιχεία*. Indeed, the use of *πορνεία* for the sin of a married woman is evident in the use of the LXX in Gn. 38.24; Hos. 2.2 (where the two are used in poetic parallelism); and elsewhere. It is significant here, however, that while *πορνεία* is used in the exceptive clauses, it is followed by a verb more strictly implying adultery (*μοιχεύω/μοιχάω*). Thus, it has been suggested by some that the word must refer to unchastity before marriage which is discovered after marriage. In such a case the essential marriage union has not taken place and the marriage is therefore nullified.

C.E.P. Cox has further sought to understand the word in terms of marriage within the prohibited degrees, such a marriage being from the outset null and void, the two instances constituting grounds for a decree of nullity.⁴⁵ P. Bonnard concurs with the second suggestion and thinks that in the apostolic decree of Acts 15.28,29 *πορνεία* is used in this sense of a marriage within the forbidden degree.⁴⁶ It is clear that such a marriage would involve *πορνεία* rather than *μοιχεία*, since no other marriage bond is involved. However, if intercourse has taken place, the relation may be both illegal and sinful, but it is hard to escape the conclusion that the “one flesh” relationship is hereby established, as in 1 Cor. 6.16. This suggestion is thus full of its own peculiar problems. The suggestion that *πορνεία* refers here to premarital unchastity is also difficult to sustain. In such a case it may be assumed that the “one flesh” relationship has been entered into with another man with no intentions of exclusiveness and permanence. Does such a relationship constitute an indissoluble relationship, and is it hence in the sight of God the equivalent of a former marriage which of necessity renders the later marriage invalid and which must make any intercourse in the later marriage adultery? Such a conclusion seems to imply that people united in sin are “joined together by God”. It also seems to take no account of the gospel, for it is not suggested that divorce is commanded, as was the case in certain situations under later Judaism. It may be that 1 Cor. 7.11 implies the case of divorce among Christians on the grounds of adultery, yet if so the woman is not to remarry but rather to seek reconciliation. Premarital unchastity is a serious sin which demands repentance and forgiveness, though apart from these it could well prove a hindrance to a true and lasting marriage. It seems, then, best to take this verse to refer to adultery after marriage.⁴⁷

It is already clear that adultery in itself need not lead to divorce. It may be followed (indeed, in a Christian context, ought to be) by repentance and reconciliation. However, it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that adultery is the one sin which by its nature violates the “one flesh” relationship. Indeed, unless there is reconciliation, it may virtually destroy it, for not only is there the break-down of the spiritual and personal bond (as in most cases where people sue for a divorce) but the violation of the marriage contract by entry into the exclusive physical relationship with another party. Thus, it may be taken that the absolute command of Mt 19.6 is in such a case not ignored by a divorce which does nothing to the relationship but is flagrantly violated by the adultery which precedes divorce. It is because of the radical separation involved in adultery that, within the Christian context, repentance and reconciliation are

⁴³ *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* (S.C.M., London, 1952), on 5.31-32.

⁴⁴ *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to S. Matthew* (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 3ed 1912), on 5.32.

⁴⁵ *op. cit.*, on Mt. 19.3-9.

⁴⁶ *op. cit.*, on Mt. 5.32.

⁴⁷ So McNeile, Filson, T.H. Robinson, Allen, Fenton inclines to this view, and Johnson is non-committal.

imperative. One may almost say that this involves the re-establishment of the marriage contract on its former exclusive permanent basis.

The question remains whether adultery, like death, so severs the marriage bond as to make the way open, after repudiation of the legal bond, for remarriage. The form of the statement in 19.9 seems to imply this, and even the omission of *καί γαμήση ἄλλην* by B does not escape from the strong suggestion that the possibility of remarriage is implied. How else, one may ask, could such a person be said to “commit adultery”? Indeed, under strict Old Testament law, the death penalty was to be meted out to the guilty party, leaving the innocent party in fact free to remarry.

It has been suggested that the excepting clause here is little more than the agreement with Shammai as against Hillel.⁴⁸ However, it is clear that Jesus was not entering into a discussion on Jewish casuistry, but setting out the principles of the creative will of God. Adultery is regarded as a serious sin, whether before or after formal divorce, though the records in Mark and Luke do not indicate the effects of this sin against the marriage bond. However, even there it is adultery rather than divorce in itself which is the radical denial of this ordinance of God. It does not seem inconsistent with the teaching of Jesus that in adultery, as not in divorce, there is such sundering of the divine bond as leaves the innocent party free to remarry. For the guilty party, of course, it is true that remarriage is merely the addition of sin to sin. To see this beyond the Jewish context, it is further necessary to extend this principle to include such cases where the adultery has been committed by the man.

6. Conclusion.

Marriage is a divine ordinance deriving its significance from the creative will of God “from the beginning”. It is hence good and sacred in itself, though the desire for marriage is to be subservient to the Kingdom, within which some few may be called to remain unmarried and be given the grace to do so. In marriage, a man and a woman are joined together by God to form “one flesh” – this being ideally **realised** as a physical, personal and spiritual union. Within this relationship, the differences between the sexes inherent in creation complement one another, so that husband and wife fulfil different roles though equal “in Christ”. This “one flesh” relationship is initiated and safeguarded by the marriage contract which involves a solemn covenant between the couple that they will in fact enter this relationship exclusively and for life. It is, however, especially the physical consummation that constitutes this relationship. The bond is therefore real even where it does not find its deepest expression. The “one flesh” relationship further implies monogamy.

Since marriage is far more than a legal contract, it cannot be dissolved by a legal agreement. While under Mosaic law, a certificate of divorce was permitted to protect the rights of women whose husbands were insistent on divorce, this permissive legislation was not to be taken as indicating the divine ideal. Basically, divorce is wrong, since it seeks to dissolve a bond established by God himself and since it sanctions adultery on the false assumption that the marriage bond has been so dissolved.

Marriage is dissolved by death, after which the remaining partner is free to remarry. But otherwise, and especially in the case of Christians who exemplify the divine ideal, the parties should either be reconciled or remain in singleness. This is partly in view of the imminence of the End, in view of which Christians should not be distracted by outside worries. For this reason, Christians are not obliged to resist pagan partners who want divorce – though it is not clear whether the Christian could remarry if he so desired. While marriage cannot be dissolved by legal agreement, adultery is the one sin which by its very nature violates the “one flesh” relationship. It need not lead to divorce, but may be followed by repentance and reconciliation. However, the man divorcing his wife for adultery is not guilty of causing her to commit adultery since that sin is already present. But further, the break in the marriage bond through adultery is such that, unless reconciliation follows, divorce is not the sundering of what God has joined but the acknowledgment of what human sinfulness has already broken. The innocent party may thus be seen to be free to remarry.

Nowhere more than in marriage and divorce is it more truly seen that human laws are regulated to the exigencies of human sinfulness. The ultimate truth is not that divorce is good in this or that case. Even where it may be “just” or “warranted” it is never “good”. The divine ethic must be seen in terms of the divine gospel which makes provision for that “hardness of heart” which so tragically makes divorce seem

⁴⁸ So Argyle, Filson, Cox, Branscomb.

necessary. The ultimate truth is not merely that marriage can be exclusive, permanent and monogamous, but that within the creative will of God it can be the means of the highest and best, enriching and ennobling man and woman alike.

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