

Jesus' Teaching on Divorce

P.G. Nelson

How are we to understand Jesus' teaching on divorce? May a Christian divorce his or her spouse? If so, on what grounds? May a divorced Christian remarry? These are important practical questions, to which scholars give different answers.¹ My aim in this article is to try to resolve this uncertainty by expounding Jesus' teaching as accurately as I can.²

Jesus taught his disciples about divorce in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:31–32). He subsequently explained his teaching in debate with the Pharisees (Matt. 19:3–12, Mark 10:2–12, Luke 16:14–18). I shall expound Matthew's account of this debate, which is the fullest, and refer to the other passages where appropriate. I shall also consider Paul's application of Jesus' teaching (1 Cor. 7:10–16).

In these passages, several words are used for divorce. One (*apostasion*) is used in the phrase 'certificate of divorce'. The others have broader meanings (*apoluō*, 'dismiss'; *aphiēmi*, 'dismiss/leave'; *chōrizō*, 'separate'). In the translations, I shall give the broader meanings, but underline them to show that that they refer to divorce.³

Exposition of Matthew 19:3–12

The Pharisees' first question (3)

³And Pharisees approached him, and tested him, asking, 'Is it permitted to dismiss [divorce] one's wife for every cause?'

The Pharisees' question drew Jesus into controversy. Moses had permitted a man to divorce his wife if he found in her '*erwat dābār* (Deut. 24:1). This literally means 'nakedness of a thing', and probably referred to immodesty – adultery was punished by death (Lev. 20:10, Deut. 22:22–24). In NT times, the interpretation of this phrase was much debated.⁴ Some rabbis, following Hillel, emphasized the word *dābār* ('thing'), and allowed a man to divorce his wife for almost anything. Others, following Shammai, concentrated on the word '*erwat*, and restricted the grounds of divorce to unchastity.

Jesus' answer (4–6)

⁴And he answered, saying, 'Have you not read that, from [the] beginning, the Creator "made them male and female", ⁵and said, "For this reason a man shall

¹ See, e.g., John Murray, *Divorce* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1961); William A. Heth and Gordon J. Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984; updated edn.: Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002); Jay E. Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986); H. Wayne House (ed.), *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990); Andrew Cornes, *Divorce and Remarriage* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993; rev. edn.: Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2002); David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Gordon J. Wenham, William A. Heth, and Craig S. Keener, *Remarriage after Divorce in Today's Church: 3 Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

² My exposition is based on the one I give in my book, *Jesus's Teaching on Divorce and Sexual Morality* (Latheronwheel, Caithness: Whittles, 2nd edn., 1996), Chap. 2 (distributor: bmdpgn@amservice.com).

³ For examples from secular literature, see Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*.

⁴ *Mishnah*, *Gittin* 9:10.

leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh”?⁶Consequently, they are no longer two, but one flesh. What then God has joined together, let not a human being separate.’

Jesus here quotes Genesis 1:27 and 2:24. He says that God created man and woman, and ordained that they should be united in marriage (4–5). As the resulting union is something that *God* has brought about, it is not something a human being may interfere with (6).

Jesus thus cut right across the contemporary debate on divorce. The rabbis were arguing about grounds for divorce. Jesus ruled out divorce altogether: ‘What God has joined together, let not a human being separate’ (6).

The Pharisees’ second question (7)

In ruling out divorce, Jesus was going further than Moses had done. The Pharisees recognized this, and immediately challenged him on it:

⁷They said to him, ‘Why then did Moses direct [one] to give a certificate of divorce and dismiss [her]?’

Jesus’ answer (8–9)

⁸He said to them, ‘Moses allowed you to dismiss your wives in view of your hard-heartedness, but from [the] beginning it has not been so. ⁹And I say to you that whoever dismisses his wife, except for fornication, and marries another, commits adultery.’

Jesus’ answer has two parts. First, he explains that Moses allowed men to divorce their wives because of the hardness of their hearts (8a). When God made man and woman, his intention was that there should be no divorce (8b).

Jesus then goes on to show that divorce, though permitted by Moses, actually goes against the law of Moses. If a man divorces his wife and marries another, he is committing adultery (9). He also makes his wife commit adultery when she marries again, and the man who marries her commits adultery (Matt. 5:32). The same applies if a woman divorces her husband (Mark 10:12).

As in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:31–32), Jesus allows one exception (9). If a man divorces his wife on the ground of (in Greek) *porneia* and marries another, he does not commit adultery. What *porneia* means here has been long debated.⁵ The basic meaning of the word is ‘prostitution’ (from *pornē*, ‘prostitute’, from *pernēmi*, ‘sell’). From this, it acquired the broader meaning of ‘sexual immorality’, and came to be applied to various kinds of sexual misconduct.⁶

Its meaning here is settled by Jesus’ logic. He starts from the premise that, when a man and a woman marry, *God* joins them together (4–6). This means that, if a man divorces his wife, he is still, in *God*’s eyes, joined to her. If, therefore, the man marries again, his second marriage

⁵ See commentaries and note 1.

⁶ Friedrich Hauck and Siegfried Schulz, *TDNT* 6, 579–95.

constitutes adultery (9). The only possible exception to this is if, in God's eyes, he was not joined to his first wife. His second marriage would not then constitute adultery.

There is a circumstance in which, in God's eyes, a man and woman do not become 'one' when they marry. This is when one or other partner has been unchaste before the marriage. Then, in God's eyes, when the marriage takes place, the unchaste partner is already joined to someone else. In this case, the innocent party can divorce the other and marry again without committing adultery.

The law of Moses provided for precisely this circumstance (Deut. 22:13–21). A man who found that his wife had been unchaste before he married her could have her put to death (21). This is the situation that Joseph thought he was in when Mary conceived Jesus (Matt. 1:18–25). The ancient Greek translation of the OT (the LXX) uses a cognate of *porneia* (*ekporneuō*) to describe the woman's behaviour.

The unusualness of this circumstance may explain why Jesus' exception is not mentioned by other NT writers. Matthew may have mentioned it because it explains why Joseph considered divorcing Mary when he found that she was pregnant (Matt. 1:19). Matthew is the only evangelist to refer to this.

Other ways of understanding Jesus' exception are less satisfactory. Taking *porneia* to refer to adultery (NIV) goes against Jesus' logic. A man whose wife commits adultery is still joined to her, so if he divorces her and marries another woman, he is still committing adultery. Jesus distinguished between *porneia* generally and adultery (*moicheia*) in 15:19.

Roman Catholic scholars take *porneia* to refer to incest (NJB). In the law of Moses, however, incest was a punishable offence (Lev. 20:11, 12, 14, 17, etc.). An incestuous couple could not therefore marry. Paul accordingly treated incest as a sin (1 Cor. 5:1–13), and dealt with it separately from marriage and divorce (1 Cor. 7), where he makes no reference to Jesus' exception.

The disciples' reaction (10)

The strictness of Jesus' teaching troubles his disciples:⁷

¹⁰The disciples said to him, 'If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry.'

The disciples reason that, if the law on divorce is as strict as Jesus says that it is, it would be safer not to marry.

Jesus' reply (11–12)

¹¹But he said to them, 'Not everyone can receive this word, but [only those] to whom it has been given. ¹²For there are eunuchs who were born so from a mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive [it], let him receive [it].'

⁷ Lit. 'If so is the cause', referring back to verse 3.

Jesus answers that his teaching on divorce cannot be accepted by everyone (11a). It can only be accepted by those ‘to whom it has been given’ (11b). What he means by this he goes on to explain (‘For ...’, 12). He does this by means of an illustration.⁸ He points out that some men are born eunuchs (i.e. incapable of having children), some are made eunuchs by men (i.e. by surgery), and some make themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven (i.e. they exercise self-restraint in their relations with women). In a similar way, he implies, some couples are born able to live together for life, some can be made to do this by human pressure (family or social), and some make themselves do it for the sake of the kingdom of God.

Jesus here draws a clear distinction between the standard he sets for his followers (those who make themselves stay together for the sake of the kingdom of God) and the standard that can be achieved by non-Christians (only some of whom are born able to stay together, or can be made to do so by society). He evidently intended that his very high standard should be for Christians, not for the world. For the world, he presumably regarded something like the law of Moses to be more appropriate, allowing, as it does, for the hardness of people’s hearts (8).

Paul’s application of Jesus’ teaching

Paul applies Jesus’ teaching in 1 Corinthians 7:10–16.⁹ He first addresses Christian couples:

¹⁰And to the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): a wife must not separate from [divorce] her husband ¹¹(but if indeed she has separated, she should remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband), and a husband must not dismiss/leave [divorce] his wife.

Here the apostle affirms Jesus’ rule, and tells those who have broken it to remain unmarried, or be reconciled to their partners.¹⁰

Paul then deals with the more difficult case of a mixed marriage. A marriage of this kind can arise when one of the partners of a non-Christian marriage is converted and the other is not.

¹²To the rest I say (I, not the Lord): if any [Christian] brother has an unbelieving wife, and she consents to live with him, he should not dismiss/leave her; ¹³and a wife who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, should not dismiss/leave her husband. ¹⁴For the unbelieving husband is made holy in [union with] his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy in [union with] the [Christian] brother. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. ¹⁵But if the unbeliever separates, let him or her separate. In such circumstances, the [Christian] brother or sister is not enslaved, and God has called you [to live] in peace. ¹⁶For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

⁸ I depart from other commentators here. That Jesus is using an illustration is evident from the context. The disciples were concerned about marriage, not being a eunuch (10). At least one of them was married already (Matt. 8:14). Jesus presumably used the illustration because the three cases are particularly clear-cut for eunuchs.

⁹ For a survey of other expositions of this passage, see Anthony C. Thistleton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 519–43.

¹⁰ In verse 11, *chōrīsthē* (aorist) must refer to a past event, otherwise the parenthesis countermands verse 10.

Paul advises that the believing partner should not seek a divorce, but do all he or she can to keep the marriage going (12–14, cf. 1 Pet. 3:1–2). If, however, the unbeliever wants a divorce, the believer should let him or her have it (15a). Paul says that the believer ‘is not enslaved’ in this circumstance (15b), and so should not create a conflict by trying to force the unbeliever to stay (15c), especially in the hope of making him or her a Christian (16).

Many commentators take ‘not enslaved’ to mean that the believer is not under obligation to resist the divorce. However, the verb Paul uses (*douloō*, ‘enslave’) seems too strong to describe an obligation to resist divorce. He later uses a weaker verb (*deō*) to describe the marriage bond itself (27?, 39). Moreover, Jesus addressed his teaching more to those who want a divorce than to those who do not. If Paul is saying that the partner who does not want a divorce is not under obligation to resist it, this scarcely represents such a big departure from Jesus’ teaching as to warrant his qualification, ‘I, not the Lord’.

I therefore take ‘not enslaved’ to mean that the believer is free to marry again. This certainly goes further than Jesus’ teaching, and explains Paul’s qualification, ‘I, not the Lord’. It also explains why he used the strong word, *douloō*. He evidently judged that a believer who loses a spouse through becoming a Christian could have particular difficulty in remaining unmarried, and that God would not hold remarriage against him or her, even though it would strictly be adultery.

Paul’s advice accords with Jesus’ principle, ‘Not everyone can receive this word, but only those to whom it has been given’ (Matt. 19:11). While he binds the believer to Jesus’ ruling on divorce if the unbeliever wants to stay, he does not bind the unbeliever, or the believer if the unbeliever leaves.

There are possible further references to this case in the verses that follow. In these, Paul enunciates the principle, ‘Each one should remain in the same calling in which he or she was called’ (17–24). He then applies this to the question of virgins (25–38). He says:

²⁷Are you bound to a woman? Do not seek release. Are you released from a woman? Do not seek a woman. ²⁸But if indeed you marry, you have not sinned; and if the virgin marries, she has not sinned. But such will have tribulation in the flesh, and I would spare you [that].

Some commentators take ‘bound to a woman’ to refer to betrothal, others to marriage.¹¹ His language is sufficiently general to cover both. In this case, ‘released from a woman’ could include divorce by an unbeliever (15), and ‘if you marry, you have not sinned’, subsequent remarriage.

Paul later refers to ‘unmarried women and virgins’ (34). Since he does not say ‘widows and virgins’, he presumably means ‘widows, virgins, and other unmarried women’. If so, he is including women divorced by unbelievers (15).

Paul’s advice in these verses is that the unmarried should remain unmarried if they can. This seems to have been partly conditioned by circumstances at Corinth (26, 29–31; cf. 1 Tim. 5:14). However, he also points out that an unmarried Christian can serve the Lord more single-mindedly than a married one (32–35). He gives similar advice to widows (39–40).

¹¹ See Thistleton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 565–602.

Paul elsewhere taught that church officers must be ‘a husband of one wife’ (1 Tim. 3:2, 12; Tit. 1:6), and ‘enrolled’ widows, ‘a wife of one husband’ (1 Tim 5:9). These restrictions cannot refer to polygamy or polyandry because the latter was not practised at the time. They must therefore refer to remarriage.

Summary and implications

1. Jesus taught that a Christian may only divorce a spouse for premarital unchastity. Otherwise, divorce severs what *God* has joined together, and leads to adultery. This means that a Christian should be very prayerful about whom to marry, and very prayerful in marriage. He or she should certainly not marry a non-Christian (2 Cor. 6:14–18).
2. A Christian who *has* divorced a spouse should remain unmarried or be reconciled to him or her.
3. A Christian should not divorce an unbeliever. This may involve having to endure suffering (see 1 Pet. 2:18–3:7, where 3:1–6 and 3:7 are linked to 2:18–25 by ‘Likewise’). If, however, the unbeliever wants a divorce, the Christian should agree to one. If this happens, Paul says that the Christian is free to marry again.
4. A Christian who divorced a spouse before becoming a Christian should be reconciled to him or her if this is possible. If not, the principle Paul uses (‘Not everyone can receive this word ...’) allows the Christian to marry again. When he or she broke Jesus’ rule on divorce, it was before being able to receive it. Becoming a Christian gave him or her a fresh start (John 8:11 etc.). It is only as a Christian, in any new marriage, that he or she is expected to keep the rule. This also applies to a Christian who was divorced *by* a spouse before becoming a Christian.
5. A Christian whose spouse professes to be a Christian but wants a divorce should seek help from the church (cf. Matt. 18:15–17). If after this the spouse still wants a divorce, the Christian can agree to one and is free to marry again. The spouse has acted as an unbeliever (17), so Paul’s permission applies.
6. A Christian who has been divorced by a spouse and cannot be reconciled should remain single if he or she can. This accords with the logic of Jesus’ teaching. It also allows the Christian to serve the Lord more single-mindedly.
7. A divorced Christian should not be a church leader.