

Who May Marry?

By Robert Waters



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Divorce and remarriage, in the last few decades, has been a hot issue in the church. Unfortunately, often the focal point for concern has been in the direction of who may NOT marry rather than who MAY marry. The issue is not “whom one may marry” for there certainly are some people, such as all those of the same sex, for which it would be forbidden to marry. The issue is whether one may have a marriage at all.

Each individual must look only to the Bible, the inspired word of God, for authority essential to arrive at a truthful answer to our question. No magazine or book authored by men has any biblical authority whatsoever. Lectures and sermons are beneficial only to the extent that truth is taught.

It will be impossible to understand what Jesus meant in his teaching on this issue if we fail to use good hermeneutics, which include the following rules:

1. Use common sense in studying the Bible, just as we would in studying any book.
2. Consider whom is being addressed and all surrounding circumstances, such as the intentions of the querist and the dispensation or law in effect at the time.
3. Do not interpret one statement in a manner that contradicts another statement in the Bible.
4. A correct understanding takes into account the context of the statement and all of the related material in the rest of the Bible.
5. Obscure passages may be understood in light of clearer passages on the same subject.
6. A correct understanding is what a passage says, not what someone else says it says.
7. A correct and authoritative understanding will provide sufficient evidence to be clearly understood by the honest person.
8. When two differing interpretations of a passage are presented, they cannot both be correct. One or the other

is wrong and both may be wrong. An incorrect understanding will have always violated the rules.

9. A correct understanding of the passage will violate no logical hermeneutical rules and will be in harmony with all truth.

10. Have a love for truth and a determination to find it regardless of what others may think and say.

While the New Testament is the “law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2) and the creed for the church, the Old Testament contains teaching pertaining to our subject that is not found in the New Testament. We must therefore start our search there.

The teaching of the Law was the focal point of various discussions Jesus had with Jews who were looking for any reason to kill him. Only in the Old Testament writings can we find the definition of divorce. First, Moses actually gave a command to the Jewish men informing them as to how to do divorce in a manner that would free the woman to "go be another man's wife" (Deut. 24:-1-2; Mark 10:3). Second, we see, in the book of Joshua, God's own divorce described in detail, to include confirmation of Moses' teaching to be from the Lord. God's personal example of how a divorce is to be done (Josh. 8:3, 14) is in contrast to a man's putting asunder (Matt 19:6) or attempting to dissolve a marriage his own way.

It is commonly taught that adultery breaks the marriage bond. That idea is not in harmony with the texts noted above. While adultery is contrary to the covenant known as marriage, the bond is intact until the divorce decree is written and presented, at which time the putting away should occur. From God's own example he teaches the spouse to be willing to forgive and to patiently wait for repentance. Only when it becomes apparent that repentance is not going to occur should one proceed with the divorce. Thus, by falsely asserting that adultery breaks the marriage bond, one is actually encouraging divorce.

Many tools are available to help us comprehend Jesus' teachings. Let us consider a couple of ideas that will aid us in understanding. First, in view of the fact that Jesus was known to have kept the Law perfectly, it is not possible that he could contradict an established

law, such as the instruction Moses gave regarding divorce. Second, before Jesus made any recorded statement that might be construed as referring to divorce, he made a point to be clear that what he was about to say was not to be taken as teaching contrary to the Law (see Matt. 5:17-32).

Since we know the Law taught that a divorced woman "may go be another man's wife" and that Jesus did not contradict the Law, how do we explain passages like Matthew 19:9 that say that if a man divorces his wife, except for fornication, he commits adultery? First, the older and best versions, like the ASV, never use the word "divorce" in translating the Greek word *apoluo*. This original Greek word is used 67 times in the New Testament and is usually translated to mean "put away, repudiate, send away," etc. Therefore, should we not question whether it is correct to force this word to mean divorce in Matthew 19:9? After all, if it does mean divorce then Jesus contradicted the Law and broke his promise not to do so. Is this a consequence we are willing to accept? Should we just ignore these facts and follow tradition? We should not if we want the truth. Truth is not established in our heart in this way. Truth is established by study while using good hermeneutics.

What then did Jesus say if he was not talking about divorce when he condemned the man for putting away his wife and marrying another, and at the same time noted that the one "put away" commits adultery if she marries another? We have already noted that Moses gave the definition of divorce and God confirmed it with his own personal example. The actions involved in a divorce were as follows: 1) Write a bill of divorcement; 2) put it into her hand; and 3) send her away (Deut. 24:1-2). Doesn't this last part sound like what Jesus was talking about? Let's test the idea from several angles.

First, when we look at what Jesus actually said, does it not appear to be the same thing as the last part of the definition of divorce (sending away), which must mean he was not talking about divorce that ends a marriage? The Hebrew word for "send away," found in Deuteronomy 24:2, is *shalach*. The corresponding Greek word, *apoluo*, has basically the same meaning. Unfortunately, some scholars have concluded that *apoluo* means divorce based on the context of how it

was used in one instance, Matthew 1:19, where it is said to be "used of divorce." The text speaks of Joseph's thinking of *apoluo-ing*, if you will, his woman because he thought she was with child by another man. Some say he was thinking of divorcing her. But no divorce is needed when no legal/scriptural marriage has occurred, and Mary and Joseph had yet to marry. All that was necessary was to end the relationship by repudiating or sending away. This is all Jesus had in mind when he noted the exception, or when sending away would not be "adultery against her" (Mark 10:11).

Second, we can go to other passages to get clarification for what a difficult passage actually means. Let's look more closely at Mark 10:11. In Mark's account it is clear that the adultery the man committed was not with someone in a subsequent marriage, but rather "against her" – the one that he sent away. Why was it adultery against her? It was adultery because he violated the covenant and sent her away, making it impossible for her to carry out her duties as wife. Now, this isn't to say he DISSOLVED the covenant or broke the bond. That can be done only by death or divorce.

The word "adultery" does not always have a sexual connotation. We know that Israel committed adultery against God with "stones and stocks" (Jer. 3:9). Thus, the word "adultery" is not used only with regard to sexual practices.

It is commonly taught, using Matthew 19:9, that if a man divorces his wife, unless she committed adultery, he must remain celibate. This conclusion was reached and the doctrine advanced without using good hermeneutics. Under the Old Testament, where Jesus lived and died, a man could have more than one wife. This fact is impossible to harmonize with the idea that Jesus taught that a divorced man must live celibate. And if Jesus was not saying this of a divorced MAN, then is it not reasonable to doubt whether he was teaching that a divorced WOMAN may not marry?

Some assert that Jesus did not mean for his teaching to apply at the time he spoke but that it became law after the cross. But when we look at the context very carefully it becomes apparent that he meant what he said TO those to whom he spoke. If it did not apply to them then he lied to them. If it did apply and he was speaking to the

“divorced,” rather than a woman “sent away,” he contradicted the Law and broke his promise not to do so. In view of the fact that Jesus spoke of the act he referred to as being “adultery against her,” it becomes apparent that Jesus was talking about the Jewish men’s merely “putting away” rather than freeing their wives with divorce papers in accordance with the Law.

The phrase “except it be for fornication” must be studied in light of what we now know is true, and it is really very simple. The man who ends a relationship with a woman he married illegally (and is thus committing fornication in this illegal marriage) does not commit adultery against her. In fact, he is doing the right thing by “putting away” or calling it quits. We have two examples in the New Testament of an illegal marriage [Matt. 14:4; (see also Lev. 18:16; 20:21); 1 Cor. 5:1]. Because these marriages were not legal, fornication was involved. Thus, a “putting away” was necessary and it would not be “adultery against her” nor would she commit adultery if she married another.

The apostle Paul presented some very clear teaching that should cause us to at least wonder if what we have heard and been taught is the truth. Now that we know what Jesus did not say and what he actually meant, we can become even more confident that we have the truth regarding the question “Who may marry?” when we look at what the apostle Paul taught.

First, he prophesied of some who would be guilty of what he called “forbidding to marry,” which he classified as a sinful practice when he put it in the category of “doctrines of devils” (1 Tim. 4:13). Bible students offer various explanations; but any way we slice it, a person who forbids an unmarried adult to marry is guilty of this sin. The above should serve as forewarning and put fear in the hearts of anyone who might be inclined to follow tradition and twist Paul’s instruction to harmonize with traditional teaching that breaks up legal marriages and imposes celibacy.

Second, the bulk of Paul’s teaching on marriage is in 1 Corinthians 7. He began by noting that he was answering questions that had been asked. We don’t have the questions but we could surmise the basic content based on his answers. In giving his answers his main concern appears to have been the same as he had when

he spoke of "forbidding to marry" as being contrary to God's will (1 Tim. 4:1-3). Twice he used the phrase "let them marry" (vs. 9, 36) and assured that if one who is "loosed" does marry it is not a sin ("thou hast not sinned," v 28).

Paul evidently received a question that indicated some were thinking marriage itself was not good. This he set straight in the very beginning (see verses 1-2). This is in harmony with the statement "it is not good that the man should be alone" (Gen. 2:18).

Another apparent question asked of Paul was whether one who had been married, but was currently "unmarried," might marry. Naturally, Paul's answer was in line with God's universal teaching on divorce, as found in the Law (Deut. 24:1, 2; Jer. 3:8). Paul wrote, "I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, It is good for them if they abide even as I. But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn" (1 Cor. 7:8, 9). Paul's answer was that the "unmarried" (which by definition includes the divorced) may marry. The command to "let them marry" is directed to any who might be otherwise inclined, whether due to false religion or some human tradition among those professing Christianity. To help assure his instructions were understood, Paul used a different approach:

"Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? seek not a wife. But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned..." (1 Cor. 7:27, 28).

Here Paul made the contrast between "bound" and "loosed" with the implication that one must first be bound (married) in order to be loosed (divorced). If marriage is not what does the binding, what does? If divorce does not result in being "loosed" then divorce does not do what God intended it to do. Paul also contrasted a "loosed" man with a virgin, but he said both may marry without sin. That the "bound" are married and the "loosed" divorced is evident from the context. Nowhere in any of Paul's teaching can we find so much as a hint that a divorce is not a divorce unless it is for some particular reason.

God was married to Israel (Jer. 3:14), but he divorced her for unfaithfulness and unwillingness to repent. Yet

she could marry another even though her husband (God) was still living. If what Paul said, recorded in Romans 7:1-4, teaches what some insist, then these Hebrews who had married Christ would be in an adulterous union with Christ. But the passage teaches the opposite—it teaches that these divorced Hebrews could “be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead.” So God’s previous wife, Israel, who was divorced for unfaithfulness, was later given as a bride to another—Jesus Christ. Teachers who do not see and believe that a divorce (as defined by Moses) does what God intended it to do, are forced to view the above situation as the Jews’ (God’s wife) having two husbands--both the Father and the Son--and therefore practicing bigamy. But Paul said, “For I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ” (2 Cor 11:2b). This applied to all, including Hebrews who had been married to God but were divorced.

In the text under study, Paul’s intention was to get the Hebrews to come out from under the Law of Moses and to be married to Christ or come under the law of Christ. This is the same principle involved in Paul’s charge to let the “unmarried” marry found in various places in 1 Corinthians 7. Those who could be married to Christ included the divorced that were unfaithful under the previous covenant. To this day, the Jews must come to Christ if they seek to “bring forth fruit unto God.”

The question “Who may marry?” is one of extreme importance because of the destructive effects forbidding someone to have a spouse may have on his or her life and family, not to mention what adverse effects this error can have on the evangelist, the church, and our own souls. To take away marriage is to take away God’s tool to help one “avoid fornication” (1 Cor. 7:1, 2). Paul’s negative comments, as to who has a scriptural right to marry, are limited to the following: 1) The female must have reached the “flower of her age”; 2) The male must be a “man” (1 Cor.7:36); and 3) the widow must marry “only in the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:39). Additional restrictions (other than bigamy laws) are supported only by the traditions and doctrines of men (Matt. 15:9).

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