

WHAT THE NEW TESTAMENT TEACHES ABOUT DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

by
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Evangelicals hold three main views on divorce and remarriage (fig. 1).

Figure 1. Three Main Views on Divorce and Remarriage

View	Divorce	Remarriage after Divorce
1. Never Initiate Divorce, Never Remarry	Never legitimate (to initiate)	Never legitimate (as long as one's former spouse is still alive)
2. Sometimes Divorce, Never Remarry	Sometimes legitimate (a) Only for sexual immorality or physical desertion	
3. Sometimes Divorce, Sometimes Remarry	(b) Also for other actions that break the marriage covenant like physical abuse	Legitimate when the divorce is legitimate

¹This article updates what I originally prepared for a meeting with my fellow elders of Bethlehem Baptist Church on July 21–22, 2017, in Minneapolis. I teamed up with my former colleague Jason DeRouchie, who presented what the OT teaches about divorce and remarriage. My article builds on DeRouchie's unpublished article.

Part of what made my assignment challenging is that I disagree on this issue with John Piper, who faithfully pastored Bethlehem Baptist Church for over thirty years and who is the chancellor of Bethlehem's church-based school, which is where I teach—Bethlehem College & Seminary. I love and respect John Piper immensely, and I thank God for him. (I recently dedicated a book to him on how to understand and apply the NT!) So I do not enjoy disagreeing with him, especially in the context of the church he shepherded. He read a draft of this article and shared detailed, forthright feedback. I am grateful that he welcomes hearty discussions about what the Bible teaches and that our disagreeing on this issue will not affect the partnership we share in the gospel and Bethlehem's Elder Affirmation of Faith. After I sent him a draft of this article, he replied, "The things we love, and live for, and would die for, are so great this could not overthrow all those riches."

Thanks to my wife, Jenni, and to friends who examined a draft of this essay and shared helpful feedback, especially Bryan Blazosky, Craig Blomberg, Jason DeRouchie, Rob Green, Wayne Grudem, Colin Hamer, Bill Heth, David Instone-Brewer, Craig Keener, Matt Klem, Jason Meyer, Jim Newheiser, Joe Rigney, Sam Storms, Mark Strauss, Brian Tabb, and Justin Taylor.

I should qualify figure 1 in three ways:

1. These are three *main* views. There are other variations.
2. When framing these three views on remarriage, I say “remarriage *after divorce*” (column 3 in fig. 1) because evangelical academics agree that one may remarry after one’s former spouse dies (Rom 7:2; 1 Cor 7:39). The debate is whether it is ever legitimate to remarry *after divorce*. According to views 1 and 2 in figure 1, only death can nullify a marriage covenant.
3. I could add a fourth view: *Divorce is almost always legitimate, and remarriage after divorce is almost always legitimate*. I am not including it because I am not aware of evangelical academics who support it, but (unfortunately, I think) it is the functional view of many professing evangelicals.

It may be helpful to highlight some proponents of the three views in figure 1:

View 1. The most influential evangelical proponent of the first view (never initiate divorce, never remarry) is John Piper.²

View 2. The most influential evangelical proponent of the second view (sometimes divorce, never remarry) used to be Bill Heth but is now probably Gordon Wenham.³

²John Piper, “Divorce and Remarriage: A Position Paper,” *Desiring God*, 21 July 1986, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/divorce-remarriage-a-position-paper>; Piper, *What Jesus Demands from the World*, in *The Collected Works of John Piper*, ed. David Mathis and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 6:731–51 (chs. 40–42). See also J. Carl Laney, *The Divorce Myth* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1981); Laney, “No Divorce and No Remarriage,” in *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*, ed. H. Wayne House, Spectrum Multiview Books (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 15–54 (also 130–34, 197–202, 249–53).

³Heth was the most scholarly proponent of this view since the 1980s. Everything he published between 1982 and 1997 defended this view, and John Piper cites Heth as an evangelical scholar who supports his view on remarriage. See especially Gordon J. Wenham and William A. Heth, *Jesus and Divorce: Towards an Evangelical Understanding of New Testament Teaching*, 2nd ed. (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1997); William A. Heth, “Divorce but No Remarriage,” in *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*, ed. H. Wayne House, Spectrum Multiview Books (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 73–129 (also 55–60, 203–9, 254–61). Wenham has continued to defend this view. See Gordon J. Wenham, “Does the New Testament Approve Remarriage after Divorce?” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 6.1 (2002): 30–45; Wenham, “No Remarriage after Divorce,” in *Remarriage after Divorce in Today’s Church: Three Views*, ed. Mark L. Strauss, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 19–42, 54–56 (also 85–89, 100, 121–25, 136).

Heth now rejects the second view and defends the third view in fig. 1. He tells the story explaining why in this article: William A. Heth, “Jesus on Divorce: How My Mind Has Changed,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 6.1 (2002): 4–29. He summarizes his view in a debate-book in which he opposes his mentor Gordon Wenham, with whom he previously coauthored a book on the issue (1st ed. 1984, 2nd ed. 1997): William A. Heth, “Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion,” in *Remarriage after*

View 3. Nearly all evangelical academics hold a version of the third view (sometimes divorce, sometimes remarriage). Bill Heth calls it the “majority” view—a label that occurs repeatedly in the tables below. He calls the first and second views the “minority” view.⁴ I hold the third view.

Among those who hold the third view, there are two main views:

1. Divorce is legitimate only for sexual immorality or physical desertion.⁵
2. Others (including me) hold that what constitutes grounds for a legitimate divorce is not limited to only sexual immorality or physical desertion but also includes other actions that break the marriage covenant such as physical abuse.⁶

Some describe their view as holding to only two grounds for divorce (sexual immorality and desertion) but then (sometimes tentatively) define *desertion* essentially as breaking the marriage covenant, so they include actions such as physical abuse or material neglect.⁷ Some who hold that there are grounds for divorce beyond sexual immorality and physical desertion include more subjective grounds such as a person’s failing to love their spouse with sufficient emotional support.⁸ I think the grounds are more

Divorce in Today’s Church: Three Views, ed. Mark L. Strauss, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 59–83, 96–100 (also 43–47, 127–31).

⁴Heth, “Jesus on Divorce,” 5–12.

⁵E.g., Westminster Confession of Faith 24.5–6; John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 583–633, 806–12.

⁶A version of this view is what Bethlehem Baptist Church adopted in 1989, though some of the elders may not personally hold that view as a matter of conscience: “Divorce may be permitted when a spouse deserts the relationship, commits adultery, or is dangerously abusive” (“A Statement on Divorce and Remarriage in the Life of Bethlehem Baptist Church,” *Desiring God*, May 2, 1989, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/a-statement-on-divorce-remarriage-in-the-life-of-bethlehem-baptist-church>). See also David Clyde Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 188–204.

⁷E.g., Jim Newheiser, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage: Critical Questions and Answers* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017), 264: “Some cases of abuse may equate to abandonment by an unbeliever.” Also John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life, A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 780–81; Sam Storms, *Tough Topics 2: Biblical Answers to 25 Challenging Questions* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2015), 228–31; John Jefferson Davis, *Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today*, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2016), 100–101.

⁸E.g., I think David Instone-Brewer could have expressed himself more carefully in his article “What God Has Joined: What Does the Bible Really Teach about Divorce?,” *Christianity Today* 51.10 (2007): 26–29. (He expresses himself much more carefully in his two books on divorce and remarriage: David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002]; Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church: Biblical Solutions*

objective than that. But even when the grounds are more objective (e.g., when one spouse is physically abusing the other), a church's elders must ask God for wisdom as they consider each situation on a case-by-case basis.

The rest of this essay attempts to concisely exegete all the texts in the NT that directly address divorce and remarriage. But first, three introductory notes:

1. The best way I know how to concisely exegete a passage is to phrase it, so I include a phrase diagram of each passage before commenting on it.⁹
2. After the phrase diagrams in each section, I include Bill Heth's table that contrasts the majority view (view 3 in fig. 1) and minority view (views 1–2 in fig. 1). Heth concisely highlights the major exegetical and theological differences.
3. This is a polemical essay. Instead of focusing on the main idea in each passage (e.g., how an expositional sermon would), I focus on exegeting each passage with reference to the debate regarding divorce and remarriage. (The main idea of the passages is not that God sometimes permits divorce and remarriage!) And while I care deeply about how this applies to practical and pastoral issues, I focus on principles. There are too many types of situations to try to address them all here specifically.¹⁰

for *Pastoral Realities* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003].) I share some of the concern John Piper expresses when he responds to Instone-Brewer's article (but for reasons I share below, I disagree with many of Piper's exegetical arguments): John Piper, "Tragically Widening the Grounds of Legitimate Divorce: A Response to Instone-Brewer's Article in *Christianity Today*," *Desiring God*, 18 October 2007, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/tragically-widening-the-grounds-of-legitimate-divorce>. When he replied to Piper, Instone-Brewer conceded that he should have expressed himself more carefully: "John Piper Corrects Misconceptions about My *Christianity Today* Article," *Questions and Problems about Divorce and Remarriage: Biblical Perspectives on Real Life Situations, by a Pastor and Scholar*, October 22, 2007, <http://divorceremarriage.blogspot.com/2007/10/john-piper-corrects-misconceptions.html>.

⁹A phrase diagram is a type of an argument diagram, which is a figure that graphically discerns and displays a text's logical flow of thought by dividing up the text into propositions and phrases and then noting logical relationships between them. A phrase diagram indents clauses and phrases above or below what they modify and adds labels that explain how the propositions and phrases logically relate. The below phrase diagrams are in English, but I first phrased the Greek text and then mirrored that in the ESV as much as possible. For an introduction to phrasing, see ch. 5 in Andrew David Naselli, *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017), 121–61. I prepared all of the below phrase diagrams using www.Biblearc.com.

¹⁰For some wise pastoral advice, see Newheiser, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage*, 239–94; John MacArthur, *The Divorce Dilemma: God's Last Word on Lasting Commitment* (Leominster, England: Day One, 2009), esp. 86–97.

1. MATTHEW 5:31–32 AND 19:3–12

Figure 2. Phrase Diagram of Matthew 5:31–32¹¹

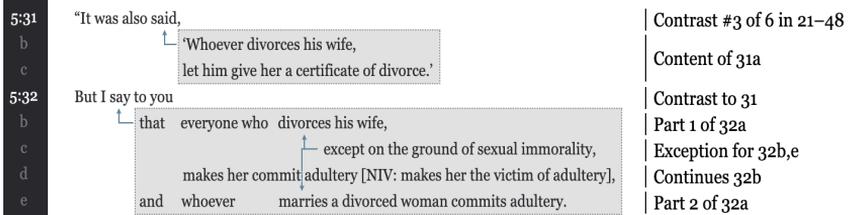
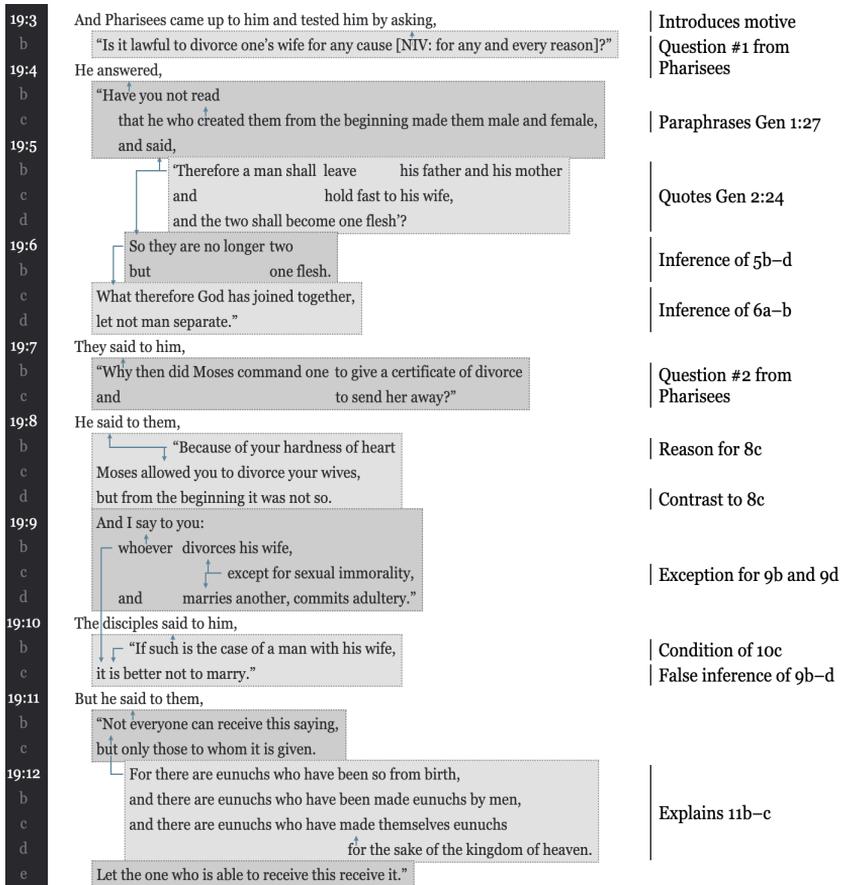


Figure 3. Phrase Diagram of Matthew 19:3–12



¹¹Scripture quotations are from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

Figure 4. Heth on the Majority vs. Minority Views on Matthew 5:32 and 19:3–12¹²

	Majority View	Minority View
Matt 5:32	The exception, applied in a legal way, qualifies Jesus' prophetic pronouncement (i.e., a wisdom saying that should be read as a prophetic and somewhat hyperbolic summons to an ideal like the preceding sayings about anger and lust). The exception reflects the language of Deut 24:1 and identifies a valid divorce. For first-century Jewish readers, a valid divorce by definition included the right to remarry.	This saying employs a legal ordinance form similar to OT casuistic law (cf. Luke 16:18a). This antithesis cannot be read in light of the first two. Jesus sets before the disciples a <i>standard</i> (as opposed to an <i>ideal</i>) that he wants them to keep. The exception restricts the statement "causes her to commit adultery." It is tautologous: if one's wife has already committed adultery, then the husband who divorces her does not make her commit adultery. She has made herself one [i.e., an adulteress] already. The question of freedom to remarry after a lawful divorce is not addressed.
Jesus' Orientation toward Deut 24:1 in Matt 19/Mark 10	Matthew sees Jesus as explaining the meaning of the law. Deuteronomy's "some indecency" = Matthew's "sexual immorality." In the OT, divorce for "some indecency" identified a legally valid divorce. Valid divorces always included the right to remarry. Jesus <i>demotes</i> Moses' concession in Deuteronomy and subordinates it to Genesis, but valid divorces are God's permissive will for some innocent victims of divorce.	Jesus <i>opposes</i> the way the Pharisees employed Deut 24:1 and contrasts divorce with God's will "from the beginning." Jesus would neither interpret nor abrogate something Moses never legislated. Jesus prohibited what Moses permitted; he did not permit what Moses prohibited. So Jesus neither divinely interprets nor abrogates Deut 24:1. It was a <i>concession</i> to human sinfulness in the OT era and contrary to God's will all along.
Matt 19:9 and the syntax of the exception clause	Exceptions are precisely exceptions. That the clause modifies both the divorce action and the remarriage action is determined more by the concept of justifiable divorce than by Greek grammar. The clause, either spoken by Jesus himself (Carson, Blomberg) or supplied by Matthew under the Spirit's inspiration (Stein, Keener, Hawthorne), clearly justifies divorce for immorality and permits remarriage. True, marriage must <i>not</i> be dissolved. But if dissolved by persistent sexual	The placement of the clause after "divorces" but before "and remarries" argues that Jesus permitted divorce for marital unfaithfulness but not also remarriage. In a culture that demanded the wife be divorced for immorality, the exception clause relieves the man of the responsibility for the divorce and its consequences. Understands Matthew's exception in light of the unqualified form of Jesus' sayings in Mark, Luke, and Paul (i.e., remarriage after any divorce results in adultery) and the Gen

¹²Heth, "Jesus on Divorce," 9–11. (This table and the others like it below are quoting Heth.)

	Majority View	Minority View
	immorality, the marriage covenant is violated.	2:24 “kinship” nature of the marriage relationship. ¹³
Meaning of “divorce” (<i>apolyō</i>)	Valid divorces always included the right to remarry. Both Jewish and Roman cultural contexts permitted, yea even required, divorce for adultery and remarriage could naturally follow. Thus Matthew’s readers would assume that the divorce Jesus permits for immorality must be the same kind of divorce that Jesus’ contemporaries practiced: it included the right to remarry. If it meant separation or legal divorce only, without the right to remarry, then Matthew’s readers would not have readily recognized this semantic shift without further explanation.	Evidently the bill of divorce does not dissolve the marriage since Jesus states that remarriage amounts to adultery (Matt 5:32b; 19:9b). Matthew’s Jesus rejects the Pharisees’ proof-text for their “remarriage-assumed” view (Deut 24:1) and instead appeals to Gen 2:24 (with its kinship understanding of marriage) as the basis for his views. Three factors suggest that Jesus’ reference to “divorce” does not sanction remarriage: (1) the “one flesh” kinship concept of marriage; (2) the probably authentic longer reading of Matt 19:9 (“and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery” [cf. Matt 5:32b]); and (3) Jesus’ objection to the disciples’ objection in vv. 10–12.
Matt 19:10–12 & the “eunuch saying”	Even with the exception, Jesus’ position is more daunting than Shammai’s. “This saying” (v. 11) refers to the disciples’ objection in v. 10 that “it is better not to marry.” Jesus recognizes that God enables some to remain celibate for the sake of advancing the claims and interests of God’s kingdom (cf. 1 Cor 7:7, 25–38).	“This saying” (v. 11) refers to Jesus’ difficult word against divorce and remarriage in v. 9. “Those to whom it is given” are the faithful disciples (as opposed to Pharisees and outsiders [cf. 13:11–12]) that Jesus encourages (v. 12) to embrace his difficult word that they should remain single after divorce even for sexual immorality.
How do Jesus & Shammai differ?	Jesus is more radical than Shammai. Jewish (and Roman) law <i>mandated</i> divorce for sexual immorality, but Jesus only <i>permits</i> it. This means that broken marriages <i>may</i> still be restored.	Jesus is <i>much</i> more radical than Shammai. Shammai <i>mandated</i> divorce for sexual immorality, but Jesus <i>prohibits</i> most divorces and remarriage after divorce for <i>porneia</i> (i.e., adultery, bestiality, incest, sodomy, homosexuality, etc.)

1.1. Jesus Permits but Does Not Require Divorce for Πορνεία

In Matthew 5:31–32 and 19:3–12, Jesus addresses what was a contemporary controversy—namely, how Jewish teachers at the time

¹³That is not how John Piper argues. See §1.3.1 below.

understood “some indecency” in Deuteronomy 24:1. (“Some indecency” translates the Hebrew phrase עֶרְוַת דְּבָרִים—which a more form-based translation could render “nakedness of a thing.”) What the Pharisees ask in Matthew 19:3 confirms that the issue regarded no-fault divorce: “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife *for any cause* [κατὰ πᾶσαν αἰτίαν]?”—or as the NIV nicely puts it, “for any and every reason?”¹⁴ At that time the Jews debated among themselves which of two rabbis (both Pharisees) to follow on divorce—Shammai (c. 50 BC–AD 30) or Hillel (c. 110–10 BC).¹⁵

- *Shammai’s view (a minority Jewish view at the time)*. If a wife commits πορνεία, then the husband must divorce his wife and may remarry. “The Shammaite school (who disagreed with the Hillelites on hundreds of other issues) said that ‘a cause of indecency’ [Deut 24:1] was a single phrase with a single meaning: it referred to ‘nothing except indecency’ (i.e., adultery).”¹⁶
- *Hillel’s view (the majority Jewish view at the time)*. In addition to Shammai’s view, a husband may divorce for “any cause” (Matt 19:3) and may remarry. “The Hillelite school argued that the phrase ‘a cause of indecency’ (Deut 24:1) referred to two grounds for divorce: ‘indecency’ (i.e., adultery) and ‘a cause,’ which they interpreted as ‘any cause.’”¹⁷ This view interprets “some indecency” in Deuteronomy 24:1 so broadly that the grounds for divorce could be as carnal as the husband’s finding a better-looking woman or as trivial as the wife’s burning a meal.¹⁸

Both views required divorce for πορνεία and permitted remarriage. Among the Jews, “Everyone agreed that adultery and other similarly weighty offenses—e.g., abuse, cruelty, humiliation, persistent refusal to provide requisite food or clothing, willful conjugal or emotional neglect (cf. Exod 21:10–11)—were clear cause for divorce and required the punishment of the offending party.”¹⁹

What Jesus teaches in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 is stricter than both Shammai and Hillel, which is why his disciples reply in 19:10, “It is

¹⁴Cf. J. William Johnston, *The Use of Πᾶς in the New Testament*, Studies in Biblical Greek 11 (New York: Lang, 2004), 132–33.

¹⁵See Craig S. Keener, *...And Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teaching of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 38–40.

¹⁶David Instone-Brewer, “Divorce,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 213.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸The Pharisee Josephus, who was himself divorced, held Hillel’s view (*Ant.* 4.253).

¹⁹Rikk E. Watts, “Mark,” in *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 2034. Cf. Gordon P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics as Developed from Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994); Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*.

better not to marry”!²⁰ Both Shammai and Hillel *required* divorce for *πορνεία*, but Jesus only *permits* it.²¹ Thus, when a spouse has a ground for divorce, that does not mean that they must divorce. To the contrary, since marriage is a sacred union, a couple should do everything they can to avoid separating that union. Andreas Köstenberger summarizes how Jesus differs from Shammai and Hillel (see fig. 5):

Figure 5. Differences of Views between the Schools of Shammai and Hillel and Jesus concerning Divorce²²

Differences of Views	Shammai	Hillel	Jesus
OT background texts for marriage	Deut 24:1–4	Deut 24:1–4	Gen 1:27; 2:24
Meaning of <i>porneia</i>	Immodest behavior or sexual immorality	Any instance where a wife did something displeasing to her husband	Immoral behavior on the part of the wife, including, but not restricted to, adultery (majority view)
Divorce for <i>porneia</i>	Required	Required	Permitted
The application of the standard for divorce and remarriage	Men only	Men only	Both men and women

²⁰Heth, “Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion,” 72: “The disciples, like nearly everyone else at the time, would have held to the Hillelite position, not the Shammaite position. They had just heard Jesus say that Hillelite ‘any cause’ divorces were illegitimate and that whoever remarries after such an invalid divorce commits adultery! This would have been shocking to first-century Jews, suggesting that Jesus’ view is stricter than Shammai’s—the radical love of God does unexpected things, like forgiving the seemingly unforgivable—and adequately explains the disciples’ incredulous reaction in Matthew 19:10 to Jesus’ saying in verse 9.”

²¹Contra William R. G. Loader, “Did Adultery Mandate Divorce? A Reassessment of Jesus’ Divorce Logia,” *New Testament Studies* 61 (2015): 67–78. John R. W. Stott is more persuasive (“The Biblical Teaching on Divorce,” *Churchman* 85 [1971]: 170): “Divorce for immorality is permissible, not mandatory. Jesus did not teach that the innocent party must divorce an unfaithful partner, still less that sexual unfaithfulness *ipso facto* dissolves the marriage. He did not even encourage divorce for unfaithfulness. His whole emphasis was on the permanence of marriage and on the inadmissibility of divorce and remarriage. He added the exceptive clause to indicate that divorce and remarriage because of sexual infidelity is alone not tantamount to adultery. His purpose was not to encourage divorce for this reason, but to forbid it for every other reason.” See also MacArthur, *Divorce Dilemma*, 22.

²²This table is by Andreas J. Köstenberger, with David W. Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 229.

*1.2. Remarriage Is Always Legitimate When the
Divorce Was Legitimate*

Both Shammai and Hillel permitted remarriage, as did all known Jewish and Greco-Roman views at that time.²³ If Jesus intended to forbid remarriage, then it is highly likely he would have forbidden it *explicitly* without any exceptions because everyone—Jew and Gentile—assumed that remarriage is legitimate when the divorce is legitimate. Divorce in the Jewish and Greco-Roman historical-cultural contexts always included the right to remarry.²⁴ The standard wording on rabbinic divorce certificates, explains Instone-Brewer, was

“You are allowed to marry any man you wish.” This wording can be traced through Jewish divorce certificates and marriage certificates that have survived from as far back as the fifth century B.C.E., and it can then be traced through Babylonian marriage certificates and law codes back as far as the fourteenth century B.C.E.²⁵

This historical-cultural context is one of the main factors that convinced Heth to change from view 2 (sometimes divorce, never remarriage) to view 3 (sometimes divorce, sometimes remarriage—see fig. 1).²⁶ This is not an instance of some alleged historical-cultural context controversially saying the opposite of what the texts transparently say and *eliminating* those texts. Instead, this historical-cultural context *illuminates* those texts.²⁷

²³Heth, “Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion,” 98, n. 20: “The only exception would be a Roman law and a Jewish practice that forbade an adulterer from marrying the one with whom he or she had committed adultery, but not someone else.” For a concise summary of divorce and remarriage in the ancient Near Eastern, Greco-Roman, and Jewish worlds, see Edwin M. Yamauchi, “Divorce,” in *Dictionary of Daily Life in Biblical and Post-Biblical Antiquity*, ed. Edwin M. Yamauchi and Marvin R. Wilson, 4 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2014–2016), 2:116–27. When Yamauchi explains what Jesus teaches about divorce, he notes, “In the Jewish world divorce always implied the right to remarry” (2:115).

²⁴Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, 28–32. See also Wayne Grudem, *Christian Ethics: An Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 780.

²⁵Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, 29.

²⁶See the section “‘Divorce’ in the First Century Was Synonymous with the Right to Remarry,” in Heth, “Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion,” 67–68. Heth argues, “Simple separation without the possibility of remarriage was unheard-of in both Jewish and Roman marriage law. Though this became the traditional Catholic view of Jesus’ teaching and is a view also held by a minority of evangelicals, there were, in fact, no religious sects in the first century that prohibited remarriage after divorce. The whole purpose of obtaining a divorce was to be freed up to remarry. This is what the Jewish bill of divorce made abundantly clear: ‘Behold, you are free to marry any man’” (67).

²⁷Cf. “Historical-Cultural Context” in Naselli, *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament*, 162–87.

1.3. Πορνεία = Sexual Immorality (Matt 5:32; 19:9)

Παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας (“except on the ground of sexual immorality” [5:32]) and μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ (“except for sexual immorality” [19:9]) indicate a legitimate ground for divorce. Πορνεία commonly referred to sexual immorality in general—that is, any kind of immoral sex.²⁸ R. T. France translates πορνεία in this context as “sexual unfaithfulness.”²⁹ Don Carson refers to πορνεία as “marital unfaithfulness,” which is “a larger category than adultery, and includes homosexuality and all other sexual indecency.”³⁰ “It is an inclusive term which refers to all sexual irregularity. For a married couple, it involves sexual marital unfaithfulness.”³¹

1.3.1. Πορνεία Does Not Refer Exclusively to Premarital Sex in Betrothal

In the context of a statement about marriage, πορνεία refers primarily to adultery. John Piper argues that we should read πορνεία in Matthew 5:32 like this: “Whoever divorces his wife—not including, of course, the case of fornication [πορνεία] between betrothed couples—and marries another, commits adultery.”³² In other words, in the exception

²⁸Instone-Brewer, “Divorce,” 215: “The term *porneia* and its cognates are used in the NT to refer to visiting a prostitute (1 Cor 6:13–15, 18), incest (1 Cor 5:1), general sexual sin by a married person (1 Cor 7:2), use of cultic prostitutes (Rev 2:20–21) and the sin of the ‘whore of Babylon’ (Rev 17:2, 4; 18:3; 19:2). The most common meaning is general ‘sexual immorality’ (e.g., Acts 15:20; Eph 5:3; Col 3:5). This family of words is used outside the NT with the same wide range of meanings.” See also Thomas R. Edgar, “Divorce and Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion,” in *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*, ed. H. Wayne House, Spectrum Multiview Books (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 162–87; Keener, *And Marries Another*, 28–33; MacArthur, *Divorce Dilemma*, 23–24, 47–48.

²⁹R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 209.

³⁰D. A. Carson, *God with Us: Themes from Matthew* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1985), 118.

³¹D. A. Carson, *Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World: An Exposition of Matthew 5–10* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 48–49. See also D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *Matthew–Mark*, 2nd ed., Expositor’s Bible Commentary 9 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 468; Stott, “The Biblical Teaching on Divorce,” 170; Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 200; Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 190. Cf. David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 171–72: “It seems most likely that [with the word πορνεία] Jesus has in mind any sort of sexual activity not involving one’s spouse.”

³²Piper, *What Jesus Demands from the World*, 6:743–44. For a presentation of the betrothal view that does not explicitly defend it but instead argues that it is exegetically respectable, see David W. Jones, “The Betrothal View of Divorce and Remarriage,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 165 (2008): 68–85.

clauses in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, *πορνεία* refers to premarital sex when a person is betrothed according to the first-century Jewish custom (i.e., what Joseph thought Mary was guilty of).

Piper's view has at least three problems:

1. It seems to commit the exegetical fallacy of appealing to unknown or unlikely meanings.³³ Piper's argument hinges on Matthew's using *πορνεία* in a peculiar way that differs from its standard usage in the rest of the NT and other contemporaneous literature. "If anything, *porneia* should mean *more* than adulterous infidelity."³⁴
2. *Πορνεία* refers to a sin that occurs in the context of marriage (not just betrothal) because the context of Matthew 19:3–12 is divorce and remarriage. More specifically, the context of Matthew 19:3–12 concerns marriage *and not betrothal*.³⁵
3. The context of Matthew 19:3–12 concerns the first-century Jewish controversy regarding no-fault divorce, and everyone assumed that adultery is a ground for divorce (see §1.1).³⁶

Bill Heth, who formerly championed the "sometimes divorce, never remarriage" view (see fig. 1), later conceded that his arguments were unconvincing. He highlights a principle that applies to the betrothal

³³See D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 37–41.

³⁴Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 467.

³⁵In an email to the author on February 22, 2018 (quoted with permission), John Piper argues that one may translate the phrases *παρεκτός λόγου πορνείας* (Matt 5:32) and *μη ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ* (Matt 19:9) as "excluding [the case of] fornication," which he paraphrases, "leaving out of account the case of sexual unfaithfulness during, say, betrothal." Thus, the exception clauses are Jesus's way of saying, "I am *not* talking about sexual sin that involves a kind of 'divorce' as, for example, in Matt 1:19—'Joseph resolved to *divorce* her quietly.'" So when someone objects to Piper's view that Matt 5:32 and 19:19 are dealing with *marriage* and not betrothal or any other kind of non-marital separation, Piper responds that that is the very point of the exception clauses. Piper argues that the presence of Matt 1:19 in the Gospel according to Matthew shows that the point is not gratuitous.

In an email to the author on July 18, 2017 (quoted with permission), Bill Heth argues, "The Mishnah records what may be an exaggerated example of Hillel's view illustrating the husband's total freedom in the matter of divorce when it says the husband can divorce 'Even if she spoiled his dish' (*Gittin* 9:10). Yet no *betrothed* woman would be fixing her 'husband' a meal in an as-yet-to-be-consummated marriage, for they are not living together. This larger rabbinic debate concerned married couples in general, not some subset situation like betrothal. The only way the betrothal view will work is if we *assume* the exception clause refers to that situation against contextual evidence that suggests marriage in general."

³⁶In an email to the author on February 22, 2018 (quoted with permission), John Piper responds that everyone *except Jesus* assumed that adultery is a ground for divorce. Piper argues that Jesus was radically out of step with his day.

view of πορνεία: “I might also add from my own experience that holding fast to one or two inaccurate concepts means that several others will have to be misconstrued in order to bring coherence to the whole.”³⁷ Defining πορνεία as premarital sex in betrothal is holding fast to an inaccurate concept that skews one’s overall position on divorce and remarriage.

1.3.2. Πορνεία Is Not Limited to Immoral Sexual Intercourse

In Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, πορνεία refers primarily to physical adultery, but there are not sufficient lexical grounds for concluding that πορνεία must always refer only to immoral sexual intercourse. Further, there are theological grounds for not limiting πορνεία to immoral sexual intercourse.

Lexically, πορνεία is the broadest term to describe sexual sin. For example, “In the Pauline writings the word group [πορνεύω, πορνεία, πόρνη, πόρνος, ἐκπορνεύω] evidently denotes any kind of illegitimate sexual activity.”³⁸

Theologically, there is a figurative aspect of πορνεία: “There are numerous passages where, in imitation of the Heb., πορνεύω and its cognates are used fig. of unfaithfulness to God, who is portrayed as a husband to Israel.... It is thus not primarily the sexual intercourse that shocks the prophets, but the absolute lack of personal faithfulness.”³⁹

Consequently, πορνεία does not refer only to immoral sexual intercourse. It can also refer to sexual sins that do not involve intercourse. For example, although the NT authors who use the word πορνεία obviously were not thinking of being addicted to internet pornography, by implication πορνεία can *apply* to that—similar to how “Do not get drunk with wine” (Eph 5:18) also implies that you should not get drunk “with beer, whiskey, rum, vodka, or champagne.”⁴⁰ Indulging in pornography is a type of sexual immorality that could be grounds for divorce.⁴¹ Churches and their elders should deal with such situations on

³⁷Heth, “Jesus on Divorce,” 5.

³⁸Moisés Silva, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 2nd ed., 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 4:115.

³⁹Ibid., 4:112. See Raymond C. Ortlund, *God’s Unfaithful Wife: A Biblical Theology of Spiritual Adultery*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

⁴⁰And Eph 5:18 further implies that you should not use any substances—including ones that do not have alcohol in them (e.g., cocaine or marijuana)—in a way that “cause you to lose control of your senses and natural inhibitions” (Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011], 19–20).

⁴¹See Thomas R. Schreiner, “Is Pornography Use Ever Grounds for Divorce?” *9Marks Journal* (2018): 137–40. Cf. R. C. Sproul, *Matthew*, St. Andrew’s Expositional

a case-by-case basis.⁴²

1.4. *Jesus Does Not Qualify Πορνεία with the Words Repeated or Unrepentant*

In 2009 Bethlehem Baptist Church's elders articulated this position: "Divorce may be permitted when a spouse decisively and physically deserts the relationship; commits repeated, unrepentant adultery; or is guilty of protracted, unrepentant life-endangerment."⁴³ I agree with that sentence, but I think it could wrongly imply that divorce is illegitimate in certain instances when it is biblically permissible. In particular, there is insufficient scriptural warrant to require that divorce is legitimate only when the adultery is *repeated* and *unrepentant*.

The only possible scriptural warrant I am aware of is assuming that "hardness of heart" in Matthew 19:8 and Mark 10:5 refers to Jeremiah 3 and 4:4.⁴⁴ That is possible but difficult to prove, and such a tenuous connection is insufficient for narrowing what constitutes grounds for divorce.

Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 561: "Sexual immorality' is broader than pure adultery. For instance, I believe that addiction to pornography violates this passage and is grounds for divorce." See Luke Gilkerson, "Pornography Use as Grounds for Divorce" (MA thesis, Reformed Theological Seminary, 2015). From the abstract: "This thesis demonstrates (1) Jesus gives grounds for divorce in cases of πορνεία (*porneia*) in Matthew 19:9, (2) the various ways commentators have attempted to define *porneia*, (3) rightly understood, *porneia* essentially means unrepentant sexual rebellion, and (4) when the nature of modern pornography is properly understood, especially against the background of first century prostitution in the Roman Empire, it becomes clear obsessive pornography use can most certainly be considered *porneia* in its own right." See also Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 775–76; David Murray, "Divorce for Pornography?," *Head, Heart, Hand: Informing Minds, Moving Hearts, Directing Hands*, 9 September 2015, <http://headhearhand.org/blog/2015/09/09/divorce-for-pornography/>; Newheiser, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage*, 240–41. For a more tentative approach, see Storms, *Tough Topics 2*, 231–32. Cf. Kyle Harper, "Porneia: The Making of a Christian Sexual Norm," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131 (2012): 363–83.

⁴²This may raise practical questions about how to discern when a spouse's πορνεία apart from sexual intercourse may be a ground for divorce. It is a wisdom issue—just like excommunication for such behavior is a wisdom issue. For example, a professing Christian man who unrepentantly refuses to stop indulging in pornography and visiting strip clubs is in a different category than a professing Christian man who browses a sports website and accidentally sees a pornographic image and does not immediately turn away but later repents. Just like churches do not ordinarily excommunicate a church member for indulging in pornography (though they may), indulging in pornography should not ordinarily be the sole ground for divorce (though it could be). (See the final paragraph in §1.4.)

⁴³*Bethlehem Relational Commitments* (Minneapolis: Bethlehem Baptist Church, October 6, 2009).

⁴⁴Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, 181: "Divorce is allowable—if there is a stubborn refusal to stop committing adultery. It is not certain that Jesus was teaching this.... It is based on the assumption that 'hardness of heart' is a reference to Jeremiah 4:4 and to chapter 3, for which 4:4 acts as a summary."

That reading also does not harmonize with how the Gospel of Matthew portrays Joseph's planning to divorce Mary (Matt 1:19). Martin Luther argues,

No one should be compelled to take back a public prostitute or an adulterer if he does not want to do so or is so disgusted that he cannot do so. We read (Matt. 1:19) that although Joseph was a pious man, he was not willing to take Mary, his betrothed wife, when he saw that she was pregnant; and he is praised for being "resolved to divorce her quietly" instead of registering a complaint against her and having her executed, as he had a right to do.⁴⁵

When a spouse commits *πορνεία* and genuinely repents and asks the spouse they sinned against to forgive them, the sinned-against spouse must forgive the repentant spouse. Ideally that couple will not divorce, and the sinned-against spouse will pursue the repentant spouse with the same unselfish loyal love with which (a) Hosea loved Gomer the whore, (b) Yahweh loved Israel the whore, and (c) Jesus loves the church. But Jesus does not say *πορνεία* must happen *repeatedly* in order for it to qualify as a ground for divorce. Nor does Jesus say that the spouse guilty of *πορνεία* must be *unrepentant* in order for their action to qualify as a ground for divorce. (And the word *unrepentant* assumes it is possible for the non-adulterous spouse to accurately discern whether the adulterous spouse is genuinely repentant.) Depending on the circumstances, divorce may be the unfortunate consequence of a spouse's (even repentant) covenant-breaking sin. I agree with Newheiser:

I do not believe the innocent spouse can be compelled (e.g., under the threat of church discipline) not to exercise the right to divorce on the grounds of adultery, even if the adulterer claims to be repentant. Wronged spouses who refuse to fully forgive usually act this way because they are not convinced that the repentance is genuine (e.g., this has happened on multiple occasions). In addition, the sin might have been so serious (e.g., rape, molesting a child) that they do not wish to pursue reconciliation. Or they may have decided that they no longer wish to remain married to a person who has callously broken the covenant or to live with the consequences of the sin (e.g., a sexually transmitted disease). Sometimes forgiven sin still has consequences (Gal. 6:6–7). The consequence could be the end of a marriage. Wronged spouses, however, must guard their hearts. Bitterness and hatred are always sinful (Eph. 4:31–32).⁴⁶

If *πορνεία* does not have to be repeated and unrepentant in order to be a ground for divorce and if *πορνεία* is not limited to immoral sexual intercourse (see §1.3.2), does that mean that a spouse's indulging

⁴⁵Martin Luther, *The Sermon on the Mount (Sermons) and the Magnificat*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Luther's Works 21 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), 96–97.

⁴⁶Newheiser, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage*, 252. Cf. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 770–71, n. 3.

in pornography one time is a ground for divorce? No. It is important to distinguish different senses of adultery. (1) *Physical adultery* is having sexual intercourse with someone other than your spouse. That is what *πορνεία* primarily refers to in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9. (2) *Metaphorical adultery* (see the Blomberg quote in §1.9) includes other sexual sins that break the marriage covenant because of their egregious nature. Just like there is a difference between anger and murder, there is a difference between a single lustful glance and physical adultery. For the consequences of non-physical (metaphorical) adultery to be equal to the consequences of physical adultery, the non-physical adultery must be egregious. That is where qualifiers like *repeated* and *unrepentant* are fitting. For example, a church treats an angry man differently than a convicted murderer. A church is more likely to excommunicate an angry man only after multiple unrepentant expressions of anger.

*1.5. ποιεῖ αὐτήν μοιχευθῆναι = Makes Her
the Victim of Adultery (Matt 5:32)*

The ESV translates *ποιεῖ αὐτήν μοιχευθῆναι* (5:32) as “makes her commit adultery.” But the NIV is probably more accurate here: “makes her the victim of adultery.” The voice of *μοιχευθῆναι* is passive. Craig Blomberg, a member of the NIV Committee on Bible Translation, explains,

In English we don't say “to be adulterated,” at least not if we mean that someone else has committed adultery against us. [R. T.] France has searched in vain for any examples of a deponent passive with this verb, inside or outside of the New Testament, in ancient Greek, i.e., in a context in which the passive form could be translated actively. Modern grammatically tagged databases with all known ancient Greek texts digitized make such searches possible for the first time in history. So that rules out the common “makes her commit adultery.”

The updated NIV nicely captures the passive sense with its “makes her the victim of adultery.” It is also the first major English translation to do so.

One confirming historical argument is as follows: While many women whose husbands divorced them in the ancient Roman world sought to remarry, not all did. So in what sense did those who remained single commit adultery on the common rendering of this verse? But men who initiated divorce in the ancient Roman world did so for one reason only—to legally remarry another woman. It makes sense, therefore, to say that the wife left behind has been made the victim of adultery. It also makes sense of the shift in the next clause to the demonstrably deponent-like middle form *moichatai*—“and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery,” which should be treated as equivalent to an active voice.⁴⁷

⁴⁷Craig L. Blomberg, “Victims of Adultery,” *Denver Seminary*, 7 July 2011,

The translation “makes her commit adultery” leads some to conclude that the non-adulterous spouse is guilty of adultery if they remarry.⁴⁸ But if the translation “makes her the victim of adultery” is correct (and I think it is), then that removes another argument for the “never remarriage” views (views 1 and 2 in fig. 1).

1.6. The Exception Clauses Also Qualify Marrying a Divorced Person (Matt 5:32; 19:9)

The exception clause in 5:32c (see fig. 2 above) qualifies not only “everyone who divorces his wife” (5:32b) but also by implication qualifies “whoever marries a divorced woman” (5:32e). That is, “whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery” except if that woman divorced legitimately.

The same is true for the exception clause in 19:9c (see fig. 3 above). It qualifies not only “whoever divorces his wife (19:9b) but also “whoever...marries another” (19:9d). That is, “whoever...marries another commits adultery” except if that person divorced legitimately. Carson paraphrases 19:9, “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery—though this principle does not hold in the case of *porneia*.”⁴⁹ That paraphrase is similar to the NLT: “Whoever divorces his wife and marries someone else commits adultery—unless his wife has been unfaithful.”

1.7. Divorce Is Not What God Originally Intended (Matt 19:4–6)

God originally intended for marriage to be inseparable and lifelong (19:4–6; citing Gen 1:27; 2:24; also Mark 10:5–9). All three views in figure 1 agree here. Jesus’s main point is that you should not divorce your spouse because God originally intended for marriage to be permanent.

1.8. A Divorced Couple Is No Longer Married in God’s Eyes

Jesus says in Luke 16:18, “Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.” Piper infers, “Evidently the reason a second marriage is called *adultery* is because the first one is considered to still be valid.”⁵⁰ I agree with DeYoung:

Marriage is not indissoluble. This means marriage really can end.

<https://newtestamentmusings.wordpress.com/2011/07/07/victims-of-adultery/>. See France, *Matthew*, 192, n. 48; 211.

⁴⁸Piper, *What Jesus Demands from the World*, 6:740.

⁴⁹Carson, “Matthew,” 471. Cf. Craig L. Blomberg, “Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Celibacy: An Exegesis of Matthew 19:3–12,” *Trinity Journal* 11 (1990): 178–80.

⁵⁰Piper, *What Jesus Demands from the World*, 6:738.

Now, usually they shouldn't. But they can. The covenant can be severed. When Jesus says, "What God has joined together, let no man separate" he implies that the couple can be separated. I mention this because sometimes people will argue against remarriage saying, "She's still married in God's eyes." I don't think that's the right way to talk about the situation. Divorced couples are divorced. They are not married in God's eyes. The question is whether they should still be married and hence, they ought not to be with another man or woman.⁵¹

A divorced couple—whether the divorce was legitimate or not—is no longer married in God's eyes.⁵² Jesus's reply to the woman at the well illustrates this. He does not say, "You *have* five husbands." He says, "You are right in saying, 'I *have* no husband'; for you *have had* five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true" (John 4:17b–18, emphasis added).

1.9. *Remarriage Is Illegitimate When the Divorce Is Illegitimate (Matt 19:9)*

As a general rule, it is sinful for a person who illegitimately divorced to remarry. A person who illegitimately divorced their spouse should repent of their sinful divorce. If that person is currently remarried (i.e., that person married someone else after illegitimately divorcing their spouse), then they should stay as they are (which is the main idea in 1 Cor 7—see §4.1).⁵³

The principle that "remarriage is illegitimate when the divorce is illegitimate" is a general rule because there are circumstances for which remarriage may be feasible. If a person who illegitimately divorced their spouse is unmarried and repentant and if their former spouse has remarried, may that person marry someone else? Jesus and the rest of the NT do not directly answer that question, and I do not think a church

⁵¹Kevin DeYoung, "A Sermon on Divorce and Remarriage," *DeYoung, Restless, and Reformed*, 3 November 2010, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2010/11/03/a-sermon-on-divorce-and-remarriage/>. Cf. Newheiser, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage*, 230–34. See also the section "Marriage Is a Covenant, but Not an Unbreakable One (Genesis 2:24)," in Heth, "Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion," 60–63.

⁵²See Newheiser, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage*, 230–34.

⁵³DeYoung, "A Sermon on Divorce and Remarriage": "Does this mean those Christians have gotten away with sin? Not at all. We are never better off for having sinned. There are consequences in our relationships. There may be consequences in your spiritual life. And if you look back at your sinful divorce and remarriage and think 'Wow, I'm glad I didn't know all this ten years ago,' that is a dreadful sign that something is very wrong in your heart. If the Spirit is at work, you will not think, 'Phew, I really got away with one here.' Instead you will think, 'O Lord, I am so sorry. I was ignorant of the Scriptures. I was blind to my own sin. I have broken your law and sullied the name of Christ. Please forgive me. Have mercy on us Lord.' And you'll not only ask for the Lord's forgiveness, you'll make things right with your ex-spouse, with your kids, your parents, your in-laws—you'll make amends and ask for forgiveness with anyone else you hurt by breaking your marriage vows."

should excommunicate a member for remarrying in such a situation.⁵⁴

1.10. *Πορνεία Is a Ground for Divorce Because It Breaks the Marriage Covenant*

Jesus explains that Moses permitted divorce because the Israelites had hard hearts—that is, they idolatrously rebelled against God (Matt 19:8; also Mark 10:5). The Israelites were spiritual whores. That is why God divorced Israel: “I had sent her away with a decree of divorce” (Jer 3:8; see 3:6–9; cf. Isa 50:1). And “if the Lord can divorce his adulterous spouse, then divorce must not always be wrong.”⁵⁵ Πορνεία is a ground for divorce because it breaks the marriage covenant to leave and cleave and to become one flesh (Gen 2:24).⁵⁶ Violating the marriage

⁵⁴John MacArthur’s position seems wise: “When a person sins as an unbeliever and those sins are responsible for the destruction of a marriage, if that person later becomes a Christian, he or she should first do everything possible to make restitution and seek forgiveness from all who were wronged by the sin, starting with the aggrieved spouse. If both partners are still unmarried and both are now believers, it might well be possible to restore the marriage. In such a case, the person *should* seek reconciliation and restoration of the marriage as part of the duty of making restitution. But where restoration of the marriage is impossible; or in cases where remarriage would involve an unequal yoke with an unbeliever; or if there is some other factor that would compound the sin that caused the divorce in the first place—as long as all the sins that led to the dissolution of the marriage have been abandoned and forgiven, I see no reason to forbid the repentant person from remarrying. But what if the guilty party was already a professing believer when the sin that caused the divorce occurred?... As a pastor, I would not consent to remarry a person who was unfaithful to a previous spouse while professing faith in Christ. If that person’s original profession of faith meant so little, how is it possible to know whether a subsequent profession of repentance is legitimate? At the same time, I’m not prepared to state dogmatically that such a person can never, under any circumstances, remarry. Since Scripture is silent on the matter, I wouldn’t want to place limits on the grace and mercy of God where He himself does not explicitly draw such boundaries” (*Divorce Dilemma*, 27–28).

⁵⁵DeYoung, “A Sermon on Divorce and Remarriage.” Newheiser, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage*, 211, n. 3: “Those advocating the permanence position try to answer by pointing out that the Lord’s divorce of Israel is metaphorical.... Yet the metaphor is meaningful because of its correspondence to literal marriage. Additionally, those holding the permanence position do not hesitate to use the metaphor when it seems to suit their purpose (e.g., arguing for their position from the Lord’s faithfulness to his people).”

⁵⁶See Devin Paul Hudson, “Covenant as a Framework for Understanding the Primary Divorce and Remarriage Texts in the New Testament” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2004); Colin Hamer, “Marital Imagery in the Bible: An Exploration of the Cross-Domain Mapping of Genesis 2:24 and Its Significance for the Understanding of New Testament Divorce and Remarriage Teaching” (PhD thesis, University of Chester, 2015). Bill Heth wrote the foreword to the published version of Hamer’s dissertation: Colin Hamer, *Marital Imagery in the Bible: An Exploration of Genesis 2:24 and Its Significance for the Understanding of New Testament Divorce and Remarriage Teaching*, Apostolos Old Testament Studies (London: Apostolos, 2015). Heth reflected further on Hamer’s book in 2016: William A. Heth, “Marital Imagery in Scripture: Developments in Understanding NT Divorce and Remarriage Teaching” (presented at the Evangelical Theological Society National Meeting, San Antonio, TX, November 15, 2016). For a more accessible version of

covenant breaks it and gives the non-adulterous spouse the right to formally nullify it (though the non-adulterous spouse may choose not to nullify it—as Yahweh does with adulterous Judah in Jer 3).

Heth used to defend the minority view, but what was decisive for changing his mind was better understanding that covenants are not indissoluble: “The Genesis 2:24 ‘one flesh’ relationship that results from the covenant of marriage ratified by sexual consummation is not an indissoluble union, just one that should preeminently not be dissolved, and a sexual sin like adultery is *the* preeminent violation of the marriage covenant.”⁵⁷

2. MARK 10:2–12 AND LUKE 16:18

Figure 6. Phrase Diagram of Mark 10:2–12

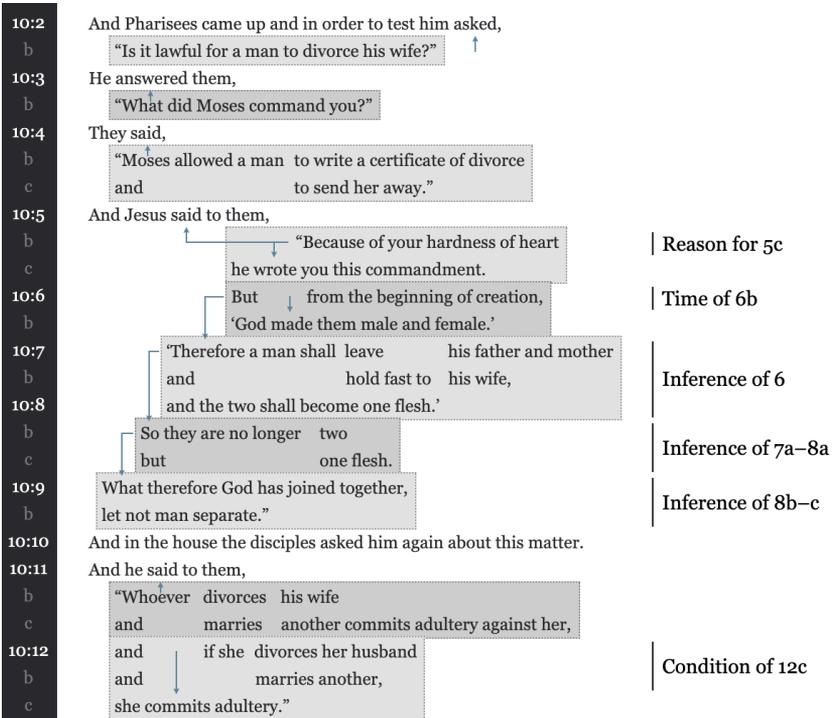
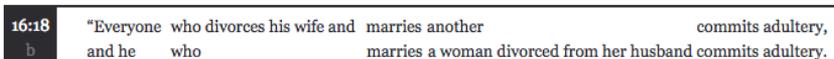


Figure 7. Phrase Diagram of Luke 16:18



Hamer’s work, see Colin Hamer, *God’s Divorce: Understanding New Testament Divorce and Remarriage Teaching* (London: Faithbuilders, 2017).

⁵⁷Heth, “Jesus on Divorce,” 19.

Figure 8. Heth on the Majority vs. Minority Views on Mark 10:11–12 and Luke 16:18⁵⁸

	Majority View	Minority View
Mark 10:10–12	<p>Jesus, a prophetic wisdom teacher, uses rhetorical overstatement to drive home a general point to hostile questioners. Thus Mark simply records Jesus’ emphatically stated divorce saying without intending to specify possible exceptions. Jesus cannot be construed as teaching an “exceptionless absolute” based on Mark because both Matthew (5:32; 19:9) and Paul (1 Cor 7:15) qualify Jesus’ prohibition of remarriage after divorce. Alternatively, Jesus’ sayings should be understood as generalizations that admit of exceptions.</p>	<p>Yes, Jesus was questioned by the Pharisees, but his final word for them is found in v. 9: “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” However, Jesus’ absolute prohibition of divorce and remarriage is reserved for the disciples in the Markan place of private instruction, “the house” (7:17; 9:28; 10:10; cf. 4:34). Jesus is clarifying kingdom standards for his disciples, to whom Jesus gives insights into the mysteries of the kingdom of God (4:11), not addressing unbelieving outsiders whom he wants to bring to repentance with a prophetic word.</p>
Luke 16:18	<p>This is Luke’s one example of radicalizing the law, and the way it is stated admits of no exceptions. The casuistic form is employed for emphasis and exaggeration: it presents an ideal like Jesus’s sayings in Mark 10:11–12. Jesus’ concern is not with legal definitions but with moral exhortation. Alternatively, Luke uses this saying as an allegorical statement on Jesus’ non-abolition of the Law (v. 17)—the person who annuls part of the Law in favor of some other practice is like a man divorcing his wife in favor of another woman. Provides no help in determining Jesus’ literal views on divorce and remarriage.</p>	<p>The introductory “Everyone who divorces” (<i>pas ho apolyōn</i>) employs a legal ordinance form similar to OT casuistic law. Jesus teaches a standard (as opposed to an ideal) that he expects his disciples to keep. Paul apparently follows Luke’s (and Mark’s) unqualified form of Jesus’ saying in 1 Cor 7:10–11. Only two alternatives present themselves in case of divorce: remain unmarried or else be reconciled.</p>

⁵⁸Ibid., 8.

These passages are similar to Matthew 5 and 19, but they do not include the exception clauses that appear in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9. Why? Because in its historical-cultural context, the phrase “whoever divorces his wife” (Mark 10:11; Luke 16:18) assumes an exception that Jews at the time shared regarding the divorce debate: whoever divorces his wife *for any cause*. Jews were debating whether a husband could divorce his wife if she burned his dinner! Jesus emphatically rejects divorcing for trivial reasons. And what Jesus says in Mark 10:11 and Luke 16:18 does not nullify what he says in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9.⁵⁹

Mark 10:10–12 and Luke 16:18 do not repeat the exception clauses in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 because Jesus was specifically addressing the controversy regarding no-fault divorce (see §1.1). Everyone would have assumed the exception clauses because everyone—both Jews and Gentiles—assumed that there are legitimate grounds for divorce such as adultery, and Jews universally assumed that there are scriptural grounds for divorce. “Matthew is merely making explicit what was assumed by Mark and Luke to be already obvious to their readers.”⁶⁰

We commonly speak in ways that assume what we mean without explicitly mentioning exceptions. Here are five examples:

1. “Everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent [i.e., for the purpose of sexually desiring that woman] has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt 5:28). But there is an exception. Jesus means “Everyone who looks at a woman *except for his wife*....”⁶¹
2. “It is against the law to drive only 10 mph on an interstate when the speed limit is 70 mph.” But there are exceptions—like driving slowly during a traffic jam or during perilous conditions like snow, ice, or torrential rain.
3. “No Trespassing.” We assume such a sign may mean “No trespassing *except in certain situations*.” A house may have that sign on its property. But if you notice late one evening the home is on

⁵⁹See Grudem, *Christian Ethics*, 781–82.

⁶⁰France, *Matthew*, 211. Cf. Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 121; Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: Volume 2: 9:51–24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1358; Watts, “Mark,” 2035.

⁶¹Cf. Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, 153; Heth, “Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion,” 75. The phrase πρὸς τὸ ἐπιθυμῆσαι means to look *for the purpose of lusting*, but the verb that most translations render as “lust” (i.e., ἐπιθυμέω) simply means “to have a strong desire to do or secure someth., *desire, long for*” (BDAG 371). More specifically, it can mean “to have sexual interest in someone” (BDAG 372). The English word *lust* connotes sinful desiring, so in that sense a husband should not lust after his wife. But desiring itself is not necessarily sinful—it depends on the nature of the desire. A husband should sexually desire his wife (and no one else), and a wife should want her husband to sexually desire her (and no one else).

Figure 10. Heth on the Majority vs. Minority Views on Rom 7:2⁶³

Majority View	Minority View
Romans 7:2 occurs as an illustration of how the Mosaic law only has power over people as long as they live. Paul does not have in view divorce for sexual immorality....	Whenever Paul mentions the possibility of remarriage, in both cases [here and 1 Cor 7:39] he notes specifically that one of the spouses has died. This is Paul's ordinary usage for the indissolubility of marriage as long as a mate is living.

God's people in the new covenant are not under the old covenant. Christians are not under the Mosaic law.⁶⁴ Paul illustrates that concept with remarriage: when your spouse dies, you are free to remarry. Paul is not discussing the intricacies of divorce and remarriage. Like any good teacher, he is simply using a basic analogy that helps communicate a single abstract concept more clearly. In Romans 7:2 (and 1 Cor 7:39), Paul is talking about marriage in general and not divorce, so we should not be surprised that he does not mention exceptions. I agree with Carson:

A few teachers attempt to expound this text [i.e., Rom 7:1–3] at the expense of all other biblical references to divorce, and assert thereby that there are no grounds whatsoever for divorce. This is patently either foolish or blind, in the light of the entire biblical revelation pertaining to this subject. The point is, Romans 7:1–3 is not dealing with marriage at all, except by way of illustration as to the way a man is bound to observe the law. It would have been ridiculous for Paul to introduce here the extraneous question of divorce.⁶⁵

Doug Moo and Tom Schreiner, two of evangelicalism's premier commentators on Romans, agree.⁶⁶

⁶³Heth, "Jesus on Divorce," 12.

⁶⁴Douglas J. Moo, "The Law of Christ as the Fulfillment of the Law of Moses: A Modified Lutheran View," in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, ed. Wayne G. Strickland, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 319–76 (also 83–90, 165–73, 218–25, 309–15); Thomas R. Schreiner, *40 Questions about Christians and Biblical Law* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010); Jason S. DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017), 427–59.

⁶⁵D. A. Carson, "Divorce: A Concise Biblical Analysis," *Northwest Journal of Theology* 4 (1975): 56.

⁶⁶Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 2nd ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 438, n. 649: "These verses are sometimes cited to prove that remarriage on any basis other than the death of one's spouse is adulterous. Whether this is the biblical teaching or not, these verses at any rate are probably not relevant to the issue. Paul is not teaching about remarriage but citing a simple example to prove a point. In such a situation, one often generalizes to what is usually true in order to simplify the analogy." Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, 2nd ed., Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

4. 1 CORINTHIANS 7:10–16, 39

Figure 11. Phrase Diagram of 1 Corinthians 7:10–16

7:10 b c d	To the married I give this charge ↑ (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband	Addresses Group #2 of 3 Qualifies 10a Ideal situation for 10a
7:11 b c d	(but if she does, she should ↓ remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.	Condition of 11b–c Contrast to 10d: two options Ideal situation for 10a
7:12 b c d e f	To the rest I say ↑ (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her.	Addresses Group #3 of 3 Qualifies 12a Conditions of 12f Ideal situation for 12a
7:13 b c	If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.	Conditions of 13c Ideal situation for 12a
7:14 b c d	↑ For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.	Supports 13 Supports 12d–f Supports 14a–b
7:15 b c d	But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. ↑ In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. ↓ God has called you to peace.	Condition of 15b Contrast to 12d–14 Explains 15b Reason for 15b
7:16 b	↑ For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?	Supports 15d

Figure 12. Phrase Diagram of 1 Corinthians 7:39

7:39 b c d	A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But ↓ if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, ↑ only in the Lord.	Reminder re marriage Condition of 39c Contrast to 39a Condition of 39c
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(Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 352: “This passage cannot settle that question [i.e., the issue of divorce and remarriage], since it isn’t Paul’s intention to provide a full discussion of his view of divorce and remarriage. The general principle is that divorce and remarriage constitute adultery, but we cannot conclude from this text alone that divorce and remarriage are always adultery. Paul employs a generalization for the sake of the illustration at hand.”

Figure 13. Heth on the Majority vs. Minority Views
on 1 Corinthians 7:10–11, 15, 39⁶⁷

	Majority View	Minority View
1 Cor 7:10–11	Paul is talking about divorce in situations other than divorce for sexual unfaithfulness. The believers advocating asceticism (1 Cor 7:1) wanted to enforce their “no sexual relations” slogan on the married (vv. 1–7), the widowers and widows (vv. 8–9, 39–40), those advocating separation (vv. 10–16), and the engaged (vv. 25–28, 34, 36–38), who, like other singles (vv. 29–35), are still free from matrimonial ties and could live single if they have the gift of sexual self-control (vv. 7, 9a; cf. Matt 19:11–12).	Studies indicate that Paul’s teaching on sexuality, marriage, and singleness in 1 Corinthians 6 and 7 stems from the same tradition of Jesus’ teaching that Matthew records in 19:3–12. Yet Paul says that if a divorce or separation takes place, “let them remain unmarried or else be reconciled.” Where Paul specifically mentions the possibility of remarriage, in both instances he notes explicitly that one of the spouses has died (1 Cor 7:39; Rom 7:2–3). Thus Paul follows the teaching of Jesus.
1 Cor 7:15: “not enslaved” (<i>ou dedoulōtai</i>)	This phrase distinctly frees the innocent party to remarry. The essential formula in the Jewish bill of divorce were the words “you are free to any man” (<i>m. Git.</i> 9:3). Paul employs the same formula for believers abandoned by unbelieving spouses. <i>Douloō</i> (1 Cor 7:15) and <i>deō</i> (1 Cor 7:39; Rom 7:2) “are related” and used interchangeably (unless one excludes categories so as to have so few examples left as to be able to argue whatever one wishes). Both free someone who was once married to remarry.	Like Matthew’s exception clause, Paul’s qualifier relieves the innocent party of the guilt of violating Christ’s command not to divorce (mentioned 4x in vv. 10–13). Nothing is said about the possibility of remarriage. The following considerations suggest remarriage is not permitted: (1) marriage is a creation ordinance, binding on all irrespective of their faith or the lack thereof; (2) Paul has already specifically prohibited remarriage in vv. 10–11; (3) when Paul speaks about the binding character of marriage he uses the term <i>deō</i> (Rom 7:2; 1 Cor 7:39; cf. 7:27, a promise of engagement), not <i>douloō</i> (1 Cor 7:15); and (4) where he clearly mentions the possibility of remarriage, Paul also refers to the death of one of the marriage partners (1 Cor 7:39; Rom 7:2).

⁶⁷Heth, “Jesus on Divorce,” 11–12.

	Majority View	Minority View
1 Cor 7:39: "a wife is bound (<i>de-detai</i>) to her husband as long as he lives"	1 Cor 7:39 involves a real case at Corinth.... Paul does not have in view divorce for sexual immorality....	Whenever Paul mentions the possibility of remarriage, in both cases [here and Rom 7:2] he notes specifically that one of the spouses has died. This is Paul's ordinary usage for the indissolubility of marriage as long as a mate is living.

4.1. The General Principle in 1 Corinthians 7 Is to Stay Where You Are

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul addresses a constellation of issues: having sex in marriage, staying single, getting divorced, and getting (re)married. What ties these issues together is the general principle to stay where you are. That is, stay in the condition you are in right now (and Paul lists exceptions all along the way):

- Those who are married should keep having marital relations (vv. 2–5).
- The unmarried and widows should stay unmarried (vv. 8–9).
- Christians who are married to Christians should stay married (vv. 10–11).
- Christians who are married to non-Christians should stay married (vv. 12–16).
- Those circumcised should stay circumcised, and those uncircumcised should stay uncircumcised (vv. 18–19).
- Those who are bondservants should stay bondservants, and those who are free should stay free (vv. 21–23).
- Those who are unmarried should stay unmarried (vv. 26–38).
- Married women should stay married, and widows should stay unmarried (vv. 39–40).

4.2. A Husband and Wife Should Not Divorce (1 Cor 7:10–11)

In vv. 6–7, Paul sets the stage to address three groups of people (vv. 8–9, 10–11, 12–16). For each group Paul describes an ideal situation and allows for a less than ideal option.

In vv. 10–11, the ideal situation is that a husband and wife remain married and that neither divorce the other. This passage raises at least three questions:

1. *Why does Paul say, “Not I, but the Lord” here and then say, “I, not the Lord” in v. 12?* He is referring to what the Lord Jesus taught during his earthly ministry (see Matt 5:32; 19:9; Mark 10:11; Luke 16:18). In Jesus’s earthly ministry, he directly addressed the issue Paul raises in 1 Corinthians 7:10–11 (and Jesus gave exceptions in Matt 5:32 and 19:9 that Paul does not repeat here), but Jesus did not address the issue Paul raises in 1 Corinthians 7:12–16.⁶⁸ Jesus did not address that issue because in his context he was teaching Jews, who married fellow Jews. But now Paul was addressing a new situation: Christian Gentiles who were married to non-Christian Gentiles.
2. *Is there a difference between the terms separate (χωρίζω) and divorce (ἀφίημι) in the final phrases of vv. 10–11?* No, they are synonymous.⁶⁹ Paul did not share the technical category for separation but not divorce that some cultures have today.⁷⁰
3. *Paul says that if a person divorces their spouse, then that person has two options: (1) remain unmarried or (2) reconcile with their spouse—are those the only options?* Apparently, yes, if the divorce was without a biblical ground, but no, if the divorce was with a biblical ground.⁷¹

⁶⁸Paul is not implying that vv. 10–11 are authoritative but that vv. 12–16 are not authoritative but simply Paul’s fallible opinion. The apostle Paul’s instruction is God-breathed.

⁶⁹David Instone-Brewer, “1 Corinthians 7 in the Light of the Graeco-Roman Marriage and Divorce Papyri,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 52 (2001): 106–7: “Some have suggested that these two verbs demonstrate a distinction in Paul between divorce and separation. Although it is possible that these two verbs have slightly different connotations (χωρίζω has a sense of ‘separate’ while ἀφίημι has a sense of ‘release’) they are used in 1 Corinthians 7 as synonymous terms, and there is no doubt that χωρίζω means ‘divorce’. There is no distinction in the marriage papyri between divorce and separation, and in Graeco-Roman law, separation with intention to end the marriage was divorce.” Again, Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, 198–99: “Both the verbs χωρίζω and ἀφίημι have the sense of ‘to divorce’ although they have been translated here by ‘to separate’ and ‘to dismiss,’ respectively. Differences between these words should not be exaggerated. There may be no significance in their use other than stylistic variation.”

⁷⁰That does not mean that there was never any such thing as a husband and wife temporarily separating in Greco-Roman culture with the hope that they would get back together. It means that the two terms Paul uses in 1 Cor 7:10–11 are synonyms that do not refer to what people in cultures today refer to as *separation*.

⁷¹See §1.9. Newheiser wisely explains (*Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage*, 269), “I believe that this passage may apply to those circumstances when, while the divorcing spouse doesn’t have clear-cut grounds for divorce, things are bad enough that church leaders would be reluctant to discipline the person for moving out. The church’s answer in such cases could be, ‘While we don’t approve of your divorce (or separation), we will not enact church discipline against you for it, but based on 1 Corinthians 7:10–11, you are not free to remarry.’”

*4.3. A Christian Should Not Divorce Their
Non-Christian Spouse (1 Cor 7:12–14)*

In vv. 12–14, Paul addresses “the rest,” that is, those who do not fit in vv. 8–11. Since Paul forbids a Christian to marry a non-Christian (v. 39), the main scenario he has in mind here is that after two non-Christians are married only one of them becomes a Christian. A Christian should not divorce their spouse simply because their spouse is not a Christian. The reason is that if one spouse is a Christian, then the entire family benefits: both the non-Christian spouse and their children are “holy” (cf. 1 Pet 3:1–2). This does not mean that a Christian spouse automatically turns the rest of their family into Christians (see 1 Cor 7:16). Rather, a Christian, whose body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (6:19–20), sets the entire household apart in some sense and positively influences it (cf. the non-salvific sanctification language in Heb 10:29).

*4.4. A Christian May Divorce Their Spouse If Their
Spouse Deserts Them (1 Cor 7:15–16)*

In vv. 15–16, Paul includes an exception. The condition for the non-Christian spouse in vv. 13–14 is that they consent to live with their Christian spouse. But if the non-Christian physically deserts the Christian spouse (e.g., because they reject their spouse’s Christian faith), then the Christian is no longer obligated to stay married: “If the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so” (v. 15). That separation refers to physical, spatial desertion that essentially constitutes divorce: “There was...no distinction between ‘separation’ and ‘divorce’ in Roman law; anyone who separated with view to ending the marriage was considered fully divorced, without the need for any written deed or court appearance.”⁷²

When a spouse physically deserts their Christian spouse, the Christian is free to divorce because they are “not enslaved.” The reason Paul gives is that God has called Christians to peace, so a Christian wife or husband is not obligated to wait indefinitely to reconcile with a non-Christian spouse who has physically deserted them. The Christian spouse simply has no assurance that they will be the human instrument through which God may save their non-Christian spouse.

If a spouse who is a professing Christian sinfully abandons their Christian spouse, then the church should go through the process of church discipline with the goal of restoring the marriage. If the guilty spouse is unrepentant, then the church may choose not to affirm that that spouse is a believer.⁷³

⁷²Instone-Brewer, “Divorce,” 216.

⁷³Cf. Newheiser, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage*, 223–24.

Physical desertion is as serious as *πορνεία* (see §1.10). Each is a ground for divorce because each breaks the marriage covenant to leave and cleave and to become one flesh (Gen 2:24).

*4.5. A Christian Who Divorces Their Spouse After Their Spouse
Deserts Them Is Free to Remarry (1 Cor 7:15)*

There are two main views on what Paul means by “not enslaved”: (1) The Christian is free to divorce but not to remarry (i.e., vv. 10–11 apply to this situation). (2) The Christian is free to divorce *and* remarry.

The second view is far more likely for two reasons. First, “not enslaved” in v. 15 conceptually parallels “bound” and “free to be married” in v. 39. Second, the ancient Greco-Roman world and Jewish world did not have a category for a lawful divorce that excluded remarriage (see §1.2 and below).

John Piper argues that a deserted and divorced spouse is not free to remarry:

The word used for “bound” (*douloo*) in verse 15 is not the same word used in verse 39 where Paul says, “A wife is bound (*deo*) to her husband as long as he lives.” Paul consistently uses *deo* when speaking of the legal aspect of being bound to one marriage partner (Romans 7:2; 1 Corinthians 7:39), or to one’s betrothed (1 Corinthians 7:27). But when he refers to a deserted spouse not being bound in 1 Corinthians 7:15, he chooses a different word (*douloo*) which we would expect him to do if he were not giving a deserted spouse the same freedom to remarry that he gives to a spouse whose partner has died (verse 39).⁷⁴

That reading seems to commit two exegetical fallacies: (1) distinguishing synonyms in contexts where they function synonymously and (2) falsely assuming a technical meaning.⁷⁵ The words *δουλόω* (v. 15) and *δέω* (v. 39) are synonymous in this context.⁷⁶ Why must Paul use

⁷⁴Piper, “Divorce and Remarriage.” Heth used to argue similarly: Wenham and Heth, *Jesus and Divorce*, 140–44.

⁷⁵Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 45–53; Naselli, *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament*, 213–16.

⁷⁶David Instone-Brewer, “1 Corinthians 7 in the Light of the Jewish Greek and Aramaic Marriage and Divorce Papyri,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 52 (2001): 238–40: “The divorce deed is compared to an emancipation certificate for a slave by early rabbinic traditions. This was not because they regarded marriage as slavery, but the divorce legislation of Exodus 21:10–11 was based on the law of the slave wife, and they found many parallels between the release of a woman from marriage and the release from slavery. The rules concerning release are similar and the wording of the two certificates was very similar. The emancipation certificate said: ‘Lo, you are a free girl, you belong to yourself’ and the only words which were necessary on a divorce certificate were ‘Lo, you are permitted to (marry) any man’. The rest of the divorce certificate is midrashic expansion. This helps to explain why Paul uses words which are associated with slavery when he speaks about freedom from the marriage bond. He uses *δουλόω*, *enslave*

the same word? He often uses synonyms. For example, in vv. 10–11, Paul writes, “the wife should not *separate from* [χωρισθῆναι] her husband...and the husband should not *divorce* [ἀφιέναι] his wife.” There Paul synonymously uses two different words for divorce (χωρίζω and ἀφίημι). He does the same thing concerning remarriage in vv. 15 and 39 with δουλόω and δέω.

Evangelical historian Edwin Yamauchi explains that the ancient Greco-Roman world did not have a category for a lawful divorce that excluded remarriage:

Some church fathers restricted the so-called “Pauline privilege” of a believing wife to part from her unbelieving husband who had abandoned her, considering it to be “separation”⁷⁵ and not divorce. But in the Greco-Roman world such a separation meant divorce and the privilege of remarriage.⁷⁷

That was the case in the Jewish world as well. Jewish divorce certificates declared, “You are free to marry any man.” Craig Keener explains why that historical-cultural context is significant for understanding what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:15:

The Jewish legal passage in question is Mishnah Gittin 9:3, which reads:

The essential formula in the bill of divorce is, “Lo, thou art free to marry any man.” R. Judah says: “Let this be from me thy writ of divorce and letter of dismissal and deed of liberation, that thou mayest marry whatsoever man thou wilt.” The essential formula in a writ of emancipation is, “Lo, thou art a freedwoman: lo, thou belongest to thyself.”⁷⁹

The ancient Jewish marriage contracts we have found agree: in the context of divorce, “free” meant precisely that the woman was free to remarry, and meant nothing else than this.

If Paul meant that remarriage was not permitted, he said precisely the opposite of what he meant.⁷⁸

(1 Cor. 7:15) and ἐλεύθερος, *free especially from slavery* (1 Cor. 7:39; Rom. 7:3). It is probably also significant that he uses δέω, *bind, tie, fetter* (1 Cor. 7:27, 39; Rom. 7:2), and λύω / λύσις, *loose, release* (1 Cor. 7:27). His unusual use of ἀφίημι, *dismiss, release* (1 Cor. 7:11–13) may also be related to this theme, because ἀφίημι is often used with regard to release from slavery. He also uses the imagery of slavery when he tells couples that their partner rules over their body so they owe each other their conjugal rights (1 Cor. 7:3–5)... Paul did not have to explicitly allow remarriage, and if he wished to forbid it for Christians, he would have to do so in very clear terms. Remarriage after divorce was a right enshrined in Graeco-Roman and Jewish law. The establishment of this right was the main purpose of the Graeco-Roman divorce certificate and the sole purpose of the Jewish divorce certificate.”

⁷⁷Yamauchi, “Divorce,” 2:115.

⁷⁸Keener, *And Marries Another*, 61. Cf. Craig S. Keener, *1–2 Corinthians*, New

Martin Luther soundly explains 7:15: “If someone is not bound, he is free and released. If he is free and released, he may change his status, just as though his spouse were dead.”⁷⁹

What Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7:39—“she [i.e., a Christian widow] is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord”—quotes Jewish divorce certificates that specified a divorced woman was free to remarry, but Paul substitutes the words “in the Lord” for “any Jewish man.” Heth explains,

Why would Paul quote Jewish divorce certificate language with reference to a widow’s freedom to remarry? The clue to Paul’s reasoning is probably found in a passage in later rabbinic writings. Rabbi Ashi (d. AD 427) attempted to prove that even a childless widow was free to remarry whomever she wanted. He reasoned that “if a divorce gave a woman complete freedom to marry whomever she wished, then widowhood would give her the same freedom.” From the language Paul employs in both 1 Corinthians 7:15 and 7:39, it appears that he, too, reasoned that if a divorcée had this freedom to remarry, then so would a widow! Paul assumes that victims of valid divorces have the right to remarry.⁸⁰

Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 65: “If the unbeliever, not following Christ’s law, chose to divorce, the believer could not stop it. When Paul says that ‘the brother or sister is not bound’ in such cases (7:15), he does not simply mean that they are free to divorce. He had no reason to state something so obvious, since they had no control over the situation: Under laws effective in Corinth, either party could dissolve the marriage without the other’s approval. ‘You are not bound’ or ‘you are free’ was the language of ancient divorce contracts, always stipulating freedom to remarry (e.g., *m. Git.* 9:3; *CPJ* 2:10–12, §144; *P. Grenf.* 2.76.10–11); Paul affirmed believers’ freedom to remarry if they did not break up their marriage.” Cf. Instone-Brewer, “1 Corinthians 7 in the Light of the Jewish Greek and Aramaic Marriage and Divorce Papyri,” 241: “When Paul says they are ‘no longer enslaved’ [7:15], any first century reader would understand him to mean that they can remarry, because they would think of the words in both Jewish and non-Jewish divorce certificates: ‘You are free to marry’. If Paul had meant something else, he would have had to state this very clearly, in order to avoid being misunderstood by everyone who read his epistle.”

⁷⁹Martin Luther, *Commentaries on 1 Corinthians 7, 1 Corinthians 15; Lectures on 1 Timothy*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, Luther’s Works 28 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1973), 37. Cf. Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, 201–3; Bruce W. Winter, “1 Corinthians,” in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson et al., 4th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 1172; Bruce N. Fisk, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation Bible Studies (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 40; Jay E. Smith, “1 Corinthians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Word Study: Acts–Ephesians*, ed. Darrell L. Bock (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 2006), 257; Kim Riddlebarger, *First Corinthians*, The Lectio Continua Expository Commentary on the New Testament (Powder Springs, GA: Tolle Lege, 2013), 178; Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 302–3; Michael G. Vanlaningham, “1 Corinthians,” in *The Moody Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary on the Whole Bible by the Faculty of Moody Bible Institute*, ed. Michael A. Rydelnick and Michael G. Vanlaningham (Chicago: Moody Press, 2014), 1785.

⁸⁰Heth, “Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion,” 76. Cf. Instone-Brewer, *Divorce*

4.6. *A Person Whose Spouse Dies Is Free to Remarry*
(1 Cor 7:39; cf. Rom 7:2)

Paul mentions marriage in v. 38, and in v. 39 he reminds the Corinthians that marriage is a lifelong covenant that death breaks. A Christian is free to remarry anyone he or she desires on the conditions that (1) their spouse dies and (2) the new spouse is a Christian.

4.7. *Breaking the Marriage Covenant Is a Ground for Divorce* (1 Cor 7)

Πορνεία and physical desertion are not the only grounds for divorce (see §§1.10 and 4.4). According to Exodus 21:10, a husband is responsible to provide for his wife: “He shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights.” And one can argue from the lesser to the greater: if that was the case for a husband’s *slave* wife, how much more is that the case for his *free* wife? Exodus 21:10 demonstrates that God deeply cares about a vulnerable wife when her husband is not providing for her, and there is nothing in the New Testament to suggest that Jesus’s fulfilling the Mosaic law nullifies a wife’s rights and a husband’s responsibilities. To the contrary, what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7 parallels Exodus 21:10:

- Those who are married should regularly have sex with each other (1 Cor 7:2–5). “The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.... Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control” (7:3, 5).
- Spouses should not abandon each other (7:10–16). “But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved” (7:15).
- The husband is responsible to provide for his wife and family (7:32–35).⁸¹

Since Paul repeats the requirements of Exodus 21:10 and since

and Remarriage in the Bible, 209.

⁸¹In 7:25–40, Paul focuses on “the betrothed,” which likely refers to engaged women. The issue is whether betrothed couples should finalize their marriages “in view of the present distress” (v. 26), which I think refers to a crisis that resulted from a famine that caused a food shortage in Greece in AD 51/52. The main idea of 7:32–25 is that Paul wants the Corinthians not to be tied up with anxieties because of “the present distress.” Unmarried men and women are free to serve the Lord with relatively few distractions, but married men and women are divided because they have more obligations (i.e., to each other and their children). Paul wants the Corinthians to serve the Lord with “undivided devotion” (v. 35)—in contrast to the “divided” interests in marriage (v. 34), especially in light of “the present distress.”

Exodus 21:11 allows for divorce when those requirements are not met, the principle still applies: divorce is legitimate when those requirements are not met—that is, when one breaks the marriage covenant. Breaking the marriage covenant is a ground for divorce. (That does not mean that divorce is necessary but only that it is permissible.) The two clearest grounds in the NT are *πορνεία* and physical desertion. But the same logic applies to other grounds:

- refusing to fulfill conjugal rights
- a husband's failing to provide for his wife (i.e., material neglect)
- a husband's failing to protect his wife (i.e., cruelty such as physical abuse)

Each of those patterns is a way a spouse may break the marriage covenant and thus desert the other spouse. That desertion or separation may not be spatial—that is, the spouses may still live in the same home. But the desertion or separation is still real because the sinful patterns abandon the one-flesh union that is essential to the marriage covenant.⁸²

Objection 1: But 1 Corinthians 7:15 refers only to spatial separation—not to relational separation. In reply, “relational separation” makes it sound like a husband merely hurt his wife's feelings. The point, however, is that the husband has broken the marriage covenant. Instead of protecting his wife, he is brutally beating her. One can argue from the lesser to the greater: How can a husband's spatially departing from his wife be a ground for divorce but a husband's physically brutalizing his wife not be? Both actions break the marriage covenant.

*Objection 2: But the NT explicitly mentions only two grounds for divorce—*πορνεία* and physical desertion.* In reply, the same logic in §2 applies here. Mark and Luke do not repeat the exception clauses that appear in Matthew 5 and 19 because everyone would have assumed the exception clauses. The same logic applies to not providing for your spouse, especially in light of Exodus 21:10.

Further, those two grounds for divorce—*πορνεία* and physical desertion—come from separate texts. So we cannot interpret either text to mean “This ground for divorce is the *only* one” without contradicting the other text. Similarly, the texts do not require us to conclude that there are two *and only two* grounds for divorce.

As I mention at the end of §1.3, this may raise practical questions about how to discern when a spouse's actions may be a ground for divorce when it is not physical adultery or spatial desertion. It is a wisdom

⁸²Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics*, 188–204.

issue—just like church discipline for such behavior is a wisdom issue. Churches and their elders should deal with such situations on a case-by-case basis.⁸³

4.8. *Divorce and Remarriage Can Protect Innocent Spouses (and Children)*

One reason God sometimes allows divorce and remarriage is to protect the innocent⁸⁴ spouse (and sometimes their children). That is spirit behind Exodus 21:10–11, which parallels 1 Corinthians 7 (see §4.7). Newheiser explains,

Biblical standards for divorce are actually designed to protect the innocent party.... The situation of a young woman who has been abandoned by an unfaithful husband would be like that of a younger widow, who would do well to remarry and have children (1 Cor. 7:39; 1 Tim. 5:14). Remarriage to a godly husband can be God’s way of providing and caring for her.⁸⁵

5. 1 TIMOTHY 3:2 AND TITUS 1:6 (ALSO 1 TIMOTHY 3:12)

The passages in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are not explicitly about divorce or remarriage, but I am addressing them because some argue that a one-woman man refers to a man who has never been divorced.⁸⁶ I focus below on the phrase “one-woman man” in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6 in the elder qualifications, but what I write applies similarly to that same phrase in 1 Timothy 3:12 in the deacon qualifications.

⁸³For pastoral wisdom on how to deal with abuse, for example, see Jim Newheiser, “The Abuse Pendulum (Part 1),” *Biblical Counseling Coalition*, 23 March 2017, <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2017/03/23/the-abuse-pendulum-part-1/>; Newheiser, “The Abuse Pendulum (Part 2),” *Biblical Counseling Coalition*, 24 March 2017, <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2017/03/24/the-abuse-pendulum-part-2/>. See also Barbara Roberts, *Not under Bondage: Biblical Divorce for Abuse, Adultery and Desertion* (Ballarat, Victoria, Australia: Maschil, 2008).

⁸⁴By *innocent*, I do not mean sinless but rather not guilty of an offense that is a ground for divorce.

⁸⁵Newheiser, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage*, 191.

⁸⁶E.g., “Persons remarried after divorce will forego positions of official leadership at Bethlehem which correspond to the role of elders or deacons (1 Tim 3:2, 12)” (“A Statement on Divorce and Remarriage in the Life of Bethlehem Baptist Church”).

**Figure 16. The Majority vs. Minority Views
on 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6⁸⁷**

Majority View	Minority View
“The husband of one wife” means that a man is “faithful to his wife” (NIV, NLT).	“The husband of one wife” entails that a man (1) has never divorced his wife and (2) has not married someone who has been divorced.

The overarching qualification for an overseer (synonymous with elder and pastor) is that he is “above reproach.” That is the umbrella requirement. All the other qualifications specify what it means to be above reproach. The first qualification is “the husband of one wife.”

There are at least four major views on what “the husband of one wife” means (fig. 16 displays only two of them): (1) faithful to his wife, (2) married, (3) monogamous (i.e., not a polygamist), and (4) not divorced or married to a divorcee.⁸⁸

5.1. “The Husband of One Wife” = Faithful to His Wife

The main reason “the husband of one wife” means “faithful to his wife” is that all the other qualifications describe a man’s life and character at that point in his life—not what that man has ever done at other points in his life. “The real issue is not so much where he has come from but who he is now by God’s grace. If a man is currently faithful to his wife, being above reproach, and has proven himself in that relationship, then it is possible for him to become an elder.”⁸⁹ A man could have been an out-of-control, disrespectable, violent drunkard and brawler. Or a man could have been a murderer like the apostle Paul himself (Acts 9:1; 22:4; 26:10). But God can change a man’s heart so that after a period of time people in his community think of his character as above reproach rather than as what he used to be. God can transform a man so that he is “faithful to his wife”—that is, he is faithfully devoted solely to her as his wife. At this point in his life, he is above reproach by physically and emotionally romancing his wife and his wife alone.

⁸⁷Heth does not include this passage in his table that I cite above for the other passages.

⁸⁸For a helpfully concise survey of these four views, see Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*, ed. Benjamin L. Merkle (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 124–28. I agree with how Merkle defends the “faithful to his wife” view and refutes the other three. Merkle labels the fourth view above as “an elder must have only one wife his entire life” (126–27). But I am not aware of any contemporary evangelical academics who would say that an elder whose wife dies is not free to remarry (in light of Rom 7:2–3; 1 Cor 7:8–9, 39). The debate is more focused: (1) May a divorced man be an elder? (2) May a man whose wife has died and who has remarried a divorced woman be an elder?

⁸⁹Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*, 128.

5.2. “The Husband of One Wife” ≠ Married

If “the husband of one wife” means that an elder must be married, then Jesus, Paul, and Timothy would not qualify to be elders. It would undermine how Paul exalts singleness in 1 Corinthians 7,⁹⁰ and it would further require that elders must have two or more children since 1 Timothy 3:4 and Titus 1:6 refer to an elder’s “children” (plural). “The husband of one wife” merely reflects “the common situation of the time because most people were married. It was simply the norm that men married [and had children], and there was no need to highlight the exception.”⁹¹

5.3. “The Husband of One Wife” ≠ Monogamous

“The husband of one wife” requirement entails that a married man has only one wife, but the main point of that qualification is not to target polygamy. There are two main reasons:

First, in the historical-cultural Greco-Roman and Jewish contexts, polygamy was uncommon.⁹² Bryan Chapell explains,

Polygamy was not normally practiced at the time and place where Titus ministered. If polygamy were being addressed, it would have been a peculiar addition to a list of elder qualifications—something akin to saying in this society, “An elder must not be a cannibal.” We know what cannibalism is and do not want our leaders to be cannibals, but it would be strange to put it in a list of qualifications where the practice does not commonly exist.⁹³

Second, 1 Timothy 5:9 uses a similar phrase for women: “Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband [ἐνὸς ἀνδρὸς γυνῆ].” “The wife of one husband” is formally “a one-man woman.” A one-woman man (μῑὰς γυναικὸς ἀνδρᾶ in 1 Timothy 3:2 and μῑὰς γυναικὸς ἀνὴρ in Titus 1:6) parallels a one-man woman (ἐνὸς ἀνδρὸς γυνῆ in 1 Tim 5:9). If being a one-woman man is primarily prohibiting a man from having more than one wife, then being a one-man woman is primarily prohibiting a

⁹⁰See Barry Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness: How the Storyline of Scripture Affirms the Single Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

⁹¹Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*, 125.

⁹²Edwin M. Yamauchi, “Marriage,” in *Dictionary of Daily Life in Biblical and Post-Biblical Antiquity*, ed. Edwin M. Yamauchi and Marvin R. Wilson, 4 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2014–2016), 3:242: “The Romans...regarded only monogamy as legitimate.... The Hebrew Scriptures permitted polygamy, but attested examples of polygamy in the Second Temple period are sparsely attested.”

⁹³Bryan Chapell, “Titus,” in *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus: To Guard the Deposit*, Preaching the Word, ed. R. Kent Hughes (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 294–95. Cf. Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Commentary on 1–2 Timothy and Titus*, Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2017), 127–28.

woman from having more than one husband. But I am not aware of any evidence that polyandry existed in Greco-Roman and Jewish contexts, let alone that it was common enough for Paul to highlight it in a list of character qualifications for women.

The translation “*having been* the wife of one husband” (1 Tim 5:9 ESV, NASB, KJV) is misleading. The NIV, NLT, and CEB more accurately translate ἐνὸς ἀνδρὸς γυνῆ as one who was “faithful to her husband.”

5.4. “*The Husband of One Wife*” ≠ *Not Divorced or Married to a Divorcée*

The qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:6–9 describe character qualities about a man’s *present* life (see §5.1). Three additional arguments support that “the husband of one wife” does not mean “not divorced or married to a divorcée.”

5.4.1. The Character Qualifications Apply to All Christians (and Divorce and Remarriage Are Sometimes Legitimate for Christians)

After reflecting on the lists in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:6–9, Carson observes that what is remarkable about the required qualifications is that they are not remarkable:

The list is remarkable for being unremarkable. In other words, there is nothing about superior IQ, charisma, powerful personality or the like. The Christian minister is supposed to be gentle, not supposed to get drunk, and so forth: the list is remarkable for being unremarkable. Indeed, with only a couple of exceptions, all of the qualifications listed here are elsewhere in the New Testament demanded of *all* Christians. For instance, this elder is supposed to be given to hospitality. But that is demanded of *all* Christians in Hebrews 13. What this means, then, is that the Christian pastor must exemplify in his own life the virtues and graces that are demanded of all the people of God. There are only a couple of entries here that cannot be demanded of all Christians, viz. “not a novice” and “able to teach.” Everything else is the responsibility of all believers, not just the pastors of believers.⁹⁴

If the character qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:6–9 apply to all Christians and if divorce and remarriage are sometimes legitimate (i.e., not sinful) for Christians (as I argue in §§1–4), then there is no scriptural warrant to automatically disqualify a divorced/remarried man from serving as an elder solely because he is divorced/remarried. There may be other reasons to consider that would suggest it is wise for such a man not to serve as an elder at a certain

⁹⁴D. A. Carson, “Defining Elders” (Lecture, Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC, 25 September 1994), http://sites.silaspartners.com/cc/article/0,,PTID314526_CHID626264_CIID2157886,00.html.

time, but a man's divorced/remarried status alone is not automatically disqualifying.

5.4.2. Automatically Disqualifying Divorced/Remarried Men Unbiblically Stigmatizes Them

When churches automatically forbid all divorced/remarried men from serving as elders, they stigmatize those men without scriptural warrant. Carson explains,

Some believe this verse [1 Tim 3:2] teaches that an elder cannot be a divorcé who has remarried. The Bible certainly warns against divorce in many ways. But it is also very important not to make divorce the worst sin on the horizon, the unforgivable sin, the sin against the Holy Spirit. Some have tried to impose a prohibition against anyone becoming a minister of the gospel who has ever been divorced at any time in his life. So he might have been a murderer, and then paid his debt to society, got out of prison and been converted and become a minister of the gospel. But if he's been divorced, he can't enter the ministry—which somehow projects an image of divorce as the unforgivable sin. Where divorce *does* disqualify a person from ministry, it seems to me, is bound up with a category we've already discussed: an elder "must be blameless." It's a credibility issue; or, again, a little further on, "he must be able to govern his own house well." You worry about someone whose life has cracked up in his marriage, and then three months later, he feels he's qualified to be back in ministry. He has repented, after all, and the gospel is all about forgiveness, isn't it? Clearly the Bible has something more stringent to say than that. Divorce is not the ultimate sin, nor is it the unforgivable sin, yet it may disqualify a person for ministry precisely because it destroys so much of a person's credibility, it destroys so much of his believability.... Divorce simply is not what this qualification is about.⁹⁵

5.4.3. Many Leaders of the Early Church Were Unbiblically Ascetic Regarding Sex

Some appeal to the early church to support their view that "the husband of one wife" entails that a man has never divorced or has not remarried someone who has been divorced.⁹⁶ But this will not do for at least three reasons:

First, it is not at all clear that the first centuries of church history prohibited remarriage as uniformly as Heth and Wenham allege. [As of 2002, it is only Wenham and not Heth.]...

Second, virtually all the early church fathers relied on one of several inferior forms of the text of Matt 19:9 which included language

⁹⁵Ibid.

⁹⁶Wenham and Heth, *Jesus and Divorce*, 19–44.

borrowed from 5:32 (e.g., “and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery”) that would make one read the rest of v. 9 as more obviously excluding remarriage....

Third, the general tendencies toward asceticism in sexual matters in early Greek and Latin Christianity make Patristic opinion on texts like this much less crucial for determining Scripture’s original intention than it might in other areas of doctrine or practice.⁹⁷

The main reason is the final one: many leaders in the early church were unbiblically ascetic regarding sex. Bill Heth, who coauthored a book that rested its argument for the “no remarriage” view largely on the view of the early church fathers, later rejected that view:

The church fathers restricted Jesus’ prohibition in line with a growing asceticism in the early church.... This asceticism was visible in embryonic form already in the New Testament (cf. 1 Cor. 7:1, 28, 36; 1 Tim. 4:3; Col. 2:21), and it eventually led to the requirement that ministers in the Roman Catholic Church be celibate. The extent to which this asceticism manifested itself is evident in those writers who disallowed second marriages *even after the death of a spouse* (Athenagoras, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria), contrary to the clear teaching of the apostle Paul (1 Cor. 7:39). Athenagoras (ca. AD 177) went so far as to refer to marriage after a spouse’s death as a veiled form of adultery! Most of these writers also took a very dim view of sexual relations within marriage, much like the ascetics Paul confronted in Corinth (1 Cor. 7:1b). In effect, most church fathers said, “Marital relations are only for begetting children, and even then you’d better not enjoy it!” This was hardly the teaching of Paul (1 Cor. 7:2–6; 1 Tim. 4:4).⁹⁸

5.5. Therefore, Divorced/Remarried Men May Be Elders

“Divorced persons should not automatically be excluded from leadership positions in the church, nor should those who have remarried after the very limited cases in which the New Testament permits remarriage after divorce (i.e., divorce with just cause).”⁹⁹ Divorced/remarried

⁹⁷Blomberg, “Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Celibacy,” 180–81. In support of the first reason, see Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics*, 187–88.

⁹⁸William A. Heth, “A Response to Gordon J. Wenham,” in *Remarriage after Divorce in Today’s Church: Three Views*, ed. Mark L. Strauss, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 45.

⁹⁹Heth, “Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion,” 82. For a sampling of arguments that line up with what I argue throughout §5 (i.e., that “the husband of one wife” means *faithful to his wife* and that divorced/remarried men may be elders), see Keener, *And Marries Another*, 83–103; George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 157–59; Sydney Page, “Marital Expectations of Church Leaders in the Pastoral Epistles,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 50 (1993): 105–20; Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, 3rd ed. (Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth, 1995), 190–93; John R. W. Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of*

men *may* be elders, but that does not mean that all divorced/remarried men *should* be elders. Merkle explains,

If he was the “innocent” party in the divorce and was not unfaithful, some time is still needed for him to prove himself in his new marriage. The same is true if he was divorced before he became a Christian (whether he was unfaithful in the relationship or not). But if a professing believer was unfaithful to his wife and was later divorced, then extreme caution must be exercised. The sin of unfaithfulness and divorce, like all sins, can be forgiven, and the person can become renewed. Thus, after a period of many years in his new marriage, it may be possible, though perhaps not advisable, for [such] a divorced man to become an elder.¹⁰⁰

6. CONCLUSION

While it is a serious error to permit what God forbids, it is also wrong to forbid what God permits. To insist that (a) initiating a divorce is never legitimate or (b) remarriage after divorce is never legitimate or (c) a divorced/remarried man is automatically disqualified to be an elder is to forbid what God sometimes permits.

1 Timothy and Titus, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 92–94; Douglas J. W. Milne, *1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus*, Focus on the Bible (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 1996), 59–60; Walter L. Liefeld, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 118–19; I. Howard Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, International Critical Commentary (London: T&T Clark, 1999), 155–57; R. Kent Hughes, “1 and 2 Timothy,” in *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus: To Guard the Deposit*, Preaching the Word, ed. R. Kent Hughes (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 77–78; William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 2000), 170–73; Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, 227–28, 313–14; John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 167–68; Billy Mack Gotcher, “A Pastor’s Guide on Divorce and Remarriage” (DMin thesis, Bob Jones University, 2005), 227–36; Köstenberger, *God, Marriage, and Family*, 239–45, 247–48, 369–71; Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 213–15; Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2012), 49, n. 6; Thomas R. Schreiner, “Overseeing and Serving the Church in the Pastoral and General Epistles,” in *Shepherding God’s Flock: Biblical Leadership in the New Testament and Beyond*, ed. Benjamin L. Merkle and Thomas R. Schreiner (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014), 96–98; David A. Croteau, “A Divorced Man Cannot Be a Pastor: 1 Timothy 3:2,” in *Urban Legends of the New Testament: 40 Common Misconceptions* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2015), 181–88; Storms, *Tough Topics* 2, 237–42; Jonathan Leeman, “Mailbag #44: Applying ‘Husband of One Wife’; Leaving the Church but Attending Bible Study; Women Voting in the Church,” *9Marks*, 9 December 2016, <https://9marks.org/mailbag/44/>.

¹⁰⁰Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*, 128. Related: See D. A. Carson, “The SBJT Forum: Do you think that a fallen Christian leader can ever be restored? If not, why not? But if so, under what conditions?,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4 (2000): 87–89; Jay E. Smith, “Can Fallen Leaders Be Restored to Leadership?,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151 (1994): 455–80.