

**Sex,  
Singleness,  
and Selection  
in First  
Corinthians 7:  
The Naked  
Truth**

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*This is piquant irony: here we are with all our high notions of ourselves as intellectual and spiritual beings, and the most profound form of knowledge for us is the plain business of skin on skin. It is humiliating. When two members of this godlike, cerebral species approach the heights of communion between themselves, what do they do? Think? Speculate? Meditate? No, they take off their clothes. Do they want to get their brains together? No. It is the most appalling of ironies: their search for union takes them quite literally in a direction away from where their brains are. (G. Lloyd Carr)*

When the twenty-first century reader listens to Paul's response to a number of questions regarding marriage put to him by the Corinthian congregation, she inevitably ends up with questions of her own. For instance, what really is marriage (Dundas 1990; Davidson 1996)? How is that Paul can discuss such important matters having to do with family without ever relating them to the ideal of love (Edwards 2006; Haynes 2006)? And is sex the sole reason for getting married, as is suggested by verses 1-5?

In the middle of the first century, it would appear, a church was having its fair share of problem with nudity: some Christian men were evidently refusing to take off their clothes after their wedding! With their knowledge of the Pentateuch in general (assumed, for example, by Paul in chap. 10:1ff), one would think that a text like Genesis 2:25 ('And they were both naked, the husband and his wife, and were not ashamed.') should have had some bearing on matters like this in Christian Corinth. What apparently had more weight was the slogan 'It is good for a man not to touch a woman,' which gave expression to the philosophy of the day that matter, being evil, did not matter. Based on this, the Corinthian husbands sought to establish their own brand of holiness on holy wedlock, to the apparent frustration of their wives. Unfortunately for these men they did not have the benefit of the piece of wisdom cited above.

The Corinthian men thought they were 'intellectuals' all right (1:18-2:8). They also thought themselves spiritual (3:1; 14:37). But the apostle and planter of the church disagreed. The First letter of Corinthians is his corrective to a number of problems<sup>93</sup> they were experiencing and chapter 7 is Paul's response to some of their family issues. These issues can be conveniently read using the following framework.

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<sup>93</sup> Favouritism (1-4), faithfulness (5-6), family (7), freedom (8-11), fellowship and Function (12-14), and the future (15; Palmer 1989, 91-92). This paper surveys the 'family' chapter in its entirety; for exegetical details, the reader is referred to the standard commentaries, such as Garland 2003; Thiselton 2000; Blomberg 1994; and Conzelmann 1975. Other useful studies are to be found in Dunois 1998 and Homer 1989.

**Marriage and Sex (1-5)**

Marriage<sup>94</sup> begins with a societal and spiritual event at the centre of which is a covenant. It is then consummated by a physical and spiritual act:

**Marriage**

**Heterosexual Union**

*'Leave'*

*'Cleave'*

Public Covenant  
(Societal Aspect)

Private Consummation  
(Sexual Aspect)

The physical act is treated in some circles as if it were a 'four-letter word'. But if you have never thought about this 'four-letter word', according to a distinguished Jamaican, it is either you are too young, too old or too *lie*. Some of the Corinthian men, apparently, fell in the last category. Others, unable to control themselves, were evidently visiting the first century equivalent of brothels; thus the apostle's strong word: 'Flee prostitution!' (6:18). This gift of God was never meant to be used in this way. The Corinthian

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<sup>94</sup> For marital anomalies in the OT world, Africa and Jamaica, see Wright 2004, 330-333; Gbadero 2006, 204-216; McGavran 1962; Dundas 1990; Gerig 1967; and Panton 1994; for an attempt at re-igniting marital sparks, we now have Hall's work-book (2007) which, curiously, does not mention sex!. See also [www. Formarriageonly.org](http://www.Formarriageonly.org).

congregation should have known this all along because the proper functions of sex are clearly laid out in their Bible (our OT).

What are these functions? The book of Genesis suggests that sex and marriage are for *procreation*<sup>95</sup> and *partnership* (1:28a; 2:24-25). There is also a hint that sex in marriage is for pleasure as well, since the meaning of their 'bed-room' (Eden)<sup>96</sup> is *pleasure*. Isaac was one OT husband who apparently knew this well, to judge from his 'sporting'<sup>97</sup> (AV) behaviour toward Rebecca (26:8; in the context this is foreplay all the way). Apparently, before Isaac's conception 'sporting' had ceased in Abraham's household for some time, causing Sarah to cynically remark 'shall I have pleasure [same root as "Eden"]', my husband being old also?' But it is the chapters of Canticles (4: 10-5:1, in particular where the consummative honeymoon is described in beautiful poetic images; Harrison 1998) and Proverbs 5:15-21, which speak eloquently to this point. As was said before, the Corinthians should have known all of this. But because of the moral degradation of the society, the apostle added

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<sup>95</sup> The additional 'blessing' in 1: 28b to 'subdue the earth,' while not limited to what is now called family planning (contraception in particular), is definitely within its purview (Waltke 1969, 7-23; Southern 2006, 117-118).

<sup>96</sup> 'Very strictly, it is not "the Garden of Eden" at all, but "*a garden in Eden*." It is to be grasped very clearly that the garden was simply a limited area within a larger area "Eden," and the two are not identical' (Kitchen 2003, 428). For 'Eden' as sexual pleasure, see Holladay (1971, 266).

<sup>97</sup> Cf. the Yoruba dictum, "'*je ka sere omo*", that is, "let us play the game that leads to children"' (Adeniyi 2005, 28).

one more function to the above list: *prevention*. This was partly to counter the popular slogan, 'it is good for a man not to touch [a euphemism for sex?] a woman,' and to prepare them for a neglected area of spiritual warfare mentioned in verses 4-5. With this in mind, it seems unfair to Paul to say that 'The only recommendation he can come up with for marriage' (Chilton 2004, 211).

### **Marriage and Singleness (7:6-9)**

Whether or not Paul was married before writing the Corinthian correspondence is a moot question (Longenecker 1971, 24; Murphy-O'Connor 1997, 62-65). One tradition (cited in Murphy-O'Connor 63) explains his strong bias toward celibacy this way:

Paul . . . [h]aving gone up to Jerusalem and having remained there a long time . . . desired to marry a daughter of the (high?) priest . . . .

When nevertheless he did not obtain the girl, he became furious and began to write against circumcision, the Sabbath and the Law.

In verses above Paul is at pains to point out that singleness<sup>98</sup> is an *option*, despite the fact that it is also an endowment. Verse seven<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Singleness and virginity are not two of the most popular options in the Caribbean basin (cf. Mullings 2000). The 'special use of *parqenoi* in 1 Cor 7.34 and 7.36 implies that the virginity of women was of central significance in Corinth and was causing considerable concern for Paul' (MacDonald 2004, 170). 'Male and female virginity is recognized as a sacred treasure that must be guarded' (Pierre 2001, 27).

lists two charismatic gifts that are seldom if any at all mentioned in some church circles (Black 2006, 160-162): the gifts of celibacy and 'intimacy' (or singleness and 'togetherness'). The Corinthians were pre-occupied with other gifts (chapters 12-14). The apostle Paul claims he has the gift of celibacy and he wishes that everyone had this gift, because it is ideally suited for service. So he addresses the bachelors, spinsters, widowers (Thiselton 2000,) widows (vv. 8, 9) and, later, those who are separated. Both McDonald (2004) and Fiorenza (2004) argue that the Corinthian women were at the centre of Paul's concern at this point. Today the concern, particularly in the Caribbean church, is for the men. For example,

The issue of the absence of men from the fellowship, worship and witness of the church in Jamaica presents the Church with pressing pastoral problems. These include the plight of frustrated single women<sup>100</sup> . . . the ineffectiveness of socializing function of the church and high incidences of dysfunctional and failed marriage (Vassel 1997, v).

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<sup>99</sup> A JTS graduate, Karis, pointed out to the writer that 1 Cor. 7:7 is the 7<sup>th</sup> book, 7<sup>th</sup> chapter and 7<sup>th</sup> verse of the NT. Of course, since the canonical order and the chapter and verse divisions are not inspired, this triple-seven phenomenon is merely fortuitous (or providential?). But there is a plethora of significant sevens within the NT (Whitlark and Parsons 2006) and Romans (Jewett 2007, 35f) in particular, such as 7 scriptural citations (Rom. 3: 10-18), 7 afflictions (Rom. 8: 35), 7 doxological affirmations (Rom. 11: 33-36), 7 gifts (Rom. 12: 6-8), etc.

<sup>100</sup> Some like Barwick (1997) would object to the phrase 'frustrated single' as a stereotype; cf. Munroe 2005.

This 'male marginality has existed as far back as slavery' (Vassel, 20; cf. Shepherd 2007 *passim*), and there appears to be some evidence of it in New Testament times.

### **Marriage and Separation (10-16)**

Marriage is for keeps (Kivunzi 1990, 29-30). On this point Paul did not have to give his inspired opinion as he did above on the matter of singleness (vv. 6, 7), because Christ himself had already given a categorical ruling on this issue : "You have heard the law that says, 'A man can divorce his wife by merely giving her a written notice of divorce.' But I say that a man who divorces his wife, unless she has been unfaithful, causes her to commit adultery. And anyone who marries a divorced woman also commits adultery" (Matt 5: 31-32 NLT; cf. Bedard 2006).

The verses appear in the now famous Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus sets forth the principles by which Kingdom people must abide, if they are to effectively maintain their presence as salt and light in a world that is both dark and decaying. The sermon is the first of five major discourses that appear to parallel the first five books of the Jewish canon. If indeed the parallel was intended by the Evangelist, we may be justified in seeing Jesus as the new lawgiver, presenting his own Messianic code over against that which formed the basis of the Mosaic covenant, and its subsequent misreading. If we further endorse the construct that Matthew wrote primarily to Jews, the sermon takes on added potency. Verses 31-32 artistically form the third of six antithetical statements in which Jesus contrasts popular Jewish understandings of the Mosaic Law

with his own authoritative interpretations. The phrase in verse 31 rendered "You have heard" does not introduce a direct quotation of Scripture. It rather represents a summary of the rabbinic position of the day. In fact, there were two rival positions that dominated First Century Jewish thought on the question of divorce (see Appendix A). But right now we will pay closer attention to Jesus' paraphrase of Deuteronomy 24 as it was understood by his contemporaries and his strong corrective in verse 32. What is clear from this verse is that Jesus severely restricted the current divorce practice, a practice which was not only too loose but discriminated against wives as well. For instance, only husbands were permitted to divorce. There was no court hearing to listen to the other side and, according to one school of interpretation, while burnt offerings were necessary in regards to the temple, in the home they may have constituted grounds for divorce (France 1985, 122).

Against this background, Jesus declared that a divorced woman was actually forced into an adulterous relationship--once she remarried. Notice that her new husband is also implicated. But it is the ex-husband who bore the greater guilt. The new ethic introduced by Jesus was indeed quite radical. Divorce will not be tolerated.

This brings us to the phrase of exception that seems to soften the hard-line position taken by Jesus on the issue. Even before we explore the key term in the phrase, the question needs to be posed as to whether or not these troublesome words really go back to Jesus. One answer is that they came from "Matthew, not from Jesus, as an editorial insertion to conform Jesus' words to God's Word in the Old Testament" (Gundry 1982, 90) In other words, we neither have Jesus' *ipsisima verba* nor his *ipsisima vox* at this point, just



Matthew's embellishment. But this will not do. While it can be easily demonstrated that the Evangelists selected and shaped their material for literacy and theological ends, I find it inconceivable that one who is reputed to be an apostle,<sup>101</sup> a member of the original band of disciples, could put words in his master's mouth and thereby present an exception where none was intended. It is better then to see the phrase of exception as expressing the very mind of Jesus, if not the very words.

We now return to what may be considered the key term in verse 32, that is, the word rendered "fornication" in our common version or "marital unfaithfulness" in the NIV. What is the precise meaning of the word in this context? Theodore Epp, the late founder of Back to the Bible International, took the term to mean "the sin of immorality committed before marriage" (1968, 44). This is perhaps the most popular understanding of the term in the Anglophone Caribbean.

Another suggestion gaining popularity amongst New Testament scholars is that *porneia*, the Greek term in question, bears the meaning of incest. This, for example, was the position of F. F. Bruce.

I think the term . . . has the same sense here as in I Cor. 5:1 (and probably also in the apostolic decree of Acts 15:20, 29, 21:25), that is to say, it refers to marital unions within prohibited degrees as laid down in Lev. 18 and not to adultery. Where such unions have been contracted, the

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<sup>101</sup> An assertion like this holds no water for people like Nolland (2005) who is skeptical of the traditional view of authorship.

separation of the parties concerned when they become Christians is permissible, if not indeed obligatory (1972, 43).

Nolland (2005, 245) also mentions adultery, prostitution, bigamy, and “intercourse with one’s menstruating wife” as possible meanings.<sup>102</sup>

It is now time for us to weigh these different proposals. In the first view it is argued that ‘fornication’ is to be understood as pre-marital sexual intercourse. Chief support for this position comes from the earlier episode of Mary and Joseph when the latter, thinking that his fiancée had sinned, was seriously contemplating divorce. While this interpretation is somewhat plausible, I think it fails to do justice to the context of Matthew 5:31 which certainly has in view a situation after the wedding ceremony, and not before. For this view, then, the Joseph-Mary situation turns out to be a poor parallel.

The second view mentioned above is that ‘fornication’ actually refers to the prohibition against incest found in Leviticus 18 (e.g. vv 1-13, 17-18). As was pointed out already the late F. F. Bruce cited Acts 15:20 and 24 to support his case. In these two verses Bruce’s assigned meaning does, in my view, fit the context well, but I must hasten to add that not all agree with him at this point. They believe instead that ‘fornication’ may just bear its general meaning as we have it in the NIV (i.e. “sexual immorality”). The other Scripture

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<sup>102</sup> Since the Greek word for ‘wife’ is used in parallel to ‘concubine’ in Judges 19: 1, 27 (LXX; cf. Sigal 1980, 62, 92), is it possible that this is the meaning of *gunh*, in the text? It would make good sense of the exceptive clause.

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cited by Bruce is I Cor. 5:1. This is manifestly close to Lev 18, particularly verse 8, which reads in the NIV “do not have sexual relations with your father’s wife; that would dishonour your father.” But what is not clear in I Cor. 5:1 is whether or not the erring brother married his step-mother. However, what is definitely in view at Matt. 5:31 is a marital union that is disrupted by ‘fornication’—whatever that is.

Perhaps the simplest solution is to take the term in question to mean adultery. The main argument against doing so, though, is that there was a term readily available that could have removed any ambiguity. It is the word *moicheia*. In fact, Matthew will juxtapose both terms in chapter 15:19 when he quotes our Lord as saying “for out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications . . .”

We now come to the position that makes the best sense in the context of Matthew 5 (and chap. 19; see Appendix A). It is simply this: fornication is a general term which means sexual immorality (Davies and Allison 1988, 529ff.). This is reflected in the NIV. A common problem of the views we looked at is that they all attempt to squeeze the term into too narrow a mold. If we understand the term to be a general one in context, then it was perhaps used by Jesus to cover any or all of the sexually deviant practices of his day, some of which are mentioned in Leviticus 18.

But as interested as we are in the question of separation, divorce and remarriage this century, let us not forget that forgiveness and reconciliation is closer to the mind of the Lord in these matters than anything else (e.g., 7:11; cf. Garland 2007, 151-152).

### **Marriage and Service (17-35)**

The importance of this consideration for Paul is seen in the number of lines assigned to it. Serving God in a Christ-rejecting world was already a difficult proposition for Paul the bachelor/divorcee. For the Corinthians who were married, it would have been even more difficult. It is more or less the same in the twenty-first century (in which the engagement-*ring* and the married- *ring* precede the suffer-*ring*! v. 28).<sup>103</sup> That is why the apostle's counsel in this chapter is timeless. What is he saying?

Firstly, every Christian, whatever his/her calling in life, is a *servant* of Christ, and that should take precedent over every other status (vv. 17-24). In light of this, getting married (or re-married) takes on a new meaning. Why? Because the time for kingdom service is at a premium (v 29). So how then should married people order their priorities? Some espouse the following:

- God first
- Ministry second
- Family third

While others adopt something like this:

1. God
2. Family

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<sup>103</sup> It is said that marriage is like a telephone call in the night: first the rings, and then you wake up!

3. Ministry

The second set of priorities seems to be an improvement on the first. However, neither philosophy has the careful Pauline nuance found in verses 29-35. What Paul argues in these verses is that family and ministry must exist in flexible tension. That is, 1 and 2 above may swap places depending on the need of the hour (v. 29a), mutual consent (v. 5a) and the will of God for that particular circumstance (v. 19b). The will of God for Paul was primarily located within the new Messianic code of ethics, as the following comparative schema shows:

**Mesographic Code  
(Romans 2: 12-15)**

For Every Gentile?<sup>104</sup>

**Mosaic Code  
(Psalm 147: 19-20)**

For Every Jew?

***Messianic Code*  
(1 Corinthians 9:19-23)**

For Every Christian?<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> The Gentiles' 'Mesographic Code,' (Borrowed from *mesographos*, 'drawn [or written] in the middle [heart?]' Liddell and Scott 1997, 500, i.e. e., written inside;. (cf. Epictetus 1926, 312) what Lewis and Demarest (1996, 1: 95) call 'the implanted law.' Cf. Segal (2003, 166), who mentions the 'seven commandments which the rabbis assumed were given to all humanity before Moses .' On Rom. 2:12-15, see Kruse (2012, 128-145).

But *El Numero Uno* remains preeminent. It is in this light that we understand what might seem to be a strange injunction: ‘...from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none’ (v. 29b; NASB). Of course, the balance is restored in verses 32-35, which point out that married people have a serious handicap in the Lord’s service when compared with singles. Knowing this Paul became a ‘eunuch’ to give himself fully to kingdom business (Matt, 19:12b).

### **Marriage and Selection (36-39)**

Verse 36 introduces a first century situation that would be analogous to a long engagement today (*contra* Caragounis 2006). Should this brother bring forward the wedding date, or should it be allowed to remain, while taking the risk of having the divine anger burn against him on account of fornication? Self-control is strongly recommended (v.37). But we must not miss Paul’s point in regard to the matter of choice: the date of the wedding is not fixed (like the proverbial law of the Medes and Persians). It is flexible (v 38).

All well and good for the wedding date. But what about a lifetime mate? Is not such a person ‘fixed’ in the sense that God has one person for everybody? The answer is an emphatic No! If that were the case, the Sadducean question of Matthew 22:28 would be nonsensical in that cultural setting, and the poor woman in the story

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<sup>105</sup> Believers today, like Paul, should see themselves as *ennomoi Christou* (1 Cor. 9: 21b; Carson 2004, 402); their directives (1 Cor. 9: 19b) are to be found here, minus the command to be circumcised (1 Cor. 9: 19a)—and a whole lot more.

would have been in breach of the will of God six times over—a clear case of serial polygamy! Of course, each of her husbands would have been innocent of such a charge since he only married the *one* person that God had for him (but not so David, or worst, his son Solomon, who were both guilty of simultaneous polygamy). No, God does not have one person for everybody, as is popularly taught. But what 1 Corinthians 7:28 teaches is that marriage is a choice and verse 39 implies further that the person I want to marry has a choice as well. That is the naked truth. And there is a caveat: ‘... only in the Lord.’ v. 39c).

Verse 39b also reminds us of a precious truth that is often overlooked, particularly in our occidental world (*pace* Edwards 2006): the woman has a choice in selecting her life partner; she is not a pawn of her culture: ‘she is *free* to marry *anyone she wishes*. . . ’ (NIV; emphasis mine). This, I think, is richly illustrated in the story of ‘Ruth-less’ Boaz, who was selected by a shrewd mother-in-law, Naomi, and sagacious widow, originally from Moab (Ruth 3-4). Another Old Testament episode which bears out the point is located in the longest chapter in the book of Genesis (Sarna 1989, 161; cf. MacLeod 2006). There Abraham’s servant is sent to fetch a bride for Isaac, the son of promise. Both at the beginning and at the end of the chapter the self-determination of the bride-to-be is underlined. In the first instance we read: ‘What if the woman is unwilling to come back with me to this land? (Gen. 24: 5; NIV. Cf. v. 39); and finally: ‘So they called Rebecca and asked her, “Will you go with this man?” “I will go,” she said’ (v. 58).

Now it must be observed that Isaac *had* to marry, given the promises made to his father. While this may be true of some others, it is

certainly not true of everyone. Put another way, spinsters and bachelors today *may* marry (1 Cor. 7: 28); Isaac, on the other hand, though free not to marry, eventually chose to be married—and yet his marriage, like that of Ruth, was an outworking of the redemptive plan of God (Gen. 24: 7-14), which also excluded the Redeemer from getting married in order for him to effectively carry out the Abrahamic/Isaakan covenant (Genesis 12: 1-3; *contra* Starbird 2005)

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Like Plato of old, the Caribbean church for the most part disapproves of same sex unions. And like Plato, she has very little to say about “love between man and woman” (Field 1969, 123), though, thankfully, the situation is changing (Ameiss and Graver 1998; Bell 2005). But like in all areas of church life the truth appears hard to come by.

Once upon a time Truth and Error ended up on the same beach. Truth had arrived first, not knowing that her erroneous enemy would soon to follow. When Error arrived Truth was already in the water taking a swim. Instead of doing the same (and to avoid risking a debate with Truth about the flawed agenda of post-modernism and whether or not there are absolute ethical principles), Error simply stole the clothes of Truth and ran away. That’s why today Error can often be found in the garb of truth—and that’s why we still talk about the naked Truth.

Now for our summary: First Corinthians 7 (along with scores of other passages) declares that marriage-

*Must be* a permanent affair (v 39a)

*Will be* a problematic affair (v 28b)



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*May be a procreative affair (v 14b)*

*Can be a pleasurable affair (v 3)*

That's the naked truth.

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**APPENDIX**

***NOTES ON DIVORCE & REMARRIAGE IN THE TEACHING OF JESUS***

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Passages: Mt. 5.31-32; 19.3-12; Mk. 10.1-12; Lk. 16.18

**Pointers:**

1. Luke (16.18) and Mark (10.11) have the same essential content: to divorce and remarry is adultery [presumably after having sex] and to marry a divorcee is adultery [presumably after having sex]. Note that Mark has the woman initiating a divorce where, normally, it would be the man's prerogative.<sup>106</sup>
2. In both Mark and Matthew 19, what occasioned Jesus' teaching on divorce was a test question from Pharisees about divorce or the grounds for divorce not about remarriage per se.
  - Mk. 10.2, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"
  - Mt. 19.3, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"

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<sup>106</sup> By the end of the first century BC, increasingly, women were gaining the right to divorce. In Jewish circles, this would often happen by a woman showing a court that she had sufficient grounds to warrant the court's intervention in persuading her husband to divorce her.

3. In both Mark and Matthew 19, Jesus, as Stott<sup>107</sup> observes, opened with a comment about the original intention and ideal of marriage: its nature (male/female, leaving/cleaving/one-flesh relationship, Gen. 1.27; 2.24) and permanence (no separation of what God has 'yoked together').
4. In both Mark and Matthew 19, Jesus indicated that the Mosaic bill of divorce was permitted<sup>108</sup> because of 'hardness of heart' and was not part of the original plan for marriage. John Stott and C.E.B. Cranfield make comments, based on the reason Jesus gave why the bill of divorce was allowed, that are puzzling, suspect, or definitely inaccurate.

"Since Jesus referred to the Mosaic provision as a concession to human sin, which was also intended to limit its evil effects, it cannot possibly be taken as indicating God's approval of divorce. To be sure, it was a divine concession... Yet the divine concession of divorce was contrary to the divine institution of marriage 'from the beginning'... Divorce is nowhere commanded, and never even encouraged, in Scripture. On the contrary, even if

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<sup>107</sup> John Stott, *Decisive Issues Facing Christians Today*, 292.

<sup>108</sup> One may be minded to argue that the disciples in Matthew 19 seemed to have taken the 'command' interpretation of Deut. 24:1 (see Greek, *eneteilato* [from *entellomai*] in their question in v. 7) whereas Jesus takes the 'permission' interpretation (see Greek, *epitrepsen* [from *epitrepō*] in his reply in v. 8). However, Mark 10:3-4 reverses the verbs, putting *entellomai* on the lips of Jesus and *epitrepō* on the lips of the disciples.



biblically justified, it remains a sad and sinful declension from the divine ideal.” (John Stott)<sup>109</sup>

Consider that the wearing of clothes in Eden, a divine concession based on human sin, was not itself a sin, even though it was contrary to the divine institution of nudity ‘from the beginning’. Can a thing be ‘biblically justified’ but sinful?

“Human conduct which falls short of the absolute command of God is sin and stands under the divine judgment. The provisions which God’s mercy has designed for the limitation of the consequences of man’s sin must not be interpreted as divine approval for sinning.” (C.E.B. Cranfield)<sup>110</sup>

If this reasoning were sound then the divine positive-law permission/concession of divorce in the Mosaic covenant would itself be an invitation to sin. What would Cranfield say of God’s action in divorcing Israel?

“‘Hardness of heart’ has been interpreted by some as if it means ‘sinfulness,’ but the Old Testament use of the word suggests that ‘stubbornness’ would be a closer meaning for a first-century Jew... This combined word [Greek: sklērokardia] occurs elsewhere only in Mark 16:14 (the

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<sup>109</sup> John Stott, 292-293, 300.

<sup>110</sup> Cited in Stott, 293.

stubborn disbelief of the disciples), and in a few OT texts [in Greek] where it means ‘stubbornness’.” (David Instone-Brewer)<sup>111</sup>

The Greek word for ‘hardness of heart’ or ‘stubbornness’ is a uniquely biblical word appearing first in a few Greek Old Testament texts, one of which, Jer. 4.4, deals with divorce in general and Deut. 24.1 in particular (see the context in Jer. 3.1). It is quite possible, though not certain, that our Lord had this Jeremiah passage in mind, in which case, he would have been suggesting that the ‘hardness of heart’ or ‘stubbornness’ related to the unfaithful partner who refused to repent of adulterous behaviour thus prompting a divorce option where repentance could have prompted a forgiveness option.<sup>112</sup>

5. Setting aside, temporarily, the exceptive phrase, then all of the passages in the gospels treat remarriage [and sex] after divorce, as adultery.
6. Jesus, in Matthew, by the phrase “except for sexual immorality (Greek: *porneia*)”, permitted divorce and remarriage (as an option) on the ground of sexual immorality. Several things need to be noted about the force and meaning of the exceptive phrase. But first let’s try to make sense of exceptive phrases generally.

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<sup>111</sup> Page 144.

<sup>112</sup> Instone-Brewer, 144-146.

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30 days hath September, April, June and November, all the rest have 31 days excepting February(= February does not have 31 days)

*Bank Notice*

Coins will be accepted only on Wednesdays except the last Wednesday of each month.

Could you deposit coins on the last Wednesday of September in this Bank?

- The exceptive phrase in Matthew was a genuine statement from Jesus despite its absence in Mark and Luke.<sup>113</sup> There is no manuscript evidence to suggest otherwise. Mark and Luke then, are shorter versions of a longer teaching.
- Some argue that porneia, in the exceptive phrase, means an incestuous marriage (Lev. 18)<sup>114</sup> but this is unlikely since such a marriage would be null and void and so a divorce certificate would not be necessary.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> A similar issue arises re the questions put to Jesus about the destruction of the Temple. Mark and Luke ask about the timing of the destruction and a sign concerning the timing (Mk.13.4;Lk. 21.7). Matthew, uniquely but authentically adds a question about the second coming and the end of the age (Mt. 24.3). See also re a sign, Mk. 8.11-12 in light of Mt. 12.39 (with exception).

<sup>114</sup> So J. Carl Laney in *The Divorce Myth*, 72-78.

<sup>115</sup> Several texts in the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud make this point (*m. Qidd 2.7; b. Yebam.10b; 44b; 52b; 69a, etc.*).

Others argue that *porneia* means premarital sex, consistent with the Joseph/Mary example in Mt. 1.18-19.<sup>116</sup> Additionally, it is pointed out that Jesus also uses a different word for adultery (*moicheia*) in the same verse. This limited meaning of *porneia* as premarital sex raises questions about whether adultery would not be a ground for divorce. Practically now, (unlike in old Israel), there would be a colossal problem because it would mean only virgins could be legitimate spouses! In all likelihood, *porneia* had to do with any sexually immoral act after marriage, as the term was wider than and included adultery.<sup>117</sup> In the context of a debate about legitimate grounds for divorce, Jesus seems to use a broad sexual term (*porneia*) for the vague sexual term *ervat*.<sup>118</sup> The exceptive phrase applies to a permission to divorce and to remarry, contrary to the otherwise careful arguments

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<sup>116</sup> Joseph apparently was planning to divorce Mary rather than have her stoned to death (see Deut. 22.21). The Jews lost the right to use capital punishment about AD 30, hence catalyzing the trend of divorce for adultery replacing death for adultery.

<sup>117</sup> See the view of Spiros Zodhiates after a comprehensive examination of the lexicons, *What About Divorce?* 129-139.

<sup>118</sup> *Porneia* and *moicheia* are at times used synonymously. Normally and technically though, *moicheia* is adultery and is defined by the married status of the woman involved. Technically, sexual intercourse of either a married or unmarried man with a *single woman* would normally be regarded as *porneia*, whereas sexual intercourse of either a married or unmarried man with a *married woman* would normally be regarded as *moicheia*.

of scholars like William A. Heth and Gordon J. Wenham in Jesus and Divorce.<sup>119</sup>

Heth and Wenham argue for a permission to divorce but no remarriage, and base their conclusions on two main arguments. First, for five centuries (excepting for Ambrosiaster in the fourth) the church Fathers, and later the western Church up to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, permitted divorce but no remarriage. Second, the astonishment of the disciples, after hearing Jesus on divorce, is best explained by a total ban on remarriage. Stott's critique is helpful and we quote him fully.

“Although this case is strong, it is not conclusive. First, the early church Fathers could have been mistaken in this matter as they were in others. Secondly, the statement in Matthew 5.32 that a husband who illegitimately divorces his wife ‘causes her to commit adultery’ can be true only if after the divorce she remarries. Thirdly, the disciples’ astonishment leading to the teaching on celibacy could have had another cause. Their perception must certainly have been of the strictness of Jesus. Not only did he reject the trivial laxity of the Hillel school, but also Shammai’s interpretation, and indeed Moses’ own reference to ‘something indecent’, as being too imprecise. Only sexual infidelity could be admitted as a ground for breaking the marriage bond.

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<sup>119</sup> Cited and critiqued in John Stott, *Decisive Issues Facing Christians Today*, 295-296.

This had been clearly recognized in the Old Testament because it was punishable by death. But the death sentence for adultery had fallen into desuetude [disuse], and in any case, the Romans did not permit the Jews to administer it. So when Joseph suspected Mary of unfaithfulness, he thought of divorce, not death (Matthew 1.18ff)...It seems then that he abrogated the death penalty for sexual infidelity, and made this the only legitimate ground for dissolving the marriage bond, by divorce not death, and then only as a permission."<sup>120</sup>

The early Church Fathers had very strange views on marriage and reveal tendencies against marriage.<sup>121</sup>

- Jesus' exception phrase is identical to that of Shammai and both permitted divorce on the ground of sexual immorality while dealing with Deut. 24. Shammai also held, like all Jews, that other grounds for divorce, arose from breaches of Ex. 21.10-11.

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<sup>120</sup> John Stott, 295.

<sup>121</sup> See Hermas, *Command.* 4.1.6-8; Justin, *Apol.* 1.15.1-4; Athenagoras, *Plea for the Christians* 33, available at <http://www.ccel.org/>, under "(Schaff)".