

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

DIVORCE

Submitted to Dr. John Markley, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the completion of the course

201640 Fall 2016 NBST 618-D01 LUO

The Corinthian Correspondence

by

Matthew McNutt

December 16, 2016

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Moses	2
Ancient Practices	2
Moses' Instructions	4
Jesus	6
Jewish Practices	6
Jesus' Teachings	7
Paul	9
Greco-Roman Practices	9
Paul's Teachings	10
Conclusion	14
Bibliography	15

Introduction

Divorce is an issue that has become both increasingly debated and normalized in American churches and the culture at large. As marriage rates decrease and divorce rates increase, the two statistics are almost equal.¹ As John Murray put it, “the question of divorce is one that perennially interests and agitates the church.”² The Apostle Paul answers questions from the Corinthians regarding marriage, singleness and divorce in 1 Corinthians 7. Gordon Fee points out that Paul’s approach in addressing these topics is different than anywhere else in the New Testament.³ The challenge for the modern reader is reconciling what at first glance seem to be differences in the teachings on divorce from the different biblical authors, in particular the three main voices, Moses, Jesus and Paul. Moses not only allows it, but creates a legal system for it; Jesus forbids it except in the case of adultery; Paul recommends against divorce in the case of adultery, but allows it if a spouse is unsaved and desires divorce.

What is perhaps more important to this topic is what is left unsaid in scripture. These texts range in age from two thousand years ago to thirty-five hundred years ago, presenting a number of cultural and language challenges to surmount. Views and understandings of divorce left unwritten because they were assumed common knowledge at the time create challenges to understanding the intent of the authors today, creating a need to both understand the culture of

¹ H. Wayne House, ed., *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1990), 9.

² John Murray, *Divorce* (Philadelphia: P & R Publishing, 1961), 1.

³ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians, Revised Edition (The New International Commentary On the New Testament)*, Revised ed. (Downers Grove, IL: Eerdmans, 2014), 270.

the Jewish people as well as the influence of surrounding nations and cultural understandings of marriage and divorce relevant to the time period.⁴ This paper will demonstrate that God's view of the marriage covenant is that is binding and lifelong, with monogamy being His intent throughout scripture by primarily looking at the teachings of Moses, Jesus and Paul. However, while scripture presents a high standard for marriage, it also demonstrates an understanding of the reality of a sinful, fallen world, with a heart for protecting those who would be taken advantage of or injured through divorce. It is not an affirmation of divorce, rather, an uncomfortable tension between the holiness God desires and the ongoing reality of sinful flesh.

Moses

The first major instructions regarding the issue of divorce come from the Pentateuch, which tradition credits Moses as the author.⁵ While there are a handful of mentions elsewhere in the Old Testament, it is Moses who describes both the beginnings of marriage in Genesis and the institution of divorce certificates as part of the law in Deuteronomy. There are many parallels between the marriage practices of the ancient Near East and the Jewish marriage practices.⁶

Ancient Practices

While covenant language was used in ancient marriage practices, it was interchangeable with the modern idea of contracts. Covenant language was used not just for marriages, but also

⁴ David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), Kindle location 1508.

⁵ John Walton, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 41.

⁶ Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, Kindle location 47.

for treaties, hiring labor, as well as other types of transactions.⁷ Being a patriarchal society, marriage negotiations took place between the father of the bride and the husband-to-be's household, with a contract decided on that included a bride-price to be paid to the bride's parents.⁸ The bride had no official voice in the negotiation process or the selection of a husband. One interesting aspect of the exchange was the dowry that came with the bride; it was delivered after the wedding was consummated and remained the property of the bride, to be passed down to only her children in the event of her death (in the case of polygamy), and if the husband were to divorce or break the relationship she was to be released with her dowry returned to her possession. The husband would only be allowed to keep the dowry if the bride was the one to violate the terms of the marriage covenant.⁹

Many of the stipulations went unwritten because they were universally understood. Culture dictated certain basic rights and responsibilities. While women were not considered property in the same way that land or livestock were, the comparison is still valid as the majority of the rights were possessed by men. The dowry was typically the only thing recorded in exact detail, in part because with marriage viewed as a contract, the loss of the dowry would have been the main penalty for breaking the contract.¹⁰ In reality, short of committing adultery – which would result in a death sentence, there was no way for a woman to leave a man, while the man

⁷ Ibid, Kindle location 58.

⁸ Ken M. Campbell, ed., *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 10.

⁹ Ibid, 11.

¹⁰ Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, Kindle location 225.

had significantly more freedom to put the woman out and divorce her.¹¹ Because divorces were not officially documented, however, a woman was not free to remarry because she technically still belonged to her former husband. This generally left abandoned women in a particularly vulnerable and untenable position.

Moses' Instructions

The institution of marriage is first documented in Genesis 2:23-24, which following the naming of the animals in pairs, as well as Adam and Eve being created for one another, forms the foundation of monogamy being God's intended plan for humans from creation.¹² Waltke writes that this first marriage, with Eve given to Adam by God, teaches that "every marriage is divinely ordained," with the intent to correct the cultural teachings that stressed parental bonds over marital bonds.¹³ While polygamy was common throughout the Old Testament, the growing view throughout the Old Testament writings suggests that monogamy was a value that was increasingly recognized as the ideal, with that teaching really coming to fruition in the years before Christ's arrival.¹⁴

Research indicates that when it came to marriage, divorce, and remarriage, the Jews largely shared the same cultural views as the rest of the ancient Near East.¹⁵ A reoccurring theme

¹¹ Ibid, Kindle location 111.

¹² Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1988), 126-127.

¹³ Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 90.

¹⁴ Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, Kindle location 256.

¹⁵ Ibid, Kindle location 238.

for Moses in Deuteronomy that sets Jews apart from the surrounding cultures is the protection of the dignity of a woman vulnerable to abuse in marriage.¹⁶ One example is in Deuteronomy 21:10-14, which gives instructions regarding the capture of women in war and the process for making them wives. While barbaric in modern culture, what Moses mandates in this passage humanizes women by giving them a month to grieve the death of their former husbands in contrast to the ancient Near Eastern culture which typically allowed for a conquering army to not only claim the women of the men they killed, but to make them their wives that same day. In the same vein, Deuteronomy 24:1-4 dictates that a man divorcing his wife must give her a certificate of divorce, as well as clarifies that he is not allowed to remarry her at any point.

This creation of a divorce certificate is unique to Judaism; there is no evidence that any other culture required or created such a document in divorce.¹⁷ This document served to protect the woman, not the man. When divorces took place, because there was no documentation, women were left in a vulnerable legal limbo; they were not married, but could not marry someone else as their first husband could technically still reclaim them, even after marrying someone else.¹⁸ It left them financially, socially, and culturally ruined, with few prospects for the future. By mandating a divorce certificate, Moses was not affirming divorce as God's plan, he was instead living out the ideals of Proverbs 31:8-9 by speaking for and defending those who could not do so for themselves. The certificate documented the formal severing of any claim on

¹⁶ Daniel I. Block, *Deuteronomy (The NIV Application Commentary)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 557.

¹⁷ Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, Kindle location 333.

¹⁸ Ibid.

that woman her now former husband may have had, as well as required the return of her dowry to her, thereby giving her assets, as well as releasing her legally to remarry without fear of reprisals or demands on her or any future children.¹⁹

Jesus

There are four places in which Jesus taught on the topic of divorce in the gospels, largely in the response to questions based on the religious leaders of the days understanding of marriage, divorce, and the law of Moses. The passages are found in Matthew 5:31-32, 19:2-9; Mark 10:2-12; and Luke 16:18.

Jewish Practices

By the first century rabbinic leaders largely agreed on the laws regarding marriage and divorce; they taught that grounds for divorce were childlessness, material neglect, emotional neglect, and unfaithfulness.²⁰ While divorce was not considered ideal, they saw it as sometimes necessary, and only enacted by the husband - although legally a wife could petition the court to persuade the husband to divorce her.²¹ Essentially, while a man had to enter a divorce voluntarily, a woman could be divorced against her will. The one area of disagreement was a more recent interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1 by the Hillelites that suggested a divorce could take place for “any matter.”²² This caused tremendous debate and had significant repercussions.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, Kindle location 948.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid, Kindle location 1189.

Jesus' Teachings

While there are four passages where Jesus teaches on divorce, the bulk of his teaching happens in the parallel passages of Matthew 19:2-9 and Mark 10:2-12; the other passage in Matthew and the passage in Luke repeat in brief the same principles present in these two larger passages. Essentially, Jesus was teaching in public when the Pharisees came and tested him with the question of whether or not it is legal to divorce for any matter. While Mark simply records the question as to whether or not it is legal to divorce, the question as stated in Matthew 19:3, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" is assumed to be the full question and is implied in the Mark reference as Jewish law made it clear divorce was already legal.²³

A significant contrast between the two passages is that the Pharisees in Matthew are quoted as saying Moses commanded divorce, but then Jesus corrects them to say Moses permitted divorce, while the reverse is true of Mark. In Mark, Jesus references Moses' command regarding divorce, while the Pharisees use the word "permitted." Some interpret Jesus use of the word command in Mark as Christ's way of not mandating divorce but as "an attempt to limit its worst consequences for women."²⁴ A more likely reconciling of these differences centers on the order in which the two authors write their narratives and the resulting communication requirements with regards to the Mosaic law. With Mark writing Jesus's response as the one bringing up Moses' command; it would have been inappropriate for Jesus to refer to the Law as

²³ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 300.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 302.

something Moses “allowed,” He would have naturally used the word “command” with reference to the passage in Deuteronomy.²⁵ Matthew’s version, however, has the Pharisees asking the question regarding Moses’ “command,” making Jesus’ reply regarding it being something permitted, not commanded, more allowable. In either passage, however, the teaching point comes through; in contrast to the general belief that divorce was required in the cases of adultery and even suspected adultery, the reality is that God simply permits it.²⁶

Jesus highlights the reality that divorce was permitted not because God views it as necessary or part of His plan, but instead because of their hard-heartedness while at the same time condemning the idea that divorce could happen for “any matter.” It was a necessary reaction to protect women from further abuse. He then goes on to point out in the Mark passage by referencing directly the Genesis 2 passage, and in Matthew by indirectly Genesis with the words, “from the beginning,” that God’s intent for marriage is to be a holy and unbreakable covenant, while Moses’ law is a concession.²⁷ In Matthew only this permission hinges only on sexual infidelity, which leads many scholars to believe it was added to Matthew’s gospel as opposed to left out of Mark and Luke.²⁸

Where Christ is truly shocking to his audience is the way in which He deepens the understanding of God’s view of the marriage covenant with His startling admonition in all four

²⁵ Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, Kindle location 1538.

²⁶ *Ibid*, Kindle location 1550.

²⁷ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary. Volume 2: The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28*, Rev ed. (Grand Rapids Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 260.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 263.

passages that remarriage is adultery. Bruner writes, “So sacred is the marriage bond that even when it is externally broken it lives on with a kind of inward taboo power, contaminating anyone who dares break what God’s own hands joined together.”²⁹ The message driven home powerfully by Christ then is this; divorce may be a concession allowed because of sin, but God’s plan is something far more beautiful, a covenant not bound by time, that ultimately is revealed later in scripture to be a picture of Christ’s love and eternal commitment for and to His church (Ephesians 5:31-32).

Paul

Paul’s writings produce some interesting insights into the topic of divorce. In Romans 7:2-3 he essentially repeats Christ’s teaching that remarriage while the former spouse is still alive is adultery as an example in the context of explaining the law to his readers. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul goes into far more detail on the topics of marriage, singleness and divorce. Additionally, Paul’s insights would have been read differently than Jesus’ teachings for a couple reasons; the first is that he is writing to a specific church answering their specific questions. Secondly, he is writing to a mix of gentile and Jewish believers, as opposed to Christ who was speaking to an essentially Jewish audience. This is significant because while there were similarities in understandings of divorce, there would still be some differences in culture and understanding between the two scenarios.

Greco-Roman Practices

²⁹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary. Volume 1: The Christbook, Matthew 1-12*, Revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 230.

In Greco-Roman culture, and Roman law, there was a different level of freedom for women than in Jewish culture. Couples were involved in the decision to marry each other and had reciprocal rights in the marriage process.³⁰ Although, with the minimum age for women to marry at twelve years of age, while the men were typically much older when they married, one wonders how much say the woman had initially in the marriage as opposed to later on.³¹ When it came to divorce, both men and women could divorce their partner without the need to name grounds for divorce or any warning.³² Neither the man or the woman could prevent a divorce if their spouse decided to leave, and there was no need to document the divorce as it could be done verbally. Divorce was so common and expected that Greco-Roman marriage certificates were worded as though divorce was the expectation, not death, to end the marriage.³³

Paul's Teachings

It is important to keep in mind that Paul is writing in 1 Corinthians 7 in response to specific questions to an audience of people made up of those with a Jewish understanding of marriage and divorce and those with a Greco-Roman view. Throughout the chapter he addresses different groups; married, widowed, singles, divorced, those married to believers, those married to unbelievers, etc. He tackles divorce specifically in verses 10-16, but even in those passages he addresses at least two groups; those who are married to believers and those who are married to unbelievers, with his instructions changing depending on the intended audience.

³⁰ Campbell, *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, 148.

³¹ *Ibid*, 149.

³² Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, Kindle location 2140.

³³ *Ibid*.

The first group he speaks to regarding marriage is the believing married couple in verses 10-11. He changes his tone from his previous tone of giving advice to taking charge; he emphasizes his instruction with the word “command” that they are not to separate.³⁴ There are a three things that stand out in these verses:

The first is that Paul leaves off the exception of sexual infidelity that he mentions with this command elsewhere, which suggests that he is referring to a specific type of divorce being discussed at the Corinthian church that does not meet Christ’s qualifications for divorce and mentioning the exception of sexual infidelity would not be applicable to the situation.³⁵

The second thing to notice is that he begins the command by singling out the wife first, and then the husband; typically, the man would have been addressed first, which again suggests that he is dealing with an individual, or a specific group of people, most likely women, with this answer.³⁶

Finally, he singles out the woman as needing to be reconciled to her husband, but does not use the same word with regards to the husband. This word, “to reconcile” is used by Paul typically to describe a “reconciliation effected by the gospel.”³⁷ Again, the woman is singled out, with an emphasis on both reuniting with her husband as well as a call to the gospel, which hints that he is targeting a woman, or a group of women, with theological issues with these statements.

³⁴ Mark Taylor, *1 Corinthians: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture (The New American Commentary)* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2014), 171.

³⁵ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 291.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, 171.

Some have theorized that verses ten through eleven are in reference specifically to a group of “eschatological women.” This was a group of women who reoccur throughout 1 Corinthians who were living as if they had totally entered the new age and believed they had already realized the “resurrection from the dead.” As a result, they believed they lived as the angels, which if this is the intended audience, would make sense in that they would have rejected sexual relations with their husbands (perhaps why the topic of spouses denying their husband or wife sex is addressed earlier in the chapter) and were perhaps even arguing for divorce.³⁸ With Paul’s opening statement in verse one that he is writing in response to matters they contacted him about, it makes sense that the “eschatological women” are the focus point of these verses; it would also explain why Paul ignores Christ’s exceptions for divorce and instead commands them. He has assessed their situation and recognizes that there are no valid biblical grounds for divorce, so he commands them to remain married and to be reconciled both to their husbands and to their God. Therefore, there is no contradiction between his commands here and Christ’s instructions in the gospels or the law of Moses.

Verses twelve through sixteen see a shift in audience from married couples who share faith but are dealing with the topic of divorce, to married couples where only one of the spouses is a believer. Mixing religions in a marriage is challenging in modern culture; in the first century it was far more complicated. Culture demanded that the wife followed the lead of the husband, and even the Old Testament (Ezra 10:3, 19) gave precedent for divorcing a pagan.³⁹ It is not

³⁸ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 290.

³⁹ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Nottingham, England: Eerdmans, 2010), 294.

surprising to consider given either of these realities, as well as the cultural prevalence of divorce, that some of the believers may have been considering leaving their unbelieving spouse. Given first century culture, it must have been surprising that Paul's advice to the men and women was the same; to not leave their unbelieving spouse. As believers, they were to honor the covenant and take it seriously in a way that only believers could truly understand. Paul goes on to challenge them with the thought that their unbelieving spouse may become a believer because of their influence. Thom Rainer did extensive research on how the church reaches the unchurched in America; one of his startling findings was that relationships are the most effective way in reaching the lost, with marriage relationships being at the top – specifically, wives reaching their husbands are the most influential group in reaching the unchurched.⁴⁰ Modern research affirms what Paul wrote so long ago.

Conversely, Paul advises the believing spouses in this passage to let their unsaved spouses divorce them if they decide to do so. Essentially, Paul is saying that the church has no authority over someone who has not given their life to Christ, therefore there is nothing they can do to restrain them from this decision. There is great debate over whether or not this passage releases the believing spouse for remarriage with another believer, but that is not the focal point of Paul's message here, which is that believers, when it is in their power to do so, should remain married.⁴¹ His concern is not whether or not they remarry, but instead with both preserving their marriage covenant as well as reaching their lost spouse for God.

⁴⁰ Thom S. Rainer, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched and Proven Ways to Reach Them* (Nashville, TN: Zondervan, 2008), Kindle location 1106.

⁴¹ Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, 175.

Conclusion

What becomes increasingly apparent, even in this brief survey of these passages and the culture of the day, is that scripture is both consistent in its teachings in marriage, as well as progressively challenging the followers to God to greater and greater Christ-likeness. The biblical standard is unbroken monogamy, ultimately to paint a picture of the relationship between Christ and His church. The law of Moses was a concession; not to give the people the divorces they wanted, but to protect the women who were already being taken advantage of. The ideal was still sacrificial, unbroken monogamy. The reality was that some abused their position of power and God created a way for the abused to be protected.

Jesus took the understanding to a far deeper level, revealing the true heart of God in marriage. Like Moses, His exceptions that permitted divorce were not the plan, they were a concession if remaining in marriage was not possible. Again, it flew in the face of a culture that discarded undesired spouses and affirmed God's perfect plan. While Paul's instructions at first seem different than Christ's, a deeper study of the context of the passage reveals that Paul was not changing the standard, rather he was simply voicing the aspects of God's standard that applied to the situation at hand, as well as emphasizing that God's people are to be held to God's standard, while the first priority for the lost is to be reached for God.

The incredible depth of scripture in the area of marriage is something to be deeply studied and not treated lightly. Scripture presents an uncomfortable tension between the high view of marriage that God intends and the reality of the ongoing fallenness of sinful flesh, demanding both high expectations as well as grace and mercy for those who call Christ Lord. Preserving the marriage covenant is the calling, divorce is a concession for protection.

Bibliography

- Block, Daniel I. *Deuteronomy (The NIV Application Commentary)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012.
- Bruner, Frederick Dale. *Matthew: A Commentary. Volume 1: The Christbook, Matthew 1-12*. Revised ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.
- Bruner, Frederick Dale. *Matthew: A Commentary. Volume 2: The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28*. Rev ed. Grand Rapids Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007.
- Campbell, Ken M., ed. *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003.
- Ciampa, Roy E., and Brian S. Rosner. *The First Letter to the Corinthians*. Nottingham, England: Eerdmans, 2010.
- Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Mark*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.
- Fee, Gordon D. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians, Revised Edition (The New International Commentary On the New Testament)*. Revised ed. Downers Grove, IL: Eerdmans, 2014.
- House, H. Wayne, ed. *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1990.
- Instone-Brewer, David. *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.
- Murray, John. *Divorce*. Philadelphia: P & R Publishing, 1961.
- Rainer, Thom S. *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched and Proven Ways to Reach Them*. Nashville, TN: Zondervan, 2008.
- Ross, Allen P. *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1988.
- Taylor, Mark. *1 Corinthians: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture (The New American Commentary)*. Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2014.
- Waltke, Bruce K. *Genesis: A Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001.
- Walton, John. *Genesis*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001.