

DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE: A SPECTRUM OF EVANGELICAL POSITIONS

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## DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE: A SPECTRUM OF EVANGELICAL POSITIONS

### Introduction

Divorce and remarriage is one of the most pressing social issues in modern times. The incontrovertible degradation of the institutions of marriage and the modern family has prompted many within the church to analyze what the Bible says about divorce and remarriage.<sup>1</sup> Various evangelical positions of divorce and remarriage are extant.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to analyze a spectrum of evangelical positions on divorce and remarriage. This will be accomplished by scrutinizing the following four positions: No Divorce and No Remarriage; Divorce, but No Remarriage; Divorce and Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion; Divorce and Remarriage under a Variety of Circumstances. Before scrutinizing the four positions amongst evangelicals relating to divorce and remarriage, God's plan for marriage will be examined, as well as an engagement of examples of divorce throughout the Bible.

Before pressing on to the bulk of this study, the word "divorce" must be defined. John Murray gives a clear definition of *divorce*: "Divorce is the breaking of a seal which

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<sup>1</sup> David W. Jones, "The Betrothal View of Divorce and Remarriage" *Bibliotheca Sacra* (January-March 2008) 68-85.

<sup>2</sup> Examples of this include Daniel R. Heimbach, *True Sexual Morality: Recovering Biblical Standards for a Culture in Crisis* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004).; Mark L. Strauss, ed., *Remarriage after Divorce in Today's Church: Three Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006); and the book from which the four views being scrutinized in this paper were drawn, H. Wayne House, ed., *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity, 1990). See Appendix A to examine Köstenberger's definition of the four major views on divorce and remarriage, as well as a listing of the major representatives on each view.

has been engraven by the hand of God.”<sup>3</sup>

### I. God’s Plan for Marriage

The plan of God for the institution of marriage is found in Genesis 2:24, which states the following: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”<sup>4</sup> This text is quoted multiple times in the New Testament (Matthew 19:5; Mark 10:7-8; and Ephesians 5:31).

This verse mentions three essential actions for a man and a woman uniting together in holy matrimony: (1) publicly “leaving” one’s family in order to begin a new home; (2) permanently “cleaving” together in a partnership as husband and wife; and (3) physically becoming “one flesh” through sexually uniting together.<sup>5</sup>

The idea of a man and woman *leaving* their parents in order to unite in marriage is the first step because a firmly established and lasting relationship cannot last without doing this. Of the three essential actions in marriage, some may struggle with loosening from their parents’ grip, but the nomadic mobility of the modern world leaves many people feeling rootless, alien, and insecure before marriage, so this step is becoming easier from a societal perspective.<sup>6</sup>

*Cleaving* together has been much too tamed in English translation. The exact

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<sup>3</sup> John Murray, *Divorce* (Phillisburgh, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company, 1961), 9.

<sup>4</sup> All Bible references quoted in this paper are from the English Standard Version.

<sup>5</sup> House, 17.

<sup>6</sup> Kent Hughes and Barbara Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Family* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 44.

sense of *cleaving* is “sticking to his wife,” just as Israel was repeatedly encouraged to stick to the Lord in Covenantal relationship (cf. Deuteronomy 10:20; 11:22; 13:4).<sup>7</sup>

Becoming *one flesh* in a sexual relationship is best understood by the words of the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:4, “For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.” Since a man and woman uniting together in marriage are no longer individuals, but are *one flesh*, “the unity they make as a couple vetoes any sexual independence which they may once have had as single people.”<sup>8</sup>

## II. Biblical Examples of Divorce

The Bible contains multitudinous examples of divorce. In the Old Testament and New Testament alike, people broke their marriage covenant with one other and with God. In this section of the paper, two Old Testament and two New Testament passages will be examined.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is an example of divorce in the Bible. This passage introduces a *Certificate of Divorcement*. The word  $\text{׳טטױרײק}$ , translated *divorce* comes from the root word  $\text{טורײק}$ , that means *to cut off or cut down*. The idea behind the word is complete severance.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and a Blessing*, vol. 1. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 62.

<sup>8</sup> Adrian Thatcher, *Marriage After Modernity: Christian Marriage in Postmodern Times* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 80.

<sup>9</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), 94.

Malachi 2:13-16 teaches of a different type of divorce that Ezra 9:1-2.<sup>10</sup> Malachi was chastising men for their mixed marriages, with an implication they divorced their Jewish wives. This is the divorce that resulted in the LORD's statement, "I hate divorce."

Matthew 19:1-12 and Mark 10:1-12 contains Jesus' teaching of divorce as He was traveling to Jerusalem for Passover. The Pharisees, in Matthew 19:3, asked Jesus the same question being examined in this paper: "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" In Matthew 19:4-6, Jesus explains that divorce is not part of God's design, and that marriage is permanent.<sup>11</sup>

The most debated verse when examining evangelical positions of divorce and remarriage centers around Matthew 19:9, as Jesus stated, "And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." In particular, the *crux interpretum* is the phrase  $\mu\eta\ \epsilon\upsilon\pi\iota\ \rho\omicron\rho\nu\epsilon\iota\ ,\alpha\ |$ . Throughout the rest of this paper, a spectrum of evangelical positions of divorce and remarriage will be explained as the various views interpret Matthew 19:9 in various ways.

### **III.No Divorce and No Remarriage**

A linguistic analysis of Matthew 19:3 falls at the base of the argument against divorce and against remarriage under any circumstance. The word  $\rho\omicron\rho\nu\epsilon\iota\ ,\alpha$  usually

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 365.

<sup>11</sup> House, 33.

does not mean “adultery.” The most common Greek word to be translated as “adultery” is *moicheia*.

Within this particular position on divorce and remarriage, the belief is that Jesus was referring to an incestuous marriage in Matthew 19:3. This stance is developed from a belief that *porneia* was used in a broad sense as a proper hermeneutic is applied. Jesus was referring to marriage between near relatives in Leviticus 18:6-18.

This position not only sees a lack of biblical legitimacy in divorce under any circumstance, but also stands against remarriage under any circumstance. The standard view of the church in the West stood firmly against remarriage until Erasmus pronounced his opposing hermeneutical perspective in 1519.<sup>12</sup> As time distanced from that of Jesus and His culture, it was one and one half millennia until a church leader publicly pronounced a view for remarriage.

A key verse in proving the theological perspective that remarriage after divorce is sinful may be found in Matthew 5:32b, “. . . whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”<sup>13</sup> This position on the spectrum of evangelical positions of divorce and remarriage believes that a person can neither divorce nor remarry without sinning against the Lord God.

#### **IV. Divorce, but No Remarriage**

According to the first-century position on divorce and remarriage, the school of

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<sup>12</sup> Paul E. Engle and Mark L. Strauss, *Remarriage After Divorce in Today's Church: 3 Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 28.

<sup>13</sup> cf. Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18.

Shammai interpreted Jesus' word in Matthew 19:3, *pornei , a*, to mean "a cause of immorality" as a single phrase referring to adultery.<sup>14</sup> The Shammai stance is one that believes divorce is copasetic if adultery has occurred, but remarriage is never allowed.

After the Shammai read the writings of Paul, Mark, and Luke, they were able to conclude it is completely congruent with the teachings of the early church from the second to fifth centuries A.D. that remarriage after divorce is sinful.<sup>15</sup> Authors closest to Jesus' time interpreted Jesus' teaching to be that remarriage after divorce is sinful.

## V. Divorce and Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion

One's hermeneutical perspective of Matthew 19:3-12 heavily determines their view of divorce and remarriage.<sup>16</sup> Another passage that assists in determining this view, sometimes referred to as the "Erasmian View," is 1 Corinthians 7:1-16.<sup>17</sup> In order to defend this view, 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 is noted as being in reference to believers while 1 Corinthians 7:15 is in reference to a believer abandoned by an unbelieving spouse by stating, "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."

Despite God's desire to uphold the indissolubility of marriage, it should be noted

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<sup>14</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 234.

<sup>15</sup> Engle and Strauss, 27.

<sup>16</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, "Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Celibacy: An Exegesis of Matthew 19:3-12," *Trinity Journal* n.s. 11 (1990): 161-96.

<sup>17</sup> Köstenberger, 255. This is labeled the "Erasmian View" due to the Reformer, Erasmus Rotterdam, having held this belief. Köstenberger noted the label was used by Gordon Wenham and William Heth, *Jesus and Divorce* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2010), and it could be construed as pejorative.

that a majority of evangelical scholars allow for divorce and remarriage if an unbeliever commits adultery or deserts their Christian spouse.<sup>18</sup> While this is the most common view amongst evangelical scholars, a more liberal stance that a variety of circumstances legitimize divorce and remarriage is held by some.

### **VI. Divorce and Remarriage Under a Variety of Circumstances**

When examining divorce and remarriage under a variety of circumstances, various “what if” scenarios could be considered. What if a woman is married to a man who murdered another person with whom he did not have an affair, and is imprisoned for life without parole? Is she required to remain married to him, and can never become married again? What if a husband has brutally beaten his wife, extinguished cigarettes extinguished on her skin, stabbed her, kicked her, and tortured her? Is the wife committing a sin against God if she leaves her non-adulterous husband?

Embracing this position stems from embracing *mercy* over *law*.<sup>19</sup> A sort of “graded absolutism” results in bending the concretion of Jesus’ words for difficult situations encountered by people in extremely difficult situations in their marriage.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper has been to analyze a spectrum of evangelical positions on divorce and remarriage. As one examines the four primary positions on divorce and remarriage, may they thoroughly weigh the words within the Bible in order to engage in

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<sup>18</sup> Köstenberger, 257.

<sup>19</sup> Dallas R. Burdette, *Old Texts Through New Eyes: Reexamination of Misunderstood Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 117.

proper hermeneutics as they embrace their position on divorce and remarriage.

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## Appendix A

### Four Major Positions on Divorce and Remarriage<sup>20</sup>

	DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE FOR ADULTERY AND DESERTION	DIVORCE, NO REMARRIAGE FOR ADULTERY AND DESERTION	NO DIVORCE, NO REMARRIAGE FOR ADULTERY: DIVORCE BUT NO REMARRIAGE FOR DESERTION	NO DIVORCE, NO REMARRIAGE FOR ADULTERY; DIVORCE, REMARRIAGE FOR DESERTION
DEFINITION	Divorce and remarriage for the innocent party of a spouse's adultery/sexual immorality and of an unbelieving spouse's desertion	Divorce for adultery but not remarriage for both adultery and spousal desertion by an unbeliever	Neither divorce nor remarriage in the case of adultery, divorce but no remarriage in the case of desertion by an unbelieving spouse	No divorce or remarriage for adultery but divorce and remarriage in the case of desertion by an unbeliever
MAJOR REPRESENTATIVES	Erasmus Westminster Confession Craig Blomberg Don Carson John Feinberg and Paul Feinberg Gordon Hugenberger David Clyde Jones John MacArthur John Murray Robert Stein John Stott William Heth	Gordon Wenham William Heth (prior to 2002) Robert Gundry Andrew Cornes Jacques Dupont	Abel Isaksson James M. Boice Dwight Pentecost John Piper	Daniel Heimbach

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<sup>20</sup> Köstenberger, 256.