

**MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, REMARRIAGE, AND CELIBACY:  
AN EXEGESIS OF MATTHEW 19:3-12**

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Clear thinking about biblical teaching on marriage and divorce seems to be as rare these days as healthy Christian marriages. Much confusion surrounds the definition of marriage, the grounds for divorce, and the possibilities of remarriage or celibacy. Many who do recognize what Scripture explicitly commands, permits, and forbids cannot agree on how that teaching applies to contemporary society.<sup>1</sup> This study will therefore devote attention to both the meaning and significance of the biblical text. It focuses on Matt 19:3-12, the single most detailed teaching passage by Jesus on marriage and its alternatives. In the process, however, attention will have to turn to other key Scriptures as well, but without anything like a comprehensive exegesis.<sup>2</sup>

**I. MEANING**

**A. LITERARY CONTEXT AND FORM**

I am elsewhere developing an outline of Matthew which combines the rival proposals of Kingsbury and Bacon.<sup>3</sup> The gospel

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<sup>1</sup>For surveys of recent literature, cf. esp. Cyril J. Barber, "Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage: A Review of the Relevant Religious Literature," *JPT* 12 (1984) 170-77; David Field, "The Divorce Debate—Where Are We Now?" *Them* 8.3 (1983) 26-31.

<sup>2</sup>It is important to add a personal note at the outset. Few things have pained me more in recent years than to watch several close Christian friends go through the trauma of divorce. In the church and in the seminary in which I teach, increasing numbers of new members/students are coming who have already been divorced, and it is clear that the trauma lingers far longer than most ever expected. I am often asked for counsel concerning the Bible's teaching on marriage and divorce as applied to the lives of specific people. While I strongly uphold the priority of exegesis over experience, I try to be sensitive to the possibility that my exegesis is mistaken if the counsel to which it leads seems entirely unworkable, unloving, or unjust. What concerns me most, e.g., about the otherwise excellent presentations and format of the recent symposium, *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views* (ed. H. Wayne House; Downers Grove: IVP, 1990), is that the case studies of every one of the four contributors seem to fail badly when judged by these criteria. It is to be hoped that

divides into three main sections: introduction (1:1-4:16), dénouement (4:17-16:20), and climax (16:21-28:20). The two longest of these in turn subdivide into blocks of material alternating between discourse and narrative. Each pair of alternating blocks addresses a common theme. Matt 19:3-12 falls at the beginning of the second subsection of the larger section on the climax of Jesus' mission. 16:21-18:35 has introduced the theme of Jesus' passion with its implications for discipleship; 19:1-25:46 describes the actual journey of Jesus to the place of his death and brings the gospel account to the threshold of the passion narrative proper.

The narrative section of 19:1-25:46 consists of chaps. 19-22, which itself contains two parts—chaps. 19-20 (Jesus travels from Galilee to Jerusalem) and 21-22 (Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem to teach there). Chaps. 19-20 fall into two sections of unequal length. Beginning with a two-verse introduction, 19:1-20:16 combines three encounters between Jesus and people from the crowds who approach him; each time his teaching embraces important implications for discipleship (19:3-12, 19:13-15, 19:16-20:16). 20:17-34 returns to the explicit prediction of Jesus' passion, juxtaposing the strikingly contrasting responses of two of Jesus' disciples and two blind people.

19:3-12 thus offers the first in a series of three pronouncement or controversy stories, as Jesus begins journeying to Jerusalem under the shadow of the cross. Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce emerges in as occasional a setting as any in the epistles. This is no dispassionate discourse of canon law; it is pointed rhetoric in response to representatives of a religious party which wants to kill Christ (12:14). The climactic focus of the passage will be Jesus' main pronouncement in v. 9, and it will take the form of proverbial or gnomic truth—a generalization which admits certain exceptions.<sup>4</sup> Mark and Luke do not spell any of these out (Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18<sup>5</sup>); Matthew makes clear there is at least one. Few try to make the pronouncements in various other controversy or pronouncement stories absolute (cf., e.g., Matt 19:21, 9:15, and esp. 13:57, a particularly interesting parallel because of its similar exception clause—yet prophets are sometimes without honor away from home or with honor at home), so one should be equally wary of elevating 19:9 (or Mark 10:11-12) into an exceptionless absolute. The casuistic legal form ("whoever. . .") does not undermine this

<sup>4</sup>Of the recent literature on form and interpretation of pronouncement stories, the most important include: Arland J. Hultgren, *Jesus and His Adversaries* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979); *Semeia* 20 (1981) *passim*; Klaus Berger, *Formgeschichte des Neuen Testaments* (Heidelberg: Quelle und Meyer, 1984) 80-93.

<sup>5</sup>Against almost all other studies, I seriously doubt that the tradition history of Luke 16:18 has anything to do with the Matthean and Markan texts. It appears as an isolated logion in an entirely different context. I believe Luke uses it 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. In its current form, it provides no help whatever in determining the meaning of Jesus' views on literal marriage and divorce.

claim; parallel "sentences of law" (e.g., Matt 5:22, 27, 39, 41) also contain implicit qualifiers.<sup>6</sup>

The form of the dialogue within vv. 3-12 follows the rabbinic *proem midrash* known as *yelammedenu rabbenu* ("let our master teach us").<sup>7</sup> An initial question designed to trap Jesus (v. 3) receives a preliminary answer (vv. 4-6). The Pharisees then pose a counter-question (v. 7) to which Jesus gives a counter-reply (v. 8), preparing the way for his solemn, climactic pronouncement (v. 9). Matthew characteristically abbreviates and combines together two separate discussions (vv. 3-8, 9-12; cf. Mark 10:10) by then appending Jesus' later interchange with his disciples: their objection (v. 10) and his reply (vv. 11-12).<sup>8</sup>

## B. COMMENTARY

*Opening Gambit* (v. 3): "Now some<sup>9</sup> Pharisees came to him [Jesus] to try to trap him. They said, 'Is it lawful for a man<sup>10</sup> to divorce his wife for any cause?'"<sup>11</sup>

The Pharisees have been Jesus' most common antagonists throughout Matthew thus far (cf. 9:11, 34; 12:2, 14, 24, 38; 15:1; 16:1). Not surprisingly, they approach him here hoping "to trap" him (πειράζοντες, a telic participle, can mean "test" or "tempt" but almost always carries the latter sense when evil people are its subject). The language echoes 16:1 and resumes the temptations of Jesus illustrated classically in 4:1-11. Already before any words are spoken, Matthew's narrative cautions his readers against expecting a calm consideration of every aspect of marriage and divorce. The context is polemical; Jesus' reply will have to avoid the trap, whatever other issues it may leave untouched.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. esp. Robert A. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Waco: Word, 1982) 239-52.

<sup>7</sup>E. Earle Ellis, "How the New Testament Uses the Old," in *New Testament Interpretation* (ed. I. Howard Marshall; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 206.

<sup>8</sup>I am personally convinced of Markan priority, with respect both to the overall relationship of Mark and Matthew and to this pericope. See, respectively, Robert H. Stein, *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987); and idem, "Is It Harmful for a Man to Divorce His Wife?" *JETS* 22 (1979) 115-21, though I do not see any need to view the exception clause of v. 9 as a later, inspired addition. It is rather more likely a portion of Jesus' original teaching which Mark omitted and Matthew restored. But very little of my exegesis depends on any particular source-critical reconstruction. I have tried to deal with the final text of Matthew in its integrity and will mostly leave to one side questions of authenticity and tradition-history. For a defense of the general trustworthiness of the gospel tradition as a whole, see Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1987).

<sup>9</sup>The reading "the Pharisees" has less diverse textual support and reads like a harmonization with Matthew's characteristic treatment of all the Jewish leaders as opponents.

<sup>10</sup>Some manuscripts omit "a man" or use the less generic "a [certain] husband," but the meaning is unchanged.

<sup>11</sup>All translations of Scripture are my own.

The question the Pharisees raise clearly reflects the intra-Pharisaic debate between the proto-rabbis Shammai and Hillel. The Mishnah describes that debate as follows:

The School of Shammai say: A man may not divorce his wife unless he has found unchastity in her, for it is written, *Because he hath found in her indecency in anything*. And the School of Hillel say: [He may divorce her] even if she spoiled a dish for him, for it is written, *Because he hath found in her indecency in anything*. R. Akiba says: Even if he found another fairer than she, for it is written, *And it shall be if she find no favour in his eyes*. . . . (*Gittin* 9:10)<sup>12</sup>

The gemara on this mishnah makes plain that the English translation has captured the essence of the disagreement with its alternation of typeface. Beth Shammai emphasized "indecency;" beth Hillel, "anything" (*b. Gittin* 90a). The Hebrew for "unchastity" is in fact identical to "indecency," and both "indecency" and "anything" hark back to Deut 24:1, translating respectively *וְנִקְמָה* and *וְכָל* in that text. "For any cause" in Matt 19:3 reflects the Hillelite perspective, referring to anything which could be construed, however broadly, as indecency. Recent study of Jewish sources has rightly cautioned against reading later rabbinic debates back into the first half of the first century, but traditions ascribed to Hillel and Shammai (Jesus' predecessors by at least 20 years) are still widely viewed as reliable.<sup>13</sup>

Other events may have also precipitated the Pharisees' question. John the Baptist's reaction to Herodias's divorce and remarriage got him executed (Matt 14:3-12), and Jesus' own previous teaching on the topic may have suggested to some that he was abrogating the Law of Moses (5:31-32). He was obviously in as much a Catch-22 situation as later in 22:15-22 when asked about paying taxes. Whatever his reply, someone stood ready to condemn him.<sup>14</sup>

The argument that because Jesus did not here address other possible grounds of divorce such as desertion or wife-beating, he therefore categorically excluded them<sup>15</sup> is thus flawed. He was asked specifically about a man who wished to divorce his wife. Women then as now seldom left their only source of sustenance or beat themselves; desertion and abuse were almost uniquely male offenses. But Jewish law afforded little provision for wives to

<sup>12</sup>Trans. Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah* (London: Oxford, 1933) 321.

<sup>13</sup>As for that matter are numerous other traditions ascribed to early Tannaim or found in early midrashim. See, e.g., Robert M. Johnston and Harvey K. McArthur, *They Also Taught in Parables* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming).

<sup>14</sup>There is no need to pit one or more of these historical antecedents against each other, as, e.g., in William F. Luck, *Divorce and Remarriage* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) 133-36.

<sup>15</sup>As, e.g., in J. Carl Laney, *The Divorce Myth* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1981) 118.

divorce their husbands,<sup>16</sup> so the Pharisees here do not even raise this issue. The setting makes the occasional nature of Jesus' teaching inescapable.

Two other terms in v. 3 require careful definition. "Lawful" (ἐξεστίν) will refer to any combination of oral or written torah. Attempts to argue that Jesus never challenged Mosaic Law but only later Jewish halakah fail for a number of reasons, not least because Pharisaism came to regard the two as indistinguishable in authority. As vv. 4-7 will demonstrate, and as the Sermon on the Mount has already abundantly illustrated, Jesus challenges the permanent applicability of portions of both oral and written Law, even though the Scriptures continue to prove instructive for his followers as pointers to their fulfilment in him (5:17).<sup>17</sup>

Second, ἀπολύω must be translated "divorce," here and throughout this passage. That is what it meant in the Shammai-Hillel debate, in the Herodias affair and in the Sermon on the Mount's antithesis to Deut 24:1. There is not a shred of contextual evidence that Jesus introduces a new meaning for the term anywhere in his dialogue; he could hardly have expected anyone to understand him differently.<sup>18</sup> Granted, ancient divorce proceedings were not entirely congruent with modern ones. Nevertheless, the crucial feature shared by both was a publicly recognized, legal dissolution of a marriage rather than annulment or mere geographical separation of individuals.<sup>19</sup>

*Scriptural Reply* (vv. 4-6): "But he replied, 'Haven't you read that the Creator<sup>20</sup> from the beginning "made them male and female" and that "for this reason a man must leave father and mother and

<sup>16</sup>Cf. the debate among Bernadette J. Brooten, "Konnten Frauen im alten Judentum die Scheidung betreiben?" *EvTh* 42 (1982) 65-80; Eduard Schweizer, "Scheidungsrecht der jüdischen Frau?" *EvTh* 42 (1982) 294-300; and Bernadette J. Brooten, "Zur Debatte über das Scheidungsrecht der jüdischen Frau," *EvTh* 43 (1983) 466-78, studies which nevertheless all agree that women divorcing men, if it occurred at all, was very much the exception to the rule.

<sup>17</sup>On Jesus and the Law, see esp. Robert Banks, *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition* (Cambridge: University Press, 1975); John P. Meier, *Law and History in Matthew's Gospel* (Rome: BIP, 1976); and Douglas J. Moo, "Jesus and the Authority of the Mosaic Law," *JSNT* 20 (1984) 3-49.

<sup>18</sup>Contra, e.g., Charles C. Ryrie, "Biblical Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage," *GTJ* 3 (1982) 189.

<sup>19</sup>William A. Heth and Gordon J. Wenham (*Jesus and Divorce* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985] 134) commit the lexical fallacy of confusing sense with reference when they argue that the Erasmian view itself defines divorce in two ways in this passage—"complete divorce with the right to remarry" when adultery occurs and "only simple separation" in other instances. Neither of these "definitions" limits itself to the meaning of ἀπολύω, which remains constant—"legal dissolution of marriage." Heth and Wenham have artificially created their contradictory definitions by reading in material from the larger contexts of each occurrence of the word. Cf. David E. Holwerda, "Jesus on Divorce: An Assessment of a New Proposal," *CTJ* 22 (1987) 119.

<sup>20</sup>The majority text replaces "Creator" with "the one who made," probably conforming the text to Gen 1:27 LXX, which Jesus goes on to quote.

commit himself to his wife and the two must become one entity"?<sup>21</sup> So they are no longer two but one entity. Therefore let no person divide what God united."

Jesus counters the Pharisees' question with one of his own. As often in Matthew, he begins with οὐκ or οὐδέποτε ἀνέγνωτε (12:3, 5; 21:16, 42; 22:31). The Pharisees no doubt found it quite presumptuous for an untrained teacher to challenge them with the ludicrous claim, "haven't you read. . . ?" But of course Jesus' point is that they have not read with correct understanding. "The Creator" is literally "the one who created" and obviously refers to God. Ἀπ' ἀρχῆς could modify "the one who created" but more naturally points forward to modify "made." Jesus' point in short is that the Pharisees' debate is misguided from the outset. They should not be concentrating solely on grounds for divorce, because God intended married people to remain together permanently.

The first Scripture Jesus cites comes from Gen 1:27. Matthew reproduces the LXX rendering verbatim. The reason for the quote apparently is to stress that God created the two genders for each other. Frederick Bruner provocatively reflects:

If God had supremely intended *solitary* [*sic* ?] life, God would have created humans one by one; if God had intended polygamous life, God would have created one man and several women (Chrys., 62:1:382); if God had intended homosexual life God would have made two men or two women; but that God intended monogamous heterosexual life was shown by God's creation of one man and one woman.<sup>22</sup>

Jesus continues in v. 5 with an almost verbatim citation of Gen 2:24 LXX. "For this reason" forms part of the citation and in the context of Genesis refers back to "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. . . ." But Jesus' inclusion of these words may suggest that he sees them as equally appropriately pointing to the creation of male and female. Because God intended the genders for each other, many should go ahead and marry. But he is not saying every single individual must marry, as vv. 11-12 will make clear.

For those who do marry, however, v. 5 provides a crucial definition of their responsibilities. The future tenses are imperative; the Scripture is not predicting how people *will* behave but telling them how they *ought* to act. The three key elements are "leave father and mother," "cleave to one's spouse," and "be one flesh." In fact, however, the first two items seem merely to reflect two parts of the same process—making a commitment or pledging allegiance to one's spouse above all other

<sup>21</sup>One could also put the question mark after "female," and make the rest of the sentence a statement, but the simple co-ordination of εἶπεν . . . καὶ εἶπεν favors treating both clauses alike.

<sup>22</sup>Frederick D. Bruner, *Matthew, vol. 2: The Churchbook* (Dallas: Word, 1990) 670-71.

human relations—so that only two distinct items remain. "Leaving" parents in the biblical world would not often have meant establishing a separate residence but would have referred to giving up a loyalty to one's father and mother as the closest of human relationships. "Cleaving" to one's wife or husband then transfers that most fundamental of loyalties to one's spouse. David Atkinson terms it a "permanent and committed faithfulness"—to a vow, a calling, a person, and a relationship.<sup>23</sup> Much has been written about the Hebrew and Greek words for "cleave," likening them to glue and its effects, but the word by itself cannot settle any debates regarding the dissolubility or indissolubility of marriage in God's eyes.<sup>24</sup>

"Becoming one flesh" then focuses on the sexual union of marriage but is by no means limited to it. It incorporates every aspect of intimacy and interdependence which should ideally render the married couple a unified entity at the deepest levels of interpersonal communion.<sup>25</sup> Claus Westermann observes that neither sex nor children are therefore first of all in view,<sup>26</sup> but a "spiritual unity, the most complete personal community."<sup>27</sup> But sexual intercourse comes so prominently into view in this communion that Paul is able to regard sexual sin as a unique sin against one's own body (1 Cor 6:18).<sup>28</sup> Marriage is thus seen as two-fold: a commitment of one's fundamental allegiance and an interpersonal relationship culminating in sexual intimacy.

The best term to describe this two-fold enterprise is that of a covenant. Divorce then becomes breaking a covenant (Prov 2:17). These verses hint at what v. 6b makes plainer: "marriage is not a metaphysical status which cannot be destroyed; it is rather a moral commitment which should be honored."<sup>29</sup> Against D. A. Carson's objection that marriage is indissoluble since it is grounded

<sup>23</sup>David Atkinson, *To Have and To Hold* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 83. Cf. U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961) 137: "The meaning of the verse is simply this: whilst a man is single, he forms part of his father's family, but when he takes a wife, he founds a new family; so long as he is in his father's house, all his love is dedicated to his father and mother, but when he marries, his love for his wife transcends that for his parents."

<sup>24</sup>See esp. Luck, *Divorce*, 8-16, contra the indissolubility view.

<sup>25</sup>Cf. H. N. Ridderbos, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 348.

<sup>26</sup>The illustration of this one-flesh unity by means of children does not help much—not all couples have children, and children have an existence independent of parents in a way which is not true of the unity within a couple.

<sup>27</sup>Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984) 233.

<sup>28</sup>Brendan Byrne ("Sinning Against One's Own Body": Paul's Understanding of the Sexual Relationship in 1 Corinthians 6:18," *CBQ* 45 [1983] 613) explains: "If soma is understood as the physical body particularly under the aspect of personal self-communication . . . then 'the immoral person perverts precisely that faculty within himself that is meant to be the instrument of the most intimate bodily communion between persons.' 'No other sin engages one's power of bodily communion in precisely so intimate a way.'"

<sup>29</sup>Atkinson, *Have and Hold*, 91.

in creation, in the way God has made people,<sup>30</sup> it must be noted that only the institution is grounded in creation. Vv. 11-12 will deal with individuals whom God has not made for marriage. Transferring one's fundamental loyalties from parents to spouse does not suggest a state that renders marriages indissoluble, but a volitional commitment which should remain permanent yet which can be rescinded.

It is also crucial to observe that sexual relations do not by themselves make a marriage. J. D. M. Derrett is perhaps the only scholar who defends this view consistently, and his own observation that no church in the history of Christianity has agreed with his position is enough to cast serious doubt on it.<sup>31</sup> It would lead to the rather bizarre conclusions that rape or incest created marriages and that any heterosexual relationship could begin with sex, however casual, or however uncommitted to each other two individuals were, so long as the two never went on to mate with anyone else! Still, many writers assume that even if sex alone does not constitute a marriage, sexual infidelity *de facto* breaks it. Sometimes this view stems from a misreading of 1 Cor 6:16—Paul does not say relations with a prostitute create a marriage, merely some kind of "one-flesh" (deeply intimate) relationship inappropriate for the lack of exclusive commitment involved. Usually, though, this view follows from an attempt to make sense of the exception clause of v. 9 as the only legitimate ground for divorce—assuming that sexual unfaithfulness actually dissolved a marriage which was somehow uniquely constituted by sexual relations at its onset. But *πορνεῖα* is not the only biblical grounds for divorce, and this logic, as subsequent discussion will clarify, is therefore invalid.<sup>32</sup> The message of v. 5 is that both a commitment and a sexual consummation create a marriage. Infidelity does not by itself dissolve a marriage; it does so only if it is accompanied by a refusal to continue to honor the commitment to "leave and cleave."

V. 6 draws the conclusions for Jesus' audience intended by the rhetorical question of vv. 4-5. If God's original intention for married couples was that they remain faithful to each other for life, then this intention still applies. V. 6a simply restates the truth of v. 5b, with the gnomic use of the present tense (*εἰσὶν* instead of *ἔσονται*). Even after the fall of humanity, even after the giving of the Law, even after the inauguration of the kingdom with the ministry of Jesus, the truth remains that married couples "are" one flesh. Such

<sup>30</sup>D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8 (ed. Frank E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 412.

<sup>31</sup>J. D. M. Derrett, *Law in the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1970) 363-88.

<sup>32</sup>This line of reasoning dispenses with the objections to Atkinson's covenant approach raised by John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1984) 274.



principles are rightly called "creation ordinances," even if the term stems from the later history of Christian theology.

V. 6b then draws a further inference from v. 5b (or from v. 6a; since 6a essentially repeats 5b, it matters little). Here is the famous text repeated in thousands of wedding ceremonies—"what God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (KJV). The term for joining or uniting is literally "yoked together" (συνέζευξεν) and portrays a married couple as partners working in tandem for a common cause. The term for sundering or dividing in this context must refer to divorce, since that was the question at hand, even though the verb is different from that used in v. 3 (χωρίζω<sup>33</sup> instead of ἀπολύω) and can in other contexts refer simply to separation. But the shift in verbs may suggest that Jesus is forbidding people to do that which would rupture a relationship at any level, even far short of full-fledged divorce. Ἀπολύω, however, will reappear in vv. 8 and 9, demonstrating that Jesus is not somehow permitting separation where he does not tolerate divorce.

The clause "what God united" has led some to suppose that not all married couples have been united by God; perhaps other unions are merely human.<sup>34</sup> By itself, v. 6b could sustain this interpretation, but in the context of a creation ordinance this is impossible. What Jesus is rather saying is that because all marriages are divinely made unions, they ought not be dissolved. Paul certainly viewed Gen 2:24 as equally applicable to believer and unbeliever, including even the pagan cult-prostitutes (1 Cor 6:16).

V. 6b also provides the crucial clue to understanding marriage as a covenant rather than a sacrament, as dissoluble rather than indissoluble.<sup>35</sup> Protestants have typically held the former views, citing Erasmus as an important predecessor, while Catholics, with important exceptions, have generally endorsed the latter. Eastern Orthodoxy has been less uniform. Curiously, there is a resurgence of opposition to the Erasmian view in very conservative Protestant circles, which lays more weight on early Orthodox and Catholic thought than evangelicals usually allow in other areas of theology. But the only way to maintain an indissolubilist view of marriage and to make sense of v. 6b is to argue that Jesus is

<sup>33</sup>The present imperative χωρίζτω may have the force of "stop dividing," and it may be significant that Matthew does not use the aorist, which can imply "don't ever . . ." in light of the exception clause of v. 9, but both of these "rules" of grammar have so many exceptions that one can assume neither without further contextual support.

<sup>34</sup>E.g. Norman L. Geisler, *Ethics: Alternatives and Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971) 208.

<sup>35</sup>"Indissoluble" in the sense of "unable to be broken," not simply that which "ought not to be broken." The distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic indissolubility, found especially in Catholic circles, introduces distinctions for which the text lends no support.

commanding people not to do in appearance that which in fact they cannot do in reality. Moreover, such a position has to argue that Moses' concession, cited in vv. 7-8, actually permitted that which really could not have occurred. With M. J. Down, then, one ought to conclude that Jesus affirms that "marriages should not be broken, but he does not say that they cannot be broken. It makes sense to say that Moses conceded permission for something basically undesirable; it does not make sense to say that Moses conceded permission for something basically impossible."<sup>36</sup> To be sure, some covenants are unconditional, but some are not. Clearly marriages are contingent on the faithfulness of both parties.<sup>37</sup>

*Counter-question (v. 7):* "They said, 'Why then did Moses command one "to give her a writ of dismissal and divorce her"<sup>38</sup>?"

The Pharisees asked Jesus if it were lawful to divorce for every cause and he has apparently answered, "not for any cause." In fact, though, all he has said so far is that God intended marriages to be permanent and that humans should not disrupt that state of affairs. Nevertheless, his interrogators understandably raise the question of why divorce was permitted under Moses' Law. Because they were trying to trap Jesus, they have often been accused of misrepresenting Scripture here. Deut 24:1-4 does not command divorce; it prohibits remarriage of a husband to his original wife after he has divorced her and she has remarried another man. But, in fairness to the Pharisees, the casuistic form of the law ("if . . . then") does seem to presuppose that divorce is legitimate in certain circumstances, so that there are proper procedures to be followed in issuing divorce papers. Jesus does not challenge this logic. In fact, in 5:31, where he offers a less literal rendering of Deut 24:1, he creates an explicitly imperatival form, even if to contrast the OT command with his own teaching.

*Counter-response (v. 8):* "He said to them, 'Because of your hard-heartedness Moses permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.'"

Jesus grants the Pharisees their argument. Divorce was permitted under the law and provisions were made for how it was

<sup>36</sup>M. J. Down, "The Sayings of Jesus about Marriage and Divorce," *ExpT* 95 (1984) 332. Cf. Helen Oppenheimer, "Is the Marriage Bond an Indissoluble 'Vinculum'?" *Theol* 78 (1975) 242.

<sup>37</sup>See esp. Oliver O'Donovan, *Marriage and Permanence* (Bramcote, Notts.: Grove, 1978) 13-18. David Peterson ("Divorce and Remarriage in the New Testament," *St. Mark's Review* 115 [1983] 11) counters by claiming that the one-flesh union creates a relationship of kinship similar to that of parents and children, which cannot be broken simply by one party rejecting the other. But this is to invert the chronology of Gen 2:24—a man first leaves parents and then becomes one flesh. The one-flesh union itself does not create the new and deeper loyalty; this has already been pledged.

<sup>38</sup>Some MSS omit "her," but the pronoun obviously remains implied.

to be administered and for when remarriage was forbidden. The entire Mishnaic tractate Gittin reveals to what lengths the oral torah built on this foundation, describing in meticulous detail all kinds of circumstances in which divorce papers were valid and invalid. Nor does Jesus argue that the laws of Moses were not from God. Rather he disputes the permanence of these provisions. They were not God's original intention for humanity at creation, prior to the Fall, and therefore they are not his standards for those who would follow Jesus as disciples in the age of the new covenant, of humanity's re-creation.<sup>39</sup>

Why then did God permit divorce in the interim period? As with many of his concessions to his people (e.g., construction of a temple and establishment of a monarchy), God graciously accommodated himself to their rebellious desires. "Hard-heartedness" (σκληροκαρδία) is a too common attribute of Israel throughout the OT (e.g., Deut 10:16; Jer 4:4; Ezek 3:7). As there, it should be defined broadly as the calloused attitude of humanity in its fallen state against the standards of God. In the context of marriage and divorce, it will refer to a stubborn unwillingness to be faithful to the marriage covenant.<sup>40</sup> In extreme instances, it may take such specific forms as physical abuse, but outward actions are not primarily in view. Strikingly, Jesus dissociates himself from this human sinfulness by speaking of "your hard-heartedness," while at the same time indicting his contemporaries along with the earlier generations of Israel.

Many writers have appealed to this σκληροκαρδία as a possible ground for divorce under the new covenant as well. If God was gracious enough to permit less than his ideal in the age of law, surely he would be at least as compassionate in the age of grace!<sup>41</sup> Unfortunately, this argument completely inverts the logic of Jesus' ethic. Jesus' commands consistently establish a greater standard of righteousness than the law required (Matt 5:20). Grace comes into play because God concurrently offers a greater empowerment to enable one better to perform his more demanding will (11:28-30). By saying in this verse, "from the beginning it was not so," Jesus insists that God did not originally intend for hard-heartedness to be an excuse for divorce. Now in the age of the new covenant, therefore, Christians may no longer appeal to hard-heartedness as grounds for dissolving a marriage.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup>It is not all that important, as some theological systems maintain, to determine whether a given practice began after Sinai or merely some time after the Fall, since (as classically with circumcision) the NT challenges the immutability of all post-Fall ordinances, apart from understanding their fulfillment in Christ.

<sup>40</sup>Cf. Dwight H. Small, *The Right to Remarry* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1975) 106.

<sup>41</sup>E.g., Larry Richards, "Divorce and Remarriage under a Variety of Circumstances," in *Divorce*, ed. House, 223.

<sup>42</sup>Matt 5:31-32 has already ruled out a facile appeal to Deuteronomy 24 to justify divorce, and Jesus' antitheses there and throughout the Sermon on the Mount

Nevertheless, this distinction between pre- and post-NT teaching suggests that Christians must recognize Jesus' words as first of all directed to his followers and only secondarily intended for the rest of humanity.<sup>43</sup> Andre Bustanoby frames the options much too antithetically when he distinguishes two divorce laws in the Bible—one for Christians able to conform to the original pattern of marriage and one for unbelievers with hardened hearts.<sup>44</sup> After all, creation ordinances remained God's ideal even in OT times. But his intuition rightly senses that some kind of distinction must be maintained. In a democracy, Christians have the right and responsibility to promote laws which reflect God's ideals. But, recognizing that not all are regenerate and empowered to meet these standards, they must leave room for "consenting adults" to choose alternate lifestyles to the extent that they do not infringe on the freedom and well-being of others.<sup>45</sup> Peter Lockery seems more on target when he remarks, "The Mosaic legislation was given as a concession to hardness of heart, and finds a legitimate place in civil divorce legislation today. The church ought to support a civil legislation which in fact is far less stringent than the teaching of Jesus and Paul."<sup>46</sup> To be sure, Christians too can divorce because of hard-heartedness, but they sin when they do.

*Climactic Pronouncement (v. 9):* "But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual sin, and marries another woman, commits adultery."<sup>47</sup>

Matthew brings this controversy story to its zenith with Jesus' solemn pronouncement, introduced with his characteristic λέγω ὑμῖν. This is the only verse in the NT which refers both to grounds for divorce and to remarriage at the same time. The literature and commentary on the verse understandably equal that on all of the rest of the pericope put together. Nevertheless, a fair consensus among older Protestant interpreters emerged which should still be heeded, despite recent widespread challenges concerning the

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show that his teaching is far more radical than simply new Jewish halakah (contra Philip Sigal, *The Halakah of Jesus of Nazareth according to the Gospel of Matthew* [Lanham, MD: UPA, 1986] 89-94).

<sup>43</sup>See esp. Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989). Cf. Richard Lischer, "The Sermon on the Mount as Radical Pastoral Care," *Int* 41 (1987) 157-69.

<sup>44</sup>Andre Bustanoby, "When Wedlock Becomes Deadlock," *CT* 19 (1975) 918-20, 1013-16.

<sup>45</sup>Of course, divorce laws in most Western countries have become so liberal that such infringement now occurs regularly.

<sup>46</sup>Peter F. Lockery, "Divorce and Remarriage in the New Testament and Its Application for the Church Today" (M.Th. Thesis, Fuller Seminary, 1987) 245.

<sup>47</sup>The number and diversity of textual variants attest to the difficulty even ancient Christianity found with this text. The version adopted here, and in virtually all modern editions and translations, is the shortest and most understandable as that which gave rise to the longer variants, all of which can be explained as harmonizing with 5:32 or Mark 10:11 or as conflations with earlier such harmonizations.

meaning of *πορνεία* and the part of the sentence which the exception clause modifies.<sup>48</sup>

But before turning to those two particularly controverted issues, several other observations prove apposite. First, the main clause of the sentence, bracketing for a moment the exception clause, reads, "whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery." This by itself reflects radical support for women's rights, otherwise unparalleled in antiquity.<sup>49</sup> Second, irrespective of the meaning of *πορνεία*, if *μὴ ἐπὶ πορνεία* is taken grammatically, with the vast majority of commentators, as an exception, then it introduces a qualification to the apparently absolute declarations of vv. 4-8. But speakers and writers regularly proceed in this fashion, expecting their words to be judged by the entire contexts in which they appear (cf. classically John 4:1-3). Thus no particular interpretation of *πορνεία* is inherently more probable than any other on the alleged grounds that it solves the apparent contradiction between vv. 6b and 9.<sup>50</sup> Every interpretation introduces a certain tension; none necessarily impugns the integrity of the speaker.

Third, the lack of a parallel to the reciprocal statement in Mark 10:12 ("and if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery") should probably be explained, on any source-critical theory, as due to Matthew's more Jewish orientation (in which milieu women's divorcing was rare) vis-à-vis Mark's more Gentile orientation (in which context such practice was at least a little more common). What is more, Matthew has already included some reciprocal teaching for both men and women concerning divorce and remarriage in 5:31-32 and may expect his readers to understand such reciprocity as implicit here too. Whichever explanation is adopted, Matthew and Mark are not to be viewed as contradictory. V. 9 must be understood as implying or at least not excluding Mark 10:12.

This observation makes it strange to see how adamantly some writers insist that *μὴ ἐπὶ πορνεία* must be interpreted so as not to be a true exception to Jesus' "no divorce" statement in Mark 10:11. This leads them to reject the very natural harmonization which assumes that Mark simply implies the exception which Matthew makes explicit, presupposing the universal acknowledgment in Jewish and Greco-Roman circles that adultery provided grounds for divorce. If such a harmonization be labeled "eisegetical"<sup>51</sup> in comparing Matt 19:9 with Mark 10:11, an identical kind of

<sup>48</sup>The classic treatment is John Murray, *Divorce* (Philadelphia: OPC, 1953). The most serious challenge comes from Heth and Wenham, *Jesus*.

<sup>49</sup>See esp. Gordon J. Wenham, "Gospel Definitions of Adultery and Women's Rights," *ExpT* 95 (1984) 330-32.

<sup>50</sup>Contra, e.g., John Goldingay, "Divine Ideals, Human Stubbornness, and Scriptural Inerrancy," *Transf* 2.4 (1985) 1-4.

<sup>51</sup>As, e.g., in William Heth, "Divorce, but No Remarriage," in *Divorce*, ed. House, 108.

harmonization remains unavoidable in comparing Matt 19:9 with Mark 10:12. And in fact such harmonizations seem appropriate in numerous places throughout Scripture. Closely parallel is the case of Matt 16:4 compared with Mark 8:12. Matthew has Jesus promise no sign from heaven for the Pharisees' benefit, except (ἐἰ μὴ) the "sign of Jonah," while Mark has Jesus refuse to give a sign altogether. Unless these verses contradict each other, one must assume that Mark implicitly means something like "no sign, except that which would not convince you any way"—as with the resurrection (cf. Luke 16:31).<sup>52</sup>

Fourth, Jesus claims that the offending person "commits adultery." Not one of the textual variants in this verse or in 5:32 uses the nouns "adulterer" or "adulteress" (μοιχός, μοιχαλίσ), leaving the interpretation "becomes an adulterer/-ess" particularly misleading. Even if one divorces for unbiblical reasons and remarries, such a person does not enter into an ongoing adulterous relationship. The commission of adultery is a one-time act. Nor does the present tense of μοιχᾶται lend support to the notion of continuous adultery. In the indicative mood, present tenses are not always progressive. The form of a pronouncement story leads one to expect as its climax a proverbial statement, which will employ gnomic or timeless verbs, not ones that emphasize ongoing action.<sup>53</sup>

The clinching argument in support of this position introduces a fifth observation. The adultery of which Jesus speaks with the verb μοιχᾶται probably does not refer to sexual relations at all! Most interpreters assume that the adultery takes place when the new marriage is consummated. But Jesus' parallel teaching in 5:32, presumably still in Matthew's and his readers' minds when they come to 19:9, cannot be so interpreted as easily. There Jesus declares that "every man who divorces his wife, except for the matter of sexual sin, *makes her commit adultery*." To be sure, many divorced Jewish women did seek the financial security of remarriage, and in that sense Jesus could be saying that divorce forces women to remarry and thus have adulterous sexual relations. But not every divorced Jewish woman remarried; some, for example, returned to their fathers' homes, often in disgrace. So Jesus' statement is simply not true in every case if "adultery" is interpreted as literally as sexual intercourse.<sup>54</sup>

It is better therefore to recognize a metaphorical meaning for adultery in Matt 5:32a. "Adultery" was regularly used in the OT for

<sup>52</sup>Cf. James Swetnam, "No Sign of Jonah," *Bib* 66 (1985) 126-30; Vincent Mora, *Le signe de Jonas* (Paris: Cerf, 1983) 26.

<sup>53</sup>See esp. Carroll D. Osburn, "The Present Indicative of Matthew 19:9," *Rest Q* 24 (1981) 193-203.

<sup>54</sup>Of course one could argue for this statement also to be taken as a generalization, admitting of exceptions not considered in or germane to its original context. But the difference here is that unremarried Jewish divorcees did form part of the immediate historical context and could scarcely have been overlooked.

spiritual idolatry (e.g., Hos 2:4, 4:12; Jer 5:7; Ezek 16:32, 23:37). In the more immediate context of Matt 5:28, Jesus has indisputably used the verb μοιχεύω to refer to other than actual sexual relations: "every man who looks at a woman πρὸς τὸ ἐπιθυμήσαι αὐτήν<sup>55</sup> has already committed adultery with her in his heart." V. 32 employs an almost identical structure as v. 28: ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πᾶς ὁ + pres. act. ind. mas. nom. sg. participle + γυνῶνκα + form of μοιχεύω, so it should probably be interpreted in similar fashion: divorce itself, except when it is for sexual sin, is metaphorical adultery—faithlessness to the person to whom one promised permanent loyalty, with lust after another lifestyle and/or set of commitments.<sup>56</sup>

But if this is the most likely interpretation of 5:32, it should probably be considered for 19:9 as well, which follows the closely parallel form, λέγω δὲ ὑμῖν ὅτι ὅς ἂν + form of ἀπολύω + τὴν γυνῶνκα αὐτοῦ + exceptive clause + form of μοιχεύω. The whole debate about whether a second marriage, following a Scripturally illegitimate divorce, is permanently adulterous or involves only an initial act of adultery thus dissolves.<sup>57</sup> Neither is true; the adultery (faithlessness) occurred at the time of divorce.<sup>58</sup>

Discussion may now proceed with a more detailed consideration of the clause μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ. Perhaps the simplest problem to solve is the force of the expression μὴ ἐπὶ. Although suggestions have been made that these words should be translated as "even in the case of," or "apart from a consideration of,"<sup>59</sup> such proposals are now almost universally recognized as extremely unlikely renderings of the Greek.<sup>60</sup> Μὴ ἐπὶ is a natural ellipsis for εἰ/ἐάν μὴ ἐπὶ and should be taken as a real exception clause.<sup>61</sup>

Also to be given only passing attention is the tradition-critical approach which assigns μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ not to Jesus but to someone in the early Jewish-Christian church or to Matthew himself.

<sup>55</sup>Usually translated "so as to lust after her," but arguably to be rendered "so that she might lust after him." See esp. Klaus Haacker, "Der Rechtsatz Jesu zur Thema Ehebruch," *BZ* 21 (1977) 113-16.

<sup>56</sup>On this whole concept of "sexless adultery," see esp. Luck, *Divorce*, 247-51.

<sup>57</sup>Contrast, e.g., Robert J. Plekker, *Divorce and the Christian* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1980) 111; with Heth and Wenham, *Jesus*, 200-1. With Plekker, if sex itself constitutes the adultery, it is hard to see why only the first act and not every subsequent act would be adulterous.

<sup>58</sup>Alternately, with Lockery, "Divorce," 128, it may be the "taking" of a new wife, in Matt 19:9 (which differs in wording from 5:32 in its reference to remarriage), which is adulterous, but still not the actual sexual consummation.

<sup>59</sup>E.g. Bruce Vawter, "The Divorce Clauses in Mt 5:32 and 19:9," *CBQ* 16 (1954) 155-67; Thomas V. Fleming, "Christ and Divorce," *TS* 24 (1963) 106-20; both following St. Augustine.

<sup>60</sup>As Bruce Vawter himself notes in "Divorce and the New Testament," *CBQ* 39 (1977) 528-42. Vawter adds ironically that though he had abandoned this view ten years earlier, scholars continue to cite him as if he still held it (p. 535)!

<sup>61</sup>See esp. Ben Witherington, "Matthew 5:32 and 19:9—Exception or Exceptional Situation?" *NTS* 31 (1985) 571.

Though this view is almost universally held in critical circles,<sup>62</sup> it introduces unlikely anomalies into the history of the formation of Matthew's gospel. Either Matthew inserted a more lenient application of Jesus' teaching, contrary to his more rigorous attitude to ethics elsewhere,<sup>63</sup> or else he allowed an inauthentic saying ascribed to Jesus but opposed to his own emphases to remain in the text even while consistently eliminating awkward or conflicting details in his source material elsewhere (e.g. 12:4, 19:17, 21:19, etc.).

But if μή ἐνί πορνεία is a genuine exception and an authentic word of Jesus, to what does πορνεία refer? Some have proposed "premarital sex." Abel Isaksson has defended this view at greatest length, drawing a parallel between Matt 19:9 and Lev 21:7. Just as OT priests were forbidden to marry any woman but a virgin, so too with the NT priesthood—all of Jesus' disciples. Divorce would thus be permitted if a man discovered his wife had not been chaste before their marriage.<sup>64</sup> But it is not obvious that Lev 21:7 applies directly to Christians. All of the other commands for priests in 21:1-9 are regularly seen as ceremonial provisions which have no direct NT counterparts, and v. 7 may have been intended to ensure the correct paternity of the next generation of priests, a problem about which believers do not have to worry.<sup>65</sup> What is more, the Pharisees asked Jesus to respond to a debate concerning adultery and not premarital sex. Finally, as Thomas Edgar points out, Isaksson's view would leave Jesus more concerned about faithfulness prior to marriage than during it!<sup>66</sup>

An increasingly popular view, spoken of by some critical scholars as if it were a consensus perspective,<sup>67</sup> equates πορνεία with forbidden, incestuous marriages between close relatives, as proscribed in Leviticus 18. Several arguments at first glance seem to make this position quite probable. 1 Cor 5:1 applies the term to a man sleeping with his father's wife. Acts 15:20, 29 link πορνεία with other ceremonial laws in a way which suggests something narrower than "sexual sin" in general. The Hebrew נא, which the

<sup>62</sup>For detailed expositions see David R. Catchpole, "The Synoptic Divorce Material as a Traditio-Historical Problem," *BJRL* 57 (1974-75) 92-127; Josef Zmijewski, "Neutestamentliche Weisungen für Ehe und Familie," *SNTU* 9 (1984) 34-69.

<sup>63</sup>For a survey of studies on Matthew's attitude to legal material, see Graham Stanton, "The Origin and Purpose of Matthew's Gospel," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 25.3 (ed. Wolfgang Hasse; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1985) 1934-37.

<sup>64</sup>Abel Isaksson, *Marriage and Ministry in the New Temple* (Lund: Gleerup, 1965) 116-52. Cf. Mark Geldard, "Jesus' Teaching on Divorce," *Churchman* 92 (1978) 134-43.

<sup>65</sup>R. Laird Harris, "Leviticus," in *EBC*, vol. 2 (1990) 616.

<sup>66</sup>Thomas Edgar, "Divorce and Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion," in *Divorce*, ed. House, 173.

<sup>67</sup>E.g., Augustine Stock, "Matthean Divorce Texts," *BTB* 8 (1978) 24-33. For a more detailed defense, cf. Heinrich Baltensweiler, "Die Ehebruchsklauseln bei Matthäus," *TZ* 15 (1959) 340-56.



LXX regularly translates with πορνεία, appears in the Qumran writings with just such a meaning.<sup>68</sup> The marriage of Herod and Herodias, if it formed part of the background which provoked the Pharisees' original questions, certainly qualified as forbidden because Herod was the brother of Philip, Herodias's previous husband.

On closer inspection, however, these arguments prove little. 1 Cor 5:1 goes on to say that such incest was rare "even" among the Gentiles, implying it was even less a problem in Judaism (apart from the unusual affairs of the Herodian household<sup>69</sup>). It is not obvious that defining πορνεία as incest in Acts 15 relieves the tension of having what remains a fundamentally moral issue grouped with prohibitions against such things as eating blood, strangled meat, and food sacrificed to idols. Narrower meanings of πορν, still remain the rare exception, not the rule. Significantly, πορνεία/πορν appears nowhere in Leviticus 18 LXX or MT. And Herodias's divorce did not stem from marriage to a close relative; only her remarriage raised questions about kinship. Moreover, as with the interpretation of πορνεία as premarital sex, taking the term to refer to incest ignores the background of the Shammai-Hillel debate. Such sins, finally, would actually have required annulment rather than divorce.<sup>70</sup>

Πορνεία should therefore be translated as "adultery," possibly including but not limited to related sexual sins such as incest, homosexuality, prostitution, molestation, or indecent exposure. This is its typical semantic range.<sup>71</sup> It scarcely matters that the OT made adultery a capital offense (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22), since this law was not widely enforced in NT times. But Carl Laney itemizes five other major objections to this interpretation: (1) It contradicts the absolute statements of Mark 10:11-12 and Luke 16:18; (2) it makes Matt 19: 6 and 9 contradict each other; (3) Jesus' teaching then does not go beyond the position of Shammai, contrary to his usually more rigorous views; (4) it contradicts 1 Cor 7:10-11, in which Paul betrays no awareness of a "word of the Lord" permitting divorce for adultery; and (5) if Matthew had meant adultery, he would have used μοιχεία not πορνεία; 15:19 makes it clear Matthew did distinguish the terms.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>68</sup>See esp. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "The Matthean Divorce Texts and Some New Palestinian Evidence," *TS* 37 (1976) 197-226; J. B. Mueller, "The Temple Scroll and the Gospel Divorce Texts," *RevQ* 10 (1980) 247-56.

<sup>69</sup>On which, see esp. K. C. Hanson, "The Herodians and Mediterranean Kinship. Part 2: Marriage and Divorce," *BTB* 19 (1989) 142-51.

<sup>70</sup>Cf. further Isaksson, *Marriage*, 130-31; Heth and Wenham, *Jesus*, 161-68.

<sup>71</sup>Bruce Malina ("Does *Porneia* Mean Fornication?" *NovT* 14 [1972] 10-17) and Joseph Jensen ("Does *Porneia* Mean Fornication? A Critique of Bruce Malina," *NovT* 20 [1978] 161-84) disagree over whether the term can refer to premarital sex but agree on the basic definition given above.

<sup>72</sup>Laney, *Divorce*, 67-68.

Not one of these objections withstands close scrutiny. (1) and (2) have already been dealt with above. With respect to (3), Jesus does go beyond Shammai in numerous ways. The house of Shammai, like Judaism more generally, *required* divorce for sexual indecencies (*m. Sot.* 5:1); Jesus only *permits* it. Restoration remains the ideal and permanency of marriage the central focus of Jesus' teaching, contrary to the Pharisees' preoccupation with grounds for divorce. And no egalitarianism appears in Shammai's teaching similar to Jesus' insistence that men can commit adultery against their wives just as heinously as wives against their husbands.<sup>73</sup> (4) must be dealt with as was (1); Paul cites the case of a woman leaving her husband, as in Mark 10:12, which is not directly parallel to the reverse situation at hand in Matt 19:9. Regarding (5), several factors may explain Matthew's use of *πορνεία* rather than *μοιχεία*. He probably wanted to avoid semantic confusion with the metaphorical use of *μοιχεύω* further on in the verse. He likely wanted to use a term that included sexual sin slightly more broadly than "adultery" (as Shammai's own understanding of *נדה* *נדה* also seemed to imply). And *πορν-* root words were used much more commonly than *μοιχ-* root words when *female* sexual infidelity was being described.<sup>74</sup>

*Μὴ ἐπὶ πορνεία* should thus be rendered "except for sexual sin." But what does this phrase modify? *divorce?* or *divorce and remarriage?* The exception clause could have appeared in three places—here in the middle of the sentence, at the beginning, or at the end. The only reason for placing it at the beginning of the sentence would have been to give it special emphasis, but Jesus wants to stress keeping marriages intact, not exceptions to the rule. At the end of the sentence, it could create the impression that Jesus had in mind only those situations in which adultery directly caused the remarriage as well as the divorce.<sup>75</sup> So if a Greek writer wanted to convey the idea that the exception clause modified both verbs, the position in which it now appears would be the least ambiguous place for it.

The same, incidentally, is true in English. Various writers have created parallels to illustrate how readers would naturally interpret sentences such as:

<sup>73</sup>Cf. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to Saint Mark* (Cambridge: University Press, 1977) 321.

<sup>74</sup>Cf. esp. Johannes B. Bauer, "Bemerkungen zu den matthäischen Unzuchtsklauseln (Mt 5,32; 19,9)," in *Begegnung mit dem Wort* (ed. Josef Zmijewski and Ernst Nellessen; Bonn: Hanstein, 1980) 26-27.

<sup>75</sup>On both these points, see esp. Luck, *Divorce*, 143.

Anyone who kills a dog, unless the animal is diseased, and buries it in his garden, shall be fined by the city council.<sup>76</sup>

One does not assume this law was enacted to legislate fines for all dog-killing, but for dog-killing followed by garden burials. Or again,

Whoever exceeds the speed-limit, except as authorized by law, and hits another vehicle, is liable to criminal prosecution.<sup>77</sup>

Granted that all speeding is wrong, one assumes this particular law is intended to deal with speeding which results in collisions—except in the case, for example, of a police car which crashes while chasing a suspect at high speeds.

Nevertheless, Heth and Wenham correctly point out that ambiguities remain in these complex sentences. In the example, "to kill someone, if it was not by accident, and to cremate them is murder," it is implied that "killing as such and cremation are always murderous. Only accidental killing not followed by cremation is not murderous."<sup>78</sup> Yet this parallel is not as close to Matt 19:9 as the others, since in the case of "killing plus cremation," cremation is not really the problem (at least not for those who are not opposed to cremation on totally unrelated grounds—e.g., a belief in keeping a body "intact" for its resurrection). Most people would not read Heth's and Wenham's sentence as pronouncing cremation immoral per se. But with "divorce plus remarriage," the whole point which Heth and Wenham are trying to prove is that Jesus objected to remarriage in every instance, even when divorce may have been permissible.

Heth and Wenham do correctly maintain that various scholars have overstated their case when alleging that the exception clause *must* modify both verbs,<sup>79</sup> but they have not set forth sufficient evidence to make their alternative—that the clause modifies only "divorce"—at all probable. Speakers in Greek (or English) wishing to be understood to say that "all remarriage is wrong even if divorce is permitted following adultery" would normally say precisely that—in two completely distinct clauses.<sup>80</sup> When one further recognizes that remarriage was viewed as a fundamental right by virtually all Jews in antiquity (*m. Git.* 9:3), one should realize that

<sup>76</sup>Personal communication from D. A. Carson, cited in Heth and Wenham, *Jesus*, 234, n. 20, who dismiss the example simply as "not ideologically parallel to Matt 19:9," without any explanation as to why it is not parallel.

<sup>77</sup>Philip H. Wiebe, "Jesus' Divorce Exception," *JETS* 32 (1989) 328.

<sup>78</sup>Heth and Wenham, *Jesus*, 234, n. 20.

<sup>79</sup>As, e.g., in Murray, *Divorce*, 40-41; Edgar in *Divorce*, ed. House, 156-62; Bruner, *Churchbook*, 683.

<sup>80</sup>The "parallels" elsewhere in Matthew which Gordon J. Wenham ("The Syntax of Matthew 19:9," *JSNT* 28 [1986] 17-23) adduces are only partially parallel. By his own admission the structure of 19:9 remains unique in Matthew.

if Jesus had wanted anyone in his audience to understand that he was forbidding all remarriage, he would have had to have said so much more clearly.

Heth and Wenham, nevertheless, go on to argue for their view both from the dominant school of interpretation among ancient Greek and Latin Christians and from their understanding of Deut 24:1-4. From these verses they believe that a woman is prevented from remarrying her first husband, after taking a second, because the indissolubility of that first marriage established a permanent kinship of relations which now makes the original husband and wife too closely related to be married again (*à la* Leviticus 18).<sup>81</sup> But Heth, at least, has now understandably abandoned this reading of Deuteronomy 24 (if marriages really are indissoluble, how could getting back together with one's original partner not be God's ideal?) in favor of one which has no bearing on whether or not remarriages may be permitted in the NT age (namely that the husband was forbidden from financially profiting twice by marrying the same woman twice).<sup>82</sup>

As for early Patristic and Catholic commentators, several factors should caution one against valuing their opinions on this subject too highly. First, it is not at all clear that the first centuries of church history prohibited remarriage as uniformly as Heth and Wenham allege. Pierre Nautin surveys evidence which suggests that the Latin Fathers of the second through fourth centuries, except for Jerome and Augustine, actually used Matt 19:9 to justify the remarriage of a husband whose wife had committed adultery, and, at first, of the wife as well. Nautin's survey calls into serious question the study of Henri Crouzel,<sup>83</sup> on which Heth and Wenham rely heavily. Later Catholic dogma officially prohibited these practices but they continued to be tolerated in various circles through at least the ninth century. Nautin believes the influential commentary by Victorin de Petovio had much to do with the growing prohibition of remarriage, but this study was more preoccupied with combating Marcion's false dichotomies between the Old and New Testaments than with straightforward exegesis of Matthew.<sup>84</sup> Michael Hurley adds that, from the sixth century on, divorce with the right to remarry was permitted in the East, and openly tolerated in the West from the eighth through the eleventh centuries. Only in the mid-twelfth century was the absolute indissolubility of Christian marriage established as indisputable

<sup>81</sup>Heth and Wenham, *Jesus*, 19-44, 105-10.

<sup>82</sup>Heth, in *Divorce*, ed. House, 83-87.

<sup>83</sup>Henri Crouzel, *L'église primitive face au divorce du premier au cinquième siècle* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1971).

<sup>84</sup>Pierre Nautin, "Divorce et remariage dans la tradition de l'église latine," *RSR* 62 (1974) 7-54.

doctrine. These admissions are all the more significant since Hurley himself strongly endorses the doctrine.<sup>85</sup>

Second, virtually all the early church fathers relied on one of several inferior forms of the text of Matt 19:9 which included language 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. Crouzel argues from this evidence for the originality of the Textus Receptus at this point,<sup>86</sup> but if this textual tradition proves late on other grounds,<sup>87</sup> then the Fathers' opinions turn out to be much less valuable than they otherwise would.

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. Pat Harrell's carefully defended conclusions merit extended citation:

The Church Fathers certainly accepted the Matthean exception clauses. The rigorists' position concerning the indissolubility of marriage gained an impetus from the church's: (a) abhorrence of the moral indifference of Gentile society, as is indicated by the Fathers' extreme position in regard to the social mixing of the sexes; (b) withdrawal from all aspects of society that might tend to weaken the moral fiber of the church; and (c) limiting of sexual intercourse to the purpose of procreation. Remarriage was also discouraged by the doctrine of penance in the Ante-Nicene Church. First, adultery was viewed among the rigorists to be beyond the Church's prerogative to forgive. Forgiveness was not impossible but could only be done at the Last Judgment of God. Secondly, the attitude was influenced by the doctrine that there was only one repentance for post-baptismal sins.<sup>88</sup>

After a somewhat tortuous consideration of all the alternatives, the traditional Protestant view remains the most persuasive. Jesus forbade divorce and remarriage, except when sexual sin intruded. Then both divorce and remarriage are permitted, though neither is ever required. Restoration always remains preferable. Infidelity does not, in and of itself, dissolve

<sup>85</sup>Michael Hurley, "Christ and Divorce," *ITQ* 35 (1968) 58-72. For other surveys of the evidence which come to similar conclusions, cf. Pat E. Harrell, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Early Church* (Austin: Sweet, 1967); Atkinson, *Have and Hold*, 36-69.

<sup>86</sup>Henri Crouzel, "Le texte patristique de Matthieu v.32 et xix.9," *NTS* 19 (1972) 98-119; so also T. Fahy, "Matthew, 19:9—Divorce or Separation?" *ITQ* 24 (1957) 173-74.

<sup>87</sup>See above, p. 43, n. 47; and cf. Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: UBS, 1971) 47-48.

<sup>88</sup>Harrell, *Divorce*, 224.

the marriage covenant, but it does introduce so serious a breach that sometimes relationships prove irreparable.

There are still, however, at least two ways to agree with this so-called Erasmian understanding of the text's meaning but to deny its traditional application. First is to argue that Jesus is not granting permission for divorce and remarriage, but merely observing that when adultery has already broken a marriage, divorce and/or remarriage do not create adultery where it had not previously occurred.<sup>89</sup> But once it is recognized that unfaithfulness alone does not end a marriage, this argument collapses. And even for those who believe adultery does dissolve a marriage, this interpretation only works in Matt 5:32 not in 19:9. For in 19:9 the man whose wife had "cheated" on him cannot be said to be guilty himself of adultery—until divorce has occurred.

Alternately, one could argue that Jesus is simply freeing a husband from any guilt if he were required by civil law (as in Israel) to divorce an unfaithful wife, but that he is not really providing a "ground" for divorce.<sup>90</sup> But this approach disregards the context of the Pharisees' original question, which asked, "is it lawful to divorce . . . ?"—a context in which grounds for divorce and the right to remarry were at stake. This view further neglects the fact that Jesus elsewhere gives no indication that his followers should feel bound by any of the Jewish civil legislation (halakah).

A few writers debate whether one should speak of actually legitimating divorce and remarriage for adultery or if one should speak of opting for the lesser of two evils.<sup>91</sup> This dichotomy is probably a false one; both positions may be true simultaneously. It is important to recall that God hates all divorce (Mal 2:14, 16), but sometimes he may hate the results of not divorcing even more. A realistic Christian ethic, whether an ideal absolutism or a hierarchicalism, recognizes that believers must often choose to do less than God's ideal. But in so doing they do not sin and may therefore be said to have made a correct or legitimate choice.<sup>92</sup>

*The Disciples' Objection (v. 10):* "His<sup>93</sup> disciples said to him, 'If this is the case with a man and his wife, it is better not to marry.'"

Here begins Matthew's major addition (vv. 10-12) to this pericope. As elsewhere, he is particularly concerned with the implications of Jesus' teaching for discipleship. The twelve recognize that Jesus' position is far stricter than those of any of their contemporaries. They recoil at the idea and wonder if

<sup>89</sup>Cf., esp., John J. Kilgallen, "To What Are the Matthean Exception-Texts (5:32 and 19:9) an Exception?" *Bib* 61 (1980) 102-5.

<sup>90</sup>E.g., Atkinson, *Have and Hold*, 118.

<sup>91</sup>E.g., Edgar ("Response," in *Divorce*, ed. House, 261-63) laments that Richards, in his contribution to the symposium, does not recognize this distinction and so takes a too negative view of divorce, even in cases of adultery or desertion.

<sup>92</sup>Cf. Geisler, *Ethics*, 97-136, for a good introduction to the two positions.

<sup>93</sup>Some MSS read "the disciples," but the meaning remains unchanged.

celibacy is not therefore preferable—at least in the sense of being more manageable. No doubt more than one spouse in the history of the world (and at least Peter, of the twelve, was already married) has often mused whether or not he or she would have been better off single than “stuck” with a seemingly unbearable marriage!

*Jesus' Final Words* (vv. 11-12): “But he said to them, ‘Not everyone can accept this word, but those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who became such in their mothers’ wombs, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by other people, and there are eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the person who is able to accept this accept it.’”

Jesus implicitly grants the disciples’ objection but immediately qualifies it substantially. In today’s vernacular, not everyone can “handle this.”<sup>94</sup> Intense debate has surrounded τὸν λόγον [τοῦτον] (“this word”). Does it refer to “it is better not to marry” in v. 10 or to Jesus’ pronouncement on divorce and remarriage in v. 9? The nearest antecedent would be v. 10, which should therefore be tried first. Jesus would then be saying that not all are able to refrain from marriage, but only those whom God particularly enables. Δέδοται represents a divine passive and is cognate to words for “gifts.” But one should probably not read in any technical sense of “gift” or “calling” here, merely divine empowerment.<sup>95</sup> Yet at the same time the language seems to preclude the traditional Roman Catholic conviction that the ability to live a celibate life is equally available to any for the asking.

Jacques Dupont and Quentin Quesnell, however, have raised serious objections to taking v. 11 as a reference to v. 10. Dupont appeals to the parallel language of Matt 13:11, in which Jesus tells the disciples, “To you has been given (δέδοται) to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to those [the crowds], it has not been given.” He takes ἀλλ’ οἷς δέδοται in 19:11, therefore, as a reference to all disciples. But clearly all of Jesus’ followers have not been gifted with celibacy, so v. 11 must refer back to v. 9. Only Christians, and not those outside the kingdom, can accept Jesus’ stringent teaching on divorce and remarriage.<sup>96</sup> The problem with Dupont’s parallel is that it proves too much. Many non-Christians do in fact believe in and practice lifelong faithfulness to their spouses. Further, as Carson comments, “Jesus’ appeal has been to the creation ordinance, not to kingdom morality.”<sup>97</sup>

Quesnell, however, adds three more objections to taking v. 11 as referring to v. 10 rather than v. 9. First, almost without exception

<sup>94</sup>Bruner, *Churchbook*, 688.

<sup>95</sup>Contra, e.g., Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *God and Marriage* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 40.

<sup>96</sup>Jacques Dupont, *Mariage et divorce dans l'évangile* (Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1959) 171-73.

<sup>97</sup>Carson, “Matthew,” 419.

elsewhere in Matthew, the disciples' role in dialogue with Jesus is to misunderstand rather than to capture correctly the import of their master's teaching. Second, Matthew would not likely have added a call to celibacy to his sources when he deletes references to asceticism elsewhere. Third, a discussion of celibacy completely reverses the thrust of the argument which vv. 3-9 have built.<sup>98</sup>

None of these arguments proves conclusive. In fact the disciples do misunderstand; they make a blanket generalization which Jesus has to explain applies only to those God specifically chooses. It is doubtful that Matthew objects to asceticism. He more likely omits reference to "leaving wife" in 19:29 (contra Luke 18:29) because it was not in his Markan source (Mark 10:29) and from 10:37-38 (contra Luke 14:26-27) to avoid the potential misinterpretation that one must divorce his wife to become a disciple. Matt 22:1-10 probably reflects a different parable altogether from Luke 14:16-24, so nothing can be deduced about redactionally motivated changes there.<sup>99</sup> Matt 22:23-33, finally, hardly supports Quesnell's belief that for Matthew "all men have wives."<sup>100</sup> As for reversing the thrust of Jesus' argument, vv. 3-12 overall still strongly support monogamous marriage as God's ideal. Vv. 10-12 qualify the typical Jewish enthusiasm for the married life but they scarcely reverse this thrust.

Francis Moloney appeals to Matt 19:23-26 as a dialogue parallel to vv. 9-12. There Jesus laments how hard it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom. When the disciples hear this, they exclaim, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus replies, "With humans this thing (τοῦτο) is impossible, but with God all things are possible." The nearest antecedent for τοῦτο is the disciples' query, but the actual one is Jesus' earlier remark.<sup>101</sup> But in fact this dialogue is not as parallel to 19:9-12 as it first seems. Τοῦτο in 19:26 does not as naturally refer back to the disciples' words precisely because they are a question rather than a statement. In v. 10, however, the disciples do make a statement, and v. 11 is more naturally taken as referring back to it.<sup>102</sup>

If one takes v. 11 as referring to v. 9, then those in v. 12 who "made themselves eunuchs" for the kingdom will most immediately refer to disciples who remain celibate after divorce.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>98</sup>Quentin Quesnell, "Made Themselves Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven' (Mt. 19,12)," *CBQ* 30 (1968) 342-46.

<sup>99</sup>Cf. Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1990) 83, 237-39.

<sup>100</sup>Quesnell, "Eunuchs," 346.

<sup>101</sup>Francis J. Moloney, "Matthew 19, 3-12 and Celibacy," *JSNT* 2 (1979) 46-47.

<sup>102</sup>Luck (*Divorce*, 150) unnecessarily tries to combine both approaches by taking "this word" to refer to v. 9 but in a sarcastic way so that it "ultimately yields the same general result" as that offered by our view.

<sup>103</sup>E.g., Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 382; Heth and Wenham, *Jesus*, 67-68.



If v. 11 refers to v. 10, one need not interpret v. 12 so narrowly. Jesus will then be saying that, just as there are people born without the capability of having sexual relations (particularly hermaphrodites without properly developed genitals), and just as there are men who for one reason or another have been castrated,<sup>104</sup> so also there are people whom God enables to live celibate lives even though they are physically capable of sexual relations.<sup>105</sup>

V. 12 concludes by echoing v. 11a with its twofold use of *χρῆμα* ("let the person who is able to accept this accept it"). On either view of the antecedent of v. 11, this call will reinforce the seriousness of Jesus' teaching. If v. 11 refers to v. 10, the call will urge those with the ability and leading to remain celibate to do so and will intend to discourage others from trying. Jesus thus strikingly repudiates the typical Jewish prejudice against celibacy<sup>106</sup> (excluding the Essenes), even while he advocates a stricter faithfulness to one's spouse than Judaism officially promoted among those already married.<sup>107</sup>

## II. SIGNIFICANCE

The traditional Protestant (or Erasmian) view of marriage, divorce, and remarriage remains the most viable of the major, well-defined interpretive options in the history of exegesis. Jesus' primary focus in Matt 19:1-12 remains on God's creation ordinance: once a couple marries, they should remain committed to each other for life. Almost anything which could strengthen a relationship and prevent divorce should become a priority in married people's lives. More premarital counseling is needed in our churches. Pastors, counselors, and Christian friends should frankly share their concerns when a couple seems to be rushing into marriage prematurely. Some couples should be encouraged not to marry. Support groups for married couples need to proliferate across our land. Competent and affordable (if not free) counseling, subsidized

<sup>104</sup>The gemara of *m. Yeb. 8:4 (b. Yeb. 79b-81a)* discusses at great length these first two kinds of eunuchs and confirms these interpretations. Overly restrictive is the view of C. Daniel ("Esséniens et eunuques (Matthieu 19, 10-12)," *RevQ* 6 [1968] 353-90) who limits "man-made eunuchs" to Essenes. Overly inclusive is Bruner (*Churchbook*, 690) who speaks of those "traumatized by experiences with other persons . . . so that they are not attracted to the other sex or they are not able or willing sexually to relate to the other sex."

<sup>105</sup>Josef Blinzler ("Εἰς τὴν εὐνοῦχον: Zur Auslegung von Mt 19,12," *ZNW* 48 [1957] 254-70) argues that v. 12c refers to all believers who metaphorically made themselves eunuchs upon entering the kingdom, but he equivocates on the meaning of "incapable" (of sexual relations) in order to defend his view.

<sup>106</sup>On which, see esp. Jerome Kodell, "The Celibacy Logion in Matthew 19.12," *BTB* 8 (1978) 19-23.

<sup>107</sup>My thinking throughout this first main section has been profoundly influenced by the two best discussions of the original meaning of this passage with which I am acquainted: Carson, "Matthew," 410-20; and Lockery, "Divorce," 95-178, even if I occasionally diverge from them. I wish at this point, however, before moving beyond them, to acknowledge my grateful indebtedness.

and/or donated, should become more widely available through a network of trained professional and lay people, for healthy as well as troubled marriages. Believers whose marriages are struggling should reject prideful attitudes which lead them to refuse help, and their friends should ruthlessly avoid stigmatizing them as in any way weak or second-class Christians.

According to Matt 19:3-12 divorce remains "unlawful" except in cases of sexual unfaithfulness. Then divorce and/or remarriage is permitted the "innocent" partner but never required. Some would automatically permit the unfaithful partner to remarry as well, but this would make adultery the way to get out of an unwanted marriage legitimately! As with Christian ethics more generally, these commands reflect God's desires for all people, but the task of the church is first of all to teach and apply them to believers. Unbelievers cannot be expected to follow Christian morality, though sometimes they pleasantly surprise us. Personal witness should concentrate on leading people first to Christ himself and then to a mature understanding of the "whole counsel" of his will. This suggests that it is proper to treat illegitimately divorced or remarried people more leniently when their sins occurred prior to a clear Christian commitment, even if 2 Cor 5:17 cannot by itself bear the full weight of this conclusion, as it is often asked to do.<sup>108</sup>

Matt 19:3-12 explicitly considers only a husband's perspective. But the reciprocal teaching of 5:32 and Mark 10:11-12 suggests that this passage applies equally to men and women. In general, it is as wrong for women to divorce and remarry as for men. In the specific case of infidelity, it is as permissible for women to divorce and/or remarry when their husbands "cheat" on them as for men when their wives do. It is as appropriate for women to consider the possibility of a single or celibate life as it is for men.

But now a crucial question clamors for a response. Do Jesus' words in Matt 19:9 cover all possible situations? The polemical context, the specific nature of the Pharisees' question, and the form of pronouncements in controversy stories in general all have suggested that v. 9 may be more a proverbial maxim than a legal absolute. Space prevents a detailed exegesis of 1 Corinthians 7, but it is worth at least noting that Paul apparently did not take Jesus' words as covering all situations. In 7:15 he allows for divorce when an unbelieving spouse no longer wishes to live with a believer. He recognizes that he has no "word of the Lord" in this matter as with

<sup>108</sup>Thus contra, e.g., Charles R. Swindoll (*Strike the Original Match* [Portland: Multnomah, 1980] 140-42) this is not a permissible ground for divorce and remarriage parallel to Jesus' exception. Cf. J. D. Thomas, *Divorce and Remarriage* (Abilene: Biblical Research Press, 1977) 81, on the view that "when an alien is baptized into Christ his baptism not only 'washes away' his past sins but it somehow sanctifies his existing marriage so that if it has been an adulterous union it now becomes a blessed one": "This strange doctrine overrates what baptism was ever purposed to do. Nothing in God's word that this writer knows of can turn a sinful act into a holy one—especially without full and complete repentance."

his more general prohibition of divorce in v. 10—probably a reference to what he knew of the Jesus-tradition. But he also believes he has “the Spirit of God” even when the historical Jesus has not pronounced on a given subject (v. 40).

What evangelicals have not wrestled with very much at all is how Paul, even under the guidance of the Spirit, could feel free to introduce a second exception to Jesus’ prohibition of divorce unless he realized that pronouncements like Matt 19:9 were not absolutes. When Jesus spoke to the Pharisees, he addressed a very homogeneous audience. Orthodox Jews were not supposed to intermarry; the problem of a Gentile spouse desiring to divorce a Jew on religious grounds may well not have been in anyone’s mind. But the setting of 1 Corinthians 7 is even more occasional than that of Matthew 19. Gordon Fee has convincingly demonstrated that the entire chapter cautions a variety of people against embracing an overly zealous pro-celibacy stance<sup>109</sup>—hardly a problem the contemporary church often faces! V. 10 therefore urges Christians not to consider divorcing their spouses in order to pursue the celibate life. Little wonder Paul feels no need to introduce Jesus’ exception clause, even if he knew of it. In v. 15, Paul probably has in mind couples in which one partner had become a believer after the marriage while the other had not. The unbelieving partner then grew increasingly disenchanted with his or her spouse’s newfound Christianity, especially if it strongly played down the role of sexual relations even in marriage (cf. the problem addressed in vv. 3-5). He or she too looked for a way of escape.

Now it has sometimes been argued that Paul is not talking about divorce at all here but merely separation “from bed and board” (χωρίζω),<sup>110</sup> though permanent desertion differs from divorce only in legalities. More relevant is the question of whether the kind of separation in view in 1 Corinthians 7 would allow for remarriage. As with Matthew 19, Heth and Wenham believe not, and they give seven reasons: (1) Marriage is a creation ordinance binding on believer and unbeliever alike. (2) The whole context of vv. 10-16 revolves around the command not to divorce. (3) Χωρίζω in v. 11 does not allow for remarriage so it must not in v. 15 either. (4) V. 16 should be translated more optimistically than it usually is, as in the NEB: “Think of it: as a wife you may be your husband’s salvation. . . .” (5) The phrase “not under bondage” (δεδούλωται) does not employ the same verb as in “not bound” (δέδεσται) in Rom 7:2 (where v. 3 makes it clear freedom to remarry is in view). (6) The Early Fathers almost unanimously saw no provision for remarriage in this verse. (7) Vv. 17-24 teach the principle, “remain

<sup>109</sup>Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 267-70.

<sup>110</sup>Laney, *Divorce*, 86-87, who also envisions divorce proceedings initiated by the deserting party but which do not free the unbeliever to remarry.

as you are," which for an abandoned spouse would mean no remarriage.<sup>111</sup>

But these arguments prove as unpersuasive as Heth's and Wenham's exegesis of Matt 19:9. The first merely demonstrates that desertion was Paul's primary concern; that it was an unbeliever wanting to leave is "accidental" in the technical sense of that term. The second simply underlines that v. 15 is truly an exception and not the rule. The third again commits the fallacy of confusing sense and reference;  $\chi\omega\rho\iota\zeta\omega$  itself neither permits nor precludes remarriage anywhere—only the context in which it is used can do that. If the separation in view in v. 10 is illegitimate, then of course Paul would rule out remarriage. If the separation in v. 15 is legitimate, the fact that the same verb reappears proves nothing about the legitimacy or illegitimacy of remarriage. Heth's and Wenham's fourth argument offers a much less likely translation than more neutral renderings.<sup>112</sup> Their fifth argument misses the point that, despite the differences in terms,  $\delta\epsilon\omega$  ("bind") and  $\delta\omicron\upsilon\lambda\acute{o}\omega$  ("enslave") are still more synonymous than dissimilar. The sixth appears as subject to revision and reinterpretation as it was with Matthew 19:9. The seventh fails to note that vv. 17-24 include an important exception to the "remain as you are" principle, namely for a slave ( $\delta\omicron\upsilon\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ ) who has opportunity to gain his or her freedom (v. 21b); v. 15 similarly refers to those who are no longer "enslaved" ( $\delta\epsilon\delta\omicron\upsilon\lambda\omega\tau\alpha$ ). Once again, in an age and culture in which divorce almost universally carried with it provisions for remarriage, Paul would have had specifically to exclude this possibility in v. 15 if he had expected anyone to understand that he was actually forbidding all remarriage.

But if divorce and remarriage are permitted in at least two instances—sexual infidelity and desertion (agreeing with Heth and Wenham that the fact that at Corinth it was unbelievers who were deserting was not the essential part of the problem), may they be permitted in any other situations? In other words, if both Matthew 19 and 1 Corinthians 7 put forward commands conditioned by specific historical circumstances, if neither was originally viewed as absolute or canon law, can one restrict divorce and remarriage to just the two instances countenanced in these texts? How would one decide if there were other circumstances in which they were legitimate? Michael Green wonders if insanity would count.<sup>113</sup> Donald Shaner adds extreme alcoholism and drug addiction to the list as "a type of 'desertion' or 'death,' releasing the partner to remarry."<sup>114</sup> Gary Liaboe broadens the definition of

<sup>111</sup>Heth and Wenham, *Jesus*, 140-43.

<sup>112</sup>Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 305.

<sup>113</sup>Michael Green, *Matthew for Today* (Dallas: Word, 1989) 184.

<sup>114</sup>Donald W. Shaner, *A Christian View of Divorce* (Leiden: Brill, 1969) 104.

πορνεία to include physical abuse.<sup>115</sup> What about irreversible conditions like Alzheimer's disease or certain comatose states?

The problem of course is that addicts can be and have been cured, abusers can stop and have stopped beating their spouses, and husbands and wives can find and have found great fulfillment in caring for their partners even when their spouses' mental faculties have entirely vanished. But then marriages ruptured by infidelity or desertion have also been restored, yet divorce and remarriage remain an option in those situations. Often reconciliation after adultery or abandonment proves impossible. Yet often it seems equally impossible with abusive or addicted partners. Must people in such situations be doomed to misery for life?

Christian writers, pastors, and counselors seem to be at a loss as to how to proceed in a hermeneutically defensible way at this point. Opinions are growing increasingly polarized. On the one hand, more and more believers are reacting against the crumbling morality of contemporary society with the imposition of tight and absolute prohibitions. If they cannot cite a chapter and verse in the Bible permitting divorce and remarriage in a certain situation, then they absolutely forbid such actions. On the other hand, increasing numbers of Christians in quite different circles have virtually resigned themselves to expect and accept fellow believers being divorced on all kinds of less serious grounds. Such people would scarcely dream of ever confronting their friends and saying, "you are wrong, you are sinning against God and your family, and you need to repent!"

A third category of Christians is grappling with guidelines for determining when divorce and remarriage might be permitted for grounds other than adultery or desertion, while at the same time recognizing that many of the reasons people give for ending a marriage remain quite illegitimate. Yet even here, despite sensitive hearts and good intentions, faulty logic abounds. For example, Stanley Marrow argues from 1 Cor 7:15 that, since God has called us to "peace," which he redefines as freedom, divorce may be justified in other situations of conflict.<sup>116</sup> But Fee persuasively argues that v. 15b offers a rationale for the whole of vv. 12-15a and therefore for the primary thrust of the passage, which is that married people should stay together. "Peace" thus has nothing to do with the exception of v. 15a.<sup>117</sup>

R. V. G. Tasker minimizes the similarities between first and twentieth centuries, since he believes the low socio-economic status of women then forced divorcées to remarry and thereby to commit adultery—in ways not often applicable today. He concludes,

<sup>115</sup>Gary P. Liaboe, "The Place of Wife Battering in Considering Divorce," *JPT* 13 (1985) 131.

<sup>116</sup>Stanley B. Marrow, "Marriage and Divorce in the New Testament," *ATR* 70 (1988) 3-15.

<sup>117</sup>Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 304-5.

the only static factors are first that the divine ideal for the relationship of men and women remains the same, and secondly, that men and women remain the same frail creatures who often find it extremely difficult to achieve in a particular marriage relationship the unity which could alone be truthfully described as a joining together by God.<sup>118</sup>

Surely this drastically overestimates the cultural differences! The socio-economic situation of women today is at least as desperate in most of the Two-Thirds World and in a growing urban poor community in the West as in the first-century Middle East. And if divorce itself, even without remarriage, is adulterous, then Jesus' and Paul's words should carry over unchanged into analogous contemporary contexts.

Others contrast the age of law with the age of grace or the real with the ideal. Richards's view has already been discussed above. Myrna and Robert Kysar view Jesus' prohibition against divorce and remarriage, like the rest of his kingdom ethics, as an often unattainable ideal. "They are not intended to be enforced as legislation any more than some other of the words of Jesus are."<sup>119</sup> But, as Atkinson points out, the Messianic "gift of righteousness" does indeed provide for the possible fulfilment of the Father's will. To say that Jesus' teaching is not a new law code implies that it offers no code for civil legislation, not that it need not or cannot be obeyed. "We must reject any antithesis between an 'ethic of law' and an 'ethic of disposition' [of the heart]: both belong together within 'covenant ethics'."<sup>120</sup>

Thomas Olszewsky goes even further than the Kysars by defining "Christian divorce" as a letting go of past sin in repentance and seeking new life in faithfulness and forgiveness. He seems to endorse divorce for any reason so long as it leads to genuine repentance and renewal!<sup>121</sup> And Theodore Epp represents an older, rapidly vanishing breed of dispensationalist which renders Matthew's teaching as irrelevant for Christians since it was addressed to Jews under the Law.<sup>122</sup>

A survey of the literature, therefore, does not inspire much confidence in the possibility of improving on the strict Erasmian position without falling into a morass of subjectivity. Robert Plekker lists and refutes numerous other shoddy excuses for divorces—"I simply cannot put up with my partner another

<sup>118</sup>R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961) 181.

<sup>119</sup>Myrna and Robert Kysar, *The Asundered* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978) 57.

<sup>120</sup>Atkinson, *Have and Hold*, 143; cf. 144-51. Cf. also Stephen Westerholm, *Jesus and Scribal Authority* (Lund: Gleerup, 1978) 124.

<sup>121</sup>Thomas M. Olszewsky, "A Christian Understanding of Divorce," *JRE* 7 (1979) 117-38.

<sup>122</sup>Theodore H. Epp, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage* (Lincoln: Back to the Bible, 1979) 37.

minute," "our love for each other is gone forever," "we are incompatible," "God told me I had an exceptional case," "women's liberation freed me from the bondage of marriage," "this is the only way out," "my case is different from everybody else," "our marriage certainly wasn't made in heaven," and so on.<sup>123</sup> Perhaps Lockery is right after all in limiting himself to the clear biblical exceptions and in admitting that inability to achieve reconciliation in other situations could be judged as a call to celibacy.<sup>124</sup>

But curious inconsistencies in the logic of a strict application of the Erasmian position urge one to press further. Consider, for example, the situation of a Christian woman I'll call Sheila who divorced her Christian husband, Jack, eight years ago for what she now admits were selfish and unbiblical reasons. They have not communicated since the divorce, but Sheila learns from mutual friends that Jack has never remarried or had an affair with any other woman. Sheila has recently rededicated her life to the Lord and was advised by her church that her only two options in life are to remain single or return to Jack. She contacts him and finds he has absolutely no interest in resuming any relationship. Friends talk to him as well and confirm his intransigence. In fact he gets angry and sends them away. Yet Sheila senses no call, gift, desire, or empowerment for lifelong celibacy. Though she too has not had sexual relations with anyone, or even any boyfriends, since her divorce, she longs for a new husband more and more with each passing year. Is remarriage forever forbidden to her?<sup>125</sup>

Here is where the inconsistencies begin. The traditional Protestant or Erasmian answer would be, "yes, remarriage is forbidden, unless her ex-husband has sexual relations with another woman." So, as long as prayers and efforts for reconciliation continue without success, Sheila is left in the strange position of having to hope that her former husband sins by taking a new lover so that she is free to remarry. As long as he does not sin in this way, she remains "doomed" to a celibate life for which she does not believe she has been empowered.<sup>126</sup> Now of course the view which forbids all remarriage avoids this inconsistency but proves no less insensitive to her plight. Is it possible that we have still missed something in our application of the biblical texts? I think so.

The question that few people ask but which may lead to a way out of the impasse is "What do Jesus' and Paul's exceptions have in

<sup>123</sup>Plekker, *Divorce*, 73-91.

<sup>124</sup>Lockery, "Divorce," 260.

<sup>125</sup>The example I have given does not intentionally correspond to the experience of any individual I know, but it is a composite of true experiences from the lives of several close friends (with different names).

<sup>126</sup>Cf. B. Ward Powers, "Divorce and the Bible," *Interchange* 23 (1978) 162: "To say that divorce and remarriage are contrary to the will of God, and therefore sin, unless a spouse commits adultery first of all, is to say that the committing of one sin (the adultery) will prevent something else (the divorce and remarriage) being sinful. This is a very curious type of teaching to attribute to Christ."

common?" Is it possible that Paul believed he could add a second exception to Jesus' apparently absolute statement because he recognized a more overarching principle of which both exceptions were particular illustrations—but a principle which was not nearly as vague or general as "grace," "forgiveness," "realities vs. ideals" or "law vs. kingdom ethic"? Answering this kind of question seems to be precisely how Christians regularly have applied other occasional teachings of Scripture—by seeking a broader principle which remains cross-culturally normative and then finding new, concrete applications for each new historical context.<sup>127</sup>

So what do sexual infidelity and desertion have in common?<sup>128</sup> Once one recalls that the marriage covenant contained two main components—personal allegiance or loyalty and interpersonal intimacy culminating in sexual relations—the answer emerges with surprising ease. Both infidelity and desertion break one half of the marriage covenant. Unfaithfulness destroys sexual exclusivity; desertion reneges on the commitment to "leave and cleave." Why is divorce and remarriage permissible, though not mandatory, in these two instances? Apparently because the very constituent elements of marriage have been so ruptured that divorce does not necessarily produce any greater evil, and at times may actually *prevent* a greater evil.<sup>129</sup> If any hopes of restoration appear, this greater good would preclude divorce, but the realities of ruptured relationships often leave no discernible possibilities for restoration, however zealously one may pursue them.

But if this is true in cases of adultery and desertion, it is often equally true in other instances. However persistent and tactful one partner may be in trying to make amends, the other may remain intransigent. Or both partners may suffer from the cumulative effect of years of destructive behavior in ways which defy repeated efforts at reconciliation. Divorce must always be recognized as failure, as an admission of defeat, but the conditions of a fallen world may in certain cases suggest that divorce is preferable to "business as usual." Thus Atkinson agrees that infidelity and desertion "may well serve as paradigms in clarifying the extreme seriousness with which the question of divorce should be approached, and in suggesting the sort of circumstances which might allow the moral permissibility of divorce as a last resort."<sup>130</sup>

<sup>127</sup>A procedure nicely outlined in simplified form by the recent work of Jack Kuhatschek, *Taking the Guesswork Out of Applying the Bible* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1990) 51-77. Cf. more briefly but more technically, William J. Larkin, *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988) 344-60.

<sup>128</sup>It is of course possible that the answer is "nothing"—except that God has ordained them as acceptable grounds for divorce, as in A. Mahoney, "A New Look at the Divorce Clauses in Mt 5:32 and 19:9," *CBQ* 30 (1968) 29-38.

<sup>129</sup>Cf., e.g., James M. Efird, *Marriage and Divorce: What the Bible Says* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985) 82-93.

<sup>130</sup>Atkinson, *Have and Hold*, 158.



The words "last resort" prove crucial. Once one moves beyond clearly definable grounds for divorce and remarriage, one opens the door to all kinds of possible abuse of biblical principles. As I think of the divorced people I know best, in most instances I do not believe they had come anywhere close to reaching their "last resort." But the potential of abusing a principle does not have any bearing on the validity of that principle per se. There are some marriages I have known in which I think a point of no return was reached. The difficulty of determining when one has reached such a point underlines the need for wise, mature, godly counsel from many different people within the believing community. Most individuals themselves believe they have no further options long before all their friends would agree! On the other hand, even close friends often do not realize the depth of the misery experienced by one or both partners in a hurting marriage.

Evald Lövestam picks up on this theme of options when he concludes that what the victimized spouses of Matthew 19 and 1 Corinthians 7 have in common is that "they find themselves in the situation not through choice," the responsibility now falling entirely on the other partner<sup>131</sup> (though obviously earlier actions by both parties may well have led to the current situation). Perhaps the best way of describing when divorce and remarriage are permitted, then, is to say simply that it is when an individual, in agreement with a supportive Christian community of which that individual has been an intimate part, believes that he or she has no other choice or option in trying to avoid some greater evil. All known attempts at reconciliation have been exhausted. This criterion should probably be used even in cases of adultery or desertion since God's ideal even then is to salvage the marriage. But recognizing the actual damage those sins already create sometimes makes legal dissolution appropriate.

These same criteria should apply equally to believers considering a divorce and to those already divorced wondering about remarriage. If no efforts at reconciliation have ever been made, they should be begun, with the help of other believers. If it becomes clear, after repeated efforts, that hopes of restoration are unrealistic, then remarriage may be considered.<sup>132</sup> The same principles should apply also to the more "guilty" party in an

<sup>131</sup>Evald Lövestam, "Divorce and Remarriage in the New Testament," *The Jewish Law Annual*, vol. 4 (ed. Bernard S. Jackson; Leiden: Brill, 1981) 65. Cf. idem, "Die funktionale Bedeutung der synoptischen Jesusworte über Ehescheidung und Wiederheirat," in *Theologie aus dem Norden* (ed. Albert Fuchs; Freistadt: Plöchl, 1977) 19-28.

<sup>132</sup>Several readers of a preliminary draft of this article found this notion of already divorced people remarrying each other the least realistic part of my application. But I have no less than four good friends who have done precisely this. Though it may frequently prove unrealistic, I am not prepared to abandon hope of restoration without making serious attempts, and thereby miss out on the possibility of God's ideal, however unlikely it may at first seem.

original divorce, if genuine repentance and Christian renewal have intervened.<sup>133</sup> Those who are already remarried on unbiblical grounds should make full confession to God of their previous sins and commit themselves to fidelity and serving Christ through their current marriage.

Jay Adams arrives at similar conclusions through a somewhat different route. He would treat marital offences with the guidelines of Matt 18:15-18. If the offending party ultimately does not respond to the loving confrontation of the entire Christian congregation, then he or she should be treated as an unbeliever, which makes divorce and remarriage for the victimized party possible via 1 Cor 7:15.<sup>134</sup> Jesus' words in Matt 18:17 ("let that person be to you like a Gentile or tax collector") probably cannot bear that much freight, but Adams's instincts are good. Just as excommunication is a counsel of despair, a measure of last resort, after everything else one can possibly think of has been tried, but nevertheless a necessary procedure in certain instances, so too with divorce. And the analogy with the involvement of the whole Christian community offers a crucial check against the far too hasty conclusion by a lone individual that one really has no further options. But of course this depends on a quality of Christian fellowship, of intimacy, trust, and love in relationships, which is not commonly present in many churches. Critics of the staggering contemporary divorce rate ought perhaps to focus first on what is lacking in Christian community.

Matt 19:3-12 does not of course end with v. 9, even if that is its climax. Application would be incomplete without some reflections on the single lifestyle addressed in vv. 10-12. Contemporary Western society does not prize marriage as highly as did first-century Judaism, but its attitudes still remain far from the biblical ideals. If traditional Roman Catholicism exalted celibacy beyond what is biblically defensible, most Protestants have undervalued it.<sup>135</sup> Neither celibacy nor marriage is superior to the other in God's eyes.<sup>136</sup>

<sup>133</sup>Cf. esp. Bruner's four points on God's perfect will—permanent marriage; his permitted will—divorce for the innocent; his implied permission of remarriage for the innocent; and the possibility from larger biblical considerations for remarriage for the repentant guilty (*Churchbook*, 670-86), along with his observations concerning the consistency of these views not only with Scripture but also with the Westminster Confession of Faith (686-87).

<sup>134</sup>Jay E. Adams, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980) 57-59.

<sup>135</sup>Cf. Bruner, *Churchbook*, 691: "Roman Catholic doctrinal authority needs to honor marriage more highly—it is not adequate (or, in Protestant opinion, correct) to call marriage a sacrament but then to say marriage disqualifies one from a professional ministry of Word and sacrament. Protestant teaching needs to honor single life more highly and to teach vv 10-12 more frequently in order that men and women called to single life will not be made to feel second-class."

<sup>136</sup>Cf. the helpful survey by Frank Stagg, "Biblical Perspectives on the Single Person," *RevExp* 74 (1977) 5-19.

Contemporary evangelicals have helpfully pioneered various singles ministries, while secular liberation movements have kept alternate lifestyles (including some immoral ones!) squarely in public focus. But most of my single Christian friends, especially those over twenty-five, report too many instances of subtle discrimination, unwarranted assumptions, unwitting neglect, and unkind comments against them and their single friends—all in Christian circles. We need much honest teaching (and actions to back up that teaching) on the spiritual value of the single life (1 Cor 7:25-38). We need more John Stotts or Amy Carmichaels who consciously commit themselves to a life of singleness for the sake of devoting more energy and resources to kingdom priorities, foreshadowing the way we all will live in the age to come (Matt 22:30).<sup>137</sup> We need realistic and forthright teaching on acceptable methods of sexual release for singles.<sup>138</sup> We must find effective methods of nurturing intimate friendships with singles and of expressing physical affection for them in ways which do not arouse expectations of marriage or sex.<sup>139</sup>

Homogeneous groupings of singles may meet certain needs of believers and more readily attract unbelievers to Christian circles, but sooner or later singles, like all people in the church, need to be mixed together with others of different marital status, age, sex, and walks of life to build relationships with those quite different from themselves. Church should be a place where people fellowship who have no natural or human reason to do so. Then the watching world, and even the unseen powers of darkness, will have to take note and account for what can only come from God (Eph 3:6-10).

### III. CONCLUSIONS

The upshot of this study leaves those who accept its findings open to attack from at least two sides. Many will protest that its conclusions go beyond the explicit teaching of Scripture. Others will lament that most divorces and remarriages are still labeled sinful. What both of these objections remind one is that any such study must be simultaneously faithful to exegesis and experience, to Scripture and to the real world, while nevertheless always giving Scripture and exegesis priority.

When this is done, it would seem that several points remain inescapable. God has designed some people to remain single and

<sup>137</sup>On this last point, see esp. William A. Heth, "'Unmarried for the Sake of the Kingdom' (Matthew 19:12) in the Early Church," *GTJ* 8 (1987) 55-88; cf. Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News according to Matthew* (Richmond: John Knox, 1975) 383-84.

<sup>138</sup>See esp. Jack O. Balswick and Judith K. Balswick, *The Family* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989) 178-87.

<sup>139</sup>On several of these points cf. Julia Duin's brief but poignant, "We Must Learn to Celebrate Celibacy," *CT* 30 (3/21/1986) 13.

celibate. He intends all marriages to be permanent but gives people the freedom to follow or reject his intentions. He permits divorce for adultery or desertion because these sins so undermine the foundation of a marriage that greater pain or evil may result if legal dissolution does not occur. Neither of these sins, however, uniquely destroys a marriage; restoration always remains the ideal. This observation, however, coupled with the "occasional" contexts of Matthew 19 and 1 Corinthians 7, leaves the door open for divorce as a last resort in certain other situations where it may also be the lesser of evils. But divorce should never be considered unless all other approaches to healing a broken relationship have been exhausted. Divorce in biblical times virtually always carried with it the right to remarry; no NT text rescinds this permission. Neither partner of a divorced couple, in which both have remained celibate, should consider marrying a new spouse unless serious and sustained attempts at reconciliation (either before or after the divorce) have proved fruitless. Those who are already remarried (or sexually involved) should earnestly repent of any unconfessed sin and commit themselves to faithfulness to making their present marriage honor Christ (or by turning their present relationship into a marriage or else breaking it off). Divorce is not the unforgivable sin, and sometimes it is not a sin at all, but it is serious. Many churches and Christians need to work hard at removing the stigmas they too often attach to singles or divorcees, while others need to recognize more deeply how wide-ranging and insidious the effects of divorce are so that they might work much harder at preserving marriages.<sup>140</sup>

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