

3. THE NEW TESTAMENT EVIDENCE

With respect to the New Testament, let us consider some key passages and also discuss recent objections against the traditional Reformed interpretation.

3.1 Matthew 5:31-32

This passage reads as follows:

31. It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’

32. But I say to you that every one who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

This passage is found in the Sermon on the Mount in which the Lord Jesus turned against Jewish formalism and superficial application of the law. In other words, do not think that you have satisfied the demands of the law if you send a wife away properly, that is with a certificate of divorce, and superficially appear to satisfy the law (Deut 24:1-4). That goes against the law of Moses!

There were many, namely, the school of Hillel, in the time of Jesus and the early church who justified easy divorce for any cause. Christ countered this tendency and Matthew, writing for the Jews, was careful to include these words of Jesus in his gospel. Divorce, unless done for unchastity, leads to adultery. The Lord Jesus wanted to tighten up the way divorce was used and so Christ acted in the spirit of Deuteronomy 24 which also wanted to prevent rash and arbitrary divorce

(as we have already seen). In the spirit of Deuteronomy 24, Christ said, If you divorce your wife without good cause (namely, unchastity), then you make your wife an adulteress (i.e. expose her to adultery)¹.

Now a certificate of divorce had been established to deal with divorce for reasons other than adultery (cf also Deut 24).² Christ however said that divorce was only truly justifiable when one of the two partners had radically betrayed the marital bond by sexual sin (*porneia*),³ which in the context of marriage constituted adultery, and so the marriage tie of the one flesh had already been broken. So Christ went beyond Deuteronomy 24 and fulfilled the law.

Now there is something we have to be careful with. The exact word used by Christ here (*porneia*) as a basis for a justifiable divorce is not precisely the same word as the word for adultery (*moichia*). However, since *porneia* denotes “every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse”⁴, it is clear that “marital unfaithfulness” (NIV) or “unchastity” (RSV) are good translations and the act in view breaks a marriage and is in fact adultery. It will therefore not do to broaden *porneia* or “unchastity” to cover the same wide area as the “some indecency” of Deut 24. There is no basis for that,⁵ although some⁶ have

¹ W. Hendriksen, *Matthew* (NTC; Grand Rapids: Baker 1973) 306.

² “If adultery was discovered, it was not the husband who gave his wife her freedom. He rather had to turn her over to the judge (see Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22).” Ridderbos, *Matthew*, 109.

³ *porneia* is defined as “prostitution, unchastity, fornication, of every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse”. Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek English Lexicon*, 699. “Prostitution, fornication, unchastity”, H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (9th ed. rev. and augmented by H. S. Jones, with a supplement 1968. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1977) 1450b.

⁴ See previous note.

⁵ See especially, J. van Bruggen, *Het huwelijk gewogen: 1 Korinthe 7* (Amsterdam: Ton Bolland 1978) 57n.

⁶ Like C. Van der Waal who basically understands Christ’s words in Matt 5 thus: “I forbid divorce, unless a situation like that in Deut 24 presents itself” (noted by Van Bruggen, *Het huwelijk gewogen*, 57 note) and G. Bahnsen,

argued it.

In going beyond Deuteronomy 24 by not allowing divorce for just any reason, Christ did not base his teaching on an exception found in the law due to hardness of human heart, but he went back to the way God had designed marriage and meant it. What is juridically allowed (like divorce according to Deut 24) is not necessarily pleasing to God. Christ did not focus on the possibility of divorce but on how it should be. He showed that a divorce on flimsy grounds did not really undo the marriage for such a divorce leads to adultery if the wife (or for that matter the husband) remarries.⁷ By so approaching this subject Christ fulfilled the law, i.e., brought fully to light its true and deepest meaning.⁸

According to Deuteronomy 24, it was impossible for a man to take back his wife after she remarried if he had sent her away for reasons other than adultery. If she remarried, she became defiled with respect to him and the first marriage, and so a remarriage with her first husband would be an abomination. Christ now goes further than Deuteronomy 24 and says that if a marriage ended in divorce for any reason except adultery, then a remarriage itself would be adulterous for it made a definitive end to the first marriage.⁹ Thus to send away a wife

Theonomy in Christian Ethics, 105-110. Bahnsen relies rather heavily on argument by way of association which is not conclusive.

⁷ From elsewhere in Scripture (Matt 19:9, Mk 10:11-12; Luke 16:18) it is clear that if either partner of the original marriage remarries after an unjustified divorce, it is like committing adultery.

⁸ See for the above, Ridderbos, *Matthew*, 109-110, 349. "The Greek word translated 'fulfill' literally means to give a vessel that is completely or partially empty its appropriate content. To fulfill the law thus means to ensure that it receives the full obedience that is its due, to bring fully to light its true and deepest meaning. ... this no doubt refers first and foremost to Jesus' work as a teacher of the law". Ridderbos, *Matthew*, 99.

⁹ Matt 5:32 was anticipated in Deut 24. Thus Keil, *Manual of Biblical Archaeology*, II, 173-174. Also see M. G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1963) 115.

for no just cause is horrible, but it is even worse if either man or wife of the original marriage marry someone else. All this is in line with the apostle's words in 1 Cor 7:10-11,

10. ... the wife should not separate from her husband

11. (but if she does, let her remain single or else be reconciled to her husband) -- and that the husband should not divorce his wife.

In view of the above, remarriage after a divorce which took place on the basis of unlawful sexual intercourse is not adultery.¹⁰ It is noteworthy that in being very precise and excluding the ground of adultery from his speaking of remarriage as adultery, Christ by implication gave a "ground" for a divorce, although it is probably better to say that Christ recognized the factual breakup of such a marriage.¹¹ Christ moved beyond the Old Testament which knew only of the death penalty for the breaking of the marital bond by sexual sin. Christ thus, as it were, quietly and by implication updated the law for the new situation in which the civil authorities did not recognize capital punishment as the penalty for marital unfaithfulness.¹²

3.2 Matthew 19:3-12

When Jesus was asked by the Pharisees if it was lawful for someone to divorce his wife for any and every reason, Jesus pointed to the institution of marriage in paradise. "What God has joined together, let man not separate" (Matt 19:6). The Pharisees asked

¹⁰ Ridderbos, *Matthew*, 109. .

¹¹ Van Bruggen (*Het huwelijk gewogen*, 60) is correctly careful to note that Christ was not interested in listing grounds for marriage as was done in the Judaism of his day.

¹² See Murray, *Divorce*, 27. Cf. also how Christ prevented the stoning of the woman who was caught in the act of adultery (John 8:3-11). Cf. Van Bruggen, *Het huwelijk gewogen*, 58-59.

7. “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?”

8. He said to them, “For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.

9. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another, commits adultery.”

Notice how the Lord explicitly refers back to the beginning. Marriage was not instituted to be broken. Divorce was not commanded (as Pharisees suggest), but it was only tolerated (“allowed”, as Jesus puts it) because of the hardness of hearts. However, we should not make too much of this distinction of “command” and “allow”, for in Mark 10:3-5 it is the Pharisees that speak of “allow” and Christ who speaks of “command”. We read in Mark 10:3-5 that Christ

answered them, “What did Moses command you?”

4. They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce, and to put her away.”

5. But Jesus said to them, “For your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment.”

All this indicates that something which is allowed because of hardness of hearts can also be a command. The provision of Deuteronomy 24 (the certificate of divorce) became in essence a prescript of the law.¹³ Christ did not criticize the fact that divorce was regulated, but he abhorred the fact that it was necessary. Moses as civil lawgiver could not simply impose the demands of God on the people but had to take into account their sinfulness and their often unrepentant heart.¹⁴ The regulation of divorce did not diminish in any way the necessity to keep marriages whole. Christ’s reference to the beginning made his desire to keep marriages intact abundantly clear as did also the reaction of the disciples. They said “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry” (Matt 19:10). If a justified divorce is so hard to get, it is

¹³ Douma, *Echtscheiding*, 28. Cf. Adams, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage*, 64. On Deut 24 see above § 2.2.3.1, point 1.

¹⁴ Ridderbos, *Matthew*, 349.

better not to marry! Christ clearly spoke against divorce in his encounter with the Pharisees. Apparently divorce was quite easy to get in those days, presumably on the basis of a loose interpretation of Deuteronomy 24.

A final note. When the Lord Jesus said “whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another, commits adultery”, then the Lord was leaving open the possibility of remarriage. That is the whole sense of the sentence. Furthermore, it can be noted that the Lord’s audience would have understood it that way given the fact that rabbinic teachings at this time coordinated divorce and remarriage. The one went with the other.¹⁵

3.3 Mark 10:2-12

In Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:9, Christ by implication said that if a marriage ended in divorce because of unchastity, remarriage was possible. What is remarkable about Christ’s words as recorded in Mark 10:2-12 and Luke 16:18 is that here Christ simply forbade remarriage after divorce and made no exception for remarriage after divorce because of unchastity.

11. And he said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her;

12. and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery” (Mark 10:11-12).

If one compares Matthew 19 and Mark 10 then it is clear that both relate the same incident. Thus Mark left the exceptive clause out. Apparently it was not needed for his purpose in writing his gospel. Mark’s gospel (and also Luke’s) was predominantly written for Greek readers and they would know from the Old Testament that adultery was punished by death

¹⁵ See further Appendix B: The Exception Clause in Matthew.

(Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22-27). They would therefore have assumed that a certificate of divorce would only be given for a reason other than adultery. The Jewish readers of Matthew however knew that adultery was no longer punished by death¹⁶ and was now covered by a certificate of divorce. For that reason, to be clear what was meant, Matthew included the exceptive clause in his gospel, but it was not necessary for the Greek audience of Mark and Luke.¹⁷

The omission does stress the fact that the relatively easy provisions for divorce and remarriage found in Deuteronomy 24 are no longer valid.¹⁸ At the same time, no misunderstanding was possible, for Jewish readers reading Mark would also know from the Old Testament that adultery truly broke a marriage (again think of the death penalty). Even if the death penalty was no longer used, a believing Israelite in New Testament times would thus have been able to have regarded his or her unfaithful partner as dead and thus divorce according to the civil law operative at that time and remarry.¹⁹

In view of the above, it is not correct to take Mark 10:11-12 out of the context of Scripture and simply reaffirm that whoever divorces and remarries commits adultery without any regard for the fuller passage in Matthew 19 which teaches that the Lord made an exception for divorce because of unchastity. Simply affirming only the wording of Mark 10:11-12 and applying it immediately to today may sound

¹⁶ Cf. John 18:31 which indicates that the Romans did not allow Jews to carry out death sentences. However, they did stone Stephen to death (Acts 7:58-60). For a discussion on the right of Jews to inflict the death penalty or not see L. Morris, *John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1971), 786-788.

¹⁷ J. Van Bruggen, *Matteüs* (NTC; Kampen: Kok 1990) 362; also Van Bruggen, *Het huwelijk gewogen*, 59-60.

¹⁸ See further on this issue, W. L. Lane, *Mark* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1974) 353-358; Murray, *Divorce*, 43-54.

¹⁹ Douma, *Echtscheiding*, 32. Douma also refers to the Westminster Confession, 24.5, where the innocent party can marry "as if the offending party were dead".

Scriptural, but it is taking Scripture out of context and having no regard for the original audience that heard these words in Mark's gospel. Our situation today is rather different and we need to be sensitive to the *full* revelation that has been given to us respecting Christ's teaching on this point so that we do not twist it or misrepresent it. What Mark could assume about his original audience (and therefore leave certain things out of the fuller revelation in Matthew) cannot be assumed of us in the same way today.

3.4 1 Corinthians 7:7-16

In 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, the apostle Paul writes:

10. To the married I give charge, not I but the Lord, that the wife should not separate from her husband

11. (but if she does, let her remain single or else be reconciled to her husband) - and that the husband should not divorce his wife.

As intimated earlier, with these words the apostle essentially repeated what Christ taught in Matthew 5 and 19. Indeed, the apostle explicitly said that this was the teaching of the Lord Jesus. Married people belong together and should not separate or be divorced (as the original can also be understood).²⁰ From the context, it is clear that these two were Christians, members of the same congregation. If they nevertheless

²⁰ See the discussion of the terms involved in J. P. Louw and E. A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies 1988) I, 457, P. Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law* (CRINT; Minneapolis: Fortress 1990) 117, and G. Duty, *Divorce and Remarriage* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship 1967) 92-94. It is possible that the immediate concern of Paul was the situation where a Biblically unjustified divorce was in process or beyond being recalled in the congregation of Corinth. See F. W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1953) 163.

separated or divorced (for no Biblical reason), they disobeyed the Lord's teaching and their being separate was contrary to God's will. The party that insisted on separation or divorce was acting like an unbeliever. As Calvin put it those who deserted their spouse "did not for a moment consider that by violating the faithfulness pledged to their partners, they were breaking the covenant of the Lord, and that by breaking the bond of marriage, they were shaking off the Lord's yoke."²¹ For that reason in such situations there are only two possibilities. They are either to remain unmarried or to be reconciled. This shows that their chief obligation is reconciliation and all efforts must be made to that end.²²

The next "cases" the apostle mentioned are as follows.

12. To the rest I say, not the Lord, if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her.

13. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.

14. For the unbelieving husband is consecrated through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is consecrated through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is they are holy.

15. But if the unbelieving partner desires to separate, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound. For God has called us to peace. (1 Cor 7:12-15)

Note how the apostle prefaced his remarks with the observation that what he is going to say now is not directly based on Christ's teaching while he was on earth. In other words, Paul now spoke as an apostle by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 7:40). This fact means that what we have here is ongoing revelation and what is said

²¹ J. Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Calvin's Commentaries; trans. J. W. Fraser; Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press 1960) 138.

²² See Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage*, 40-42.

here should not be put in opposition to what Christ said, but placed side by side, as a further elucidation of the topic of marriage and divorce.²³

A basic principle that underlines this passage is that marriage should not be lightly broken. Even if there is a mixed marriage,²⁴ the marriage bond should be honoured if there is willingness to live together as man and wife. All this shows how strong the marriage bond is.

Note also how the unbelieving partner is consecrated, sanctified, through the believing partner. This means that through the faith of the believing partner, the other party in the marriage has come into the sphere where the gospel functions. The believing partner is to have a holy influence on the unbelieving partner who is willing to live with the believer and experience important elements of a Christian marriage and life style.²⁵

If, however, there is no desire on the part of the unbelieving partner to remain in the marriage, let him or her separate. God does not want a mixed marriage to be kept together at all costs.²⁶ If a marriage

²³ The situation in Matt 5:32 is different from that in 1 Cor 7. In Matt, Christ places his hearers before the responsibility not to divorce and thus not to marry the divorced woman. A rash divorce must not be followed by a rash remarriage. Reconciliation must be sought and that is why there must be no remarriage. However the situation in 1 Cor 7 is different. Here no divorce is sought, but an unbelieving marriage partner leaves. See Douma, *Echtscheiding*, 96.

²⁴ Paul clearly warns against mixed marriages (2 Cor 6:14ff.). The issue here is different, namely, that a mixed marriage exists. Although this situation may well have come about from one partner becoming a believer, given the situation in the early church, this need not have been the case (cf. Paul's warnings in 2 Cor 6). In any case, the mixed marriage is there and needs to be dealt with.

²⁵ See Douma, *Echtscheiding*, 40.

²⁶ God himself separated man and wife by death in church discipline in the Old Testament. The inherent incongruity of believer and unbeliever in a Christian marriage and the provision of ending a mixed marriage is consistent

cannot be saved, although all possible efforts have been made, (we may assume this given the context) and there is such a separation, then the believer is not bound. What does that mean? Answers have varied, but the overwhelming Reformed consensus is that this means that that marriage has become undone and a remarriage with someone else is not forbidden. We can go no further than such a negative conclusion for nowhere does 1 Corinthians 7 explicitly say that a Christian who has been deserted by an unbeliever may marry again.²⁷

3.5 Office Bearers and marriage

In the Old Testament there are special regulations concerning the office of priest which forbade the priest to marry a divorced woman (Lev 21:7). We find no such comparable law for any New Testament office bearer. Both elders and deacons must be the husband of one wife.²⁸ This does not mean that unmarried males in the congregation could not be elders. It does mean that he must only be married to one wife (literally “husband of one wife”) and not do, as pagans often did, enter into an immoral relationship with another woman while married to his

with Old Testament church discipline.

²⁷ Douma, *Echtscheiding*, 42. Heth and Wenham argue that “not bound” (in 1 Cor 7:15) means no more than that the Christian is not “enslaved” by Christ’s prohibition of divorce when he or she is divorced by the unbelieving, but is allowed “to agree to an unbeliever’s insistent demand for divorce”. W. A. Heth and G. J. Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce* (Nashville, Tenn.: Nelson, 1984), 144. But what choice does such a believer have? The context suggests the believer is no longer bound to the unbelieving marriage partner and whether Paul would forbid remarriage is not specifically addressed. Also see J. Barclay in a review of Heth and Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce* in *Evangelical Quarterly* 58 (1986) 362.

²⁸ For the elders, see 1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:6; for the deacons, 1 Tim 3:12.

wife. It also does not mean that an elder must be a man who was only married once. The text does not say this.²⁹

3.6 Conclusions

The New Testament data yields the following conclusions.

i. The Lord Jesus constantly emphasized the ideal of marriage as instituted in paradise and confronted people with the full demands of the seventh commandment to emphasize the marriage ordinance as God established it.

ii. The Lord Jesus acted in the spirit of Deuteronomy 24 by discouraging divorce, but went further. A divorce not based on unchastity does not really undo a marriage and so a subsequent remarriage is adulterous (Matt 5:31-32; 19:9). By implication a divorce legitimate in God's eyes leaves one free to remarry (§ 3.2).

iii. By giving unchastity as a ground for divorce, the Lord Jesus moved beyond the Old Testament laws which only knew of the death penalty for adultery. In this way, the Lord equipped his people for a new situation in which the civil authorities did not recognize capital punishment as the penalty for marital unfaithfulness.

iii. The apostle Paul repeated what Christ had said earlier, namely, that marriages should not be lightly broken. Christians can be expected to sort out their difficulties and remain together. However, if they separate for no Biblical cause, then they are either to remain unmarried or seek reconciliation (1 Cor 7:10-11).

²⁹ In other words, those who remarried after the death of their wife, could become an office-bearer. "Paul did not oppose remarriage after the death of the marriage-partner (see especially 1 Tim 5:14; then 4:3; cf. Rom 7:2; 1 Cor 7:9), though *under certain specified conditions* he considered continuation in the unmarried state to be wiser than marriage (1 Cor 7:26, 38)." W. Hendriksen, *I-II Timothy and Titus* (NTC; Grand Rapids: Baker 1957) 121-122 (emphasis is Hendriksen's).

iv. With the apostle Paul more revelation was given on marriage and divorce to address the situation of mixed marriages in the church. This teaching must be read along with that of Christ. It is all the Word of God. The apostle said that a believer should not seek to end a wedlock with an unbeliever if he or she is willing to live with the believer for the unbelieving partner is consecrated by the believer (1 Cor 7:14).

v. However, if the unbelieving partner desires to separate, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound (1 Cor 7:15). When a marriage is thus broken the believer is not forbidden to remarry.

vi. There is no special New Testament requirement that an office bearer may not marry a divorced woman.