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A. W. PINK

# Divorce

## A. W. Pink

### Part One

One of the most unmistakable and tragic evidences of the moral decadence of our generation is the enormous increase in the number of divorces. During the last few decades, they have literally multiplied. They are common to every strata of society, rich and poor, educated and illiterate alike. They are not confined to the young and immature, the more-experienced and middle-aged, or the elderly; nor is this pernicious phenomenon peculiar to the British Isles, but obtains just as extensively—and in the U.S.A., even more alarmingly—throughout the whole of Christendom. Such a widespread epidemic is proof of the ethical laxity and emotional instability which is now so rife, and it augurs ill for the near future. It is nothing less than a dishonest evasion, a refusal to face facts, which attributes this social scourge unto the last two wars—for any one who examines statistics knows that this malady was eating away at the roots of the nation long before 1914, though like many other diseases, it has continued to spread through the body politic and is now “coming to a head.”

Like many another social and physical evil which the world is now plagued with, this one is but the shadowing forth of what first obtained in the *religious* sphere. It is not sufficiently recognized that conditions in the ecclesiastical realm are quickly reflected in the secular and social, that what marks the latter, first characterized the former. Those bearing the name of Christ are “the salt of the earth,” but when the salt has lost its savour, not only is it “thenceforth good for nothing” (Matt. 5:13), but there is no longer anything left to stay the unregenerate carcass from complete putrefaction. When the churches keep to the divine Rule, and its members walk in the path of God’s precepts, a powerful influence for good—for morality and respectability, for law and order—is engendered by them; but when the divine Law is flouted, then lawlessness prevails in the community. When the churches degenerate into social clubs, and their members are naught but empty professors—preferring the movies, the dance, and the card-party above the prayer

meeting—then they are “germ carriers” which spread disease.

Genuine conversion is entering into a marriage covenant with God in Christ. It is the soul expressing its love for Him, giving up itself to Him (2 Cor. 8:5), and solemnly vowing to be henceforth ruled only by Him (Isa. 26:13). It is a deliberate and hearty choice of the Lord to be his supreme Delight, his alone Lord, his grand End, his everlasting Portion, and a promising to be faithful unto Him and His interests. That is why the Gospel proclamation and offer is likened unto an invitation to a marriage feast (Matt. 22:1-3, 11-12). Hence, the saints are said to be “married to another” (Rom. 7:4). The apostle used the same figure when expressing his tender solicitude and holy jealousy for the Corinthian believers: “I have [ministerially] espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ” (2 Cor. 11:2): he laboured to keep them faithful to their vows, with the unchilled first-love of their betrothal unto the Bridegroom. For the same reason, the grand consummation of redemption—when the Church enters corporately upon its glory-union with the Lord—is designated “the marriage of the Lamb,” and She is spoken of as “his wife hath made herself ready” (Rev. 19:7).

When those who profess to have “turned unto the Lord” forsake Him, and go back again into the world, and give their hearts unto idols—God charges them with having “transgressed his covenant” (2 Kings 18:12), to have “dealt falsely in [His] covenant” (Psa. 44:17), and to have “broken [His] covenant” (Jer. 11:10). Consequently, we find that the Lord frequently brought against Israel the charge of marital infidelity: “O Ephraim, thou committest whoredom, and Israel is defiled” (Hos. 5:3); “Because thou hast forgotten me, and cast me behind thy back, therefore bear thou also thy lewdness and thy whoredoms” (Ezek. 23:35). The same solemn indictment is brought against a New Testament company which bore the name of the Lord: “Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will [is determined to] be a friend of the world is the enemy of God” (Jam. 4:4), which shows it is a *spiritual* adultery which is in view—a giving unto the world that love and devotion, time and strength, which the Lord alone is entitled unto.

As natural marriage is a solemn and sacred engagement which is

not to be entered into lightly, constituting as it does a lifelong compact, much more should there be the most serious and self-searching deliberation before any one openly professes to be united to the Lord. Hence, we are bidden to “sitteth... down first, and counteth the cost” (Luke 14:28). Christ is more grievously dishonoured and “put...to an open shame” (Heb. 6:6) by those who may have taken upon them His holy name and avowed themselves “Christians,” and later cast off His yoke, repudiate His sceptre, and return unto their “wallowing in the mire” (2 Pet. 2:22). Yet for generations past, Christendom has swarmed with such cases individually, while corporately, the majority of the “churches” have walked arm-in-arm with the world; but Christ no longer owned them, regarding them as harlots. And the rot spread swiftly from the “religious” to the non-religious elements of society. The “churches” sowed the wind, and now the nations are reaping the whirlwind in an orgy of marital infidelity and immorality—a recent letter in *The Times* states, “the number of illegitimate births today exceeds a thousand a *week*”!

We do not propose to generalize or moralize any further upon the subject, but rather turn to the Holy Scriptures for information and illumination thereon; for many of the Lord’s own people today are far from being clear as to exactly what are its real teachings upon the matter, nor are their ministers and instructors by any means agreed—some teaching one thing, others something quite different. Our design will be to supply answers unto the following questions: First, does the teaching of the New Testament differ from that of the Old Testament on this subject? Second, what are the Scriptural grounds for a divorce?—or is there but a single one? Third, when the marriage bond is broken by the infidelity of one party, is the innocent one free—in the sight of God, we mean—to marry again?—or is he or she henceforth shut up to a life of celibacy?

“And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh” (Gen. 2:23-24). Here we have the ordination of the marriage institution in Eden before the Fall, and the Law concerning it divinely fixed. “*Divinely fixed*,” we say, for the Lord Jesus plainly averred that God Himself

was the Author of that statement, “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife;” for when replying to the Pharisees, He said, “Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife” (Matt. 19:4-5). The Speaker in Genesis 2:24 was the Creator, whether the instrument was Adam himself, or Moses at the time he wrote the book of Genesis; if the former, Adam spake by divine inspiration, and prophetically, for at that time, there were no “fathers and mothers.”

It is clear, then, that Genesis 2:24 was a divine statute, and, being founded upon nature, an unalterable one. Originally, Adam and Eve were one, for Eve was taken out of Adam; and therefore, it is said at their first creation, “in the image of God created he *him*; male and female created he *them*” (Gen. 1:27). Later, by the formation of the woman (Gen. 2:21-22), the original one became two. But by marriage, the twain became “one flesh,” the nearest and dearest union there is in all nature—a divinely ordained, a legally constituted, and an affectionately formed one. Marriage is a permanent and exclusive union between one man and one woman, and therefore, can only be innocently dissolved by death. If ever there was any pretence for the necessity of a man’s having more than one wife, it must have been in the days of Adam, when the earth was unpeopled, but the revealed will of God expressly forbade that. First, by His making only a single woman for Adam—creation itself teaches monogamy! Second, by this authoritative statement: “A man...shall *cleave unto* his wife.”

The expression “cleave unto” is a very emphatic and decisive one, as appears from the fact of its being used of the duty involved in our covenant relationship to God: “But cleave unto the LORD your God, as ye have done unto this day” (Jos. 23:8)—they were to love Him with all their hearts, to be devoted exclusively unto Him (having no other “gods”), to seek His honour and promote His interests. In like manner is a man to cleave unto his wife. The Hebrews verb is “*debaq*” and is rendered “are joined together” in Job 41:23; “abide...fast” in Ruth 2:8; “stick” in Ezekiel 29:4; “kept fast” in Ruth 2:23. “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife” shows that the bonds of this divine

institution are stronger than those of nature, and intimates not only the nearness of the marital relationship, but its perpetuity. They are “one flesh” definitely prohibits polygamy. Thus was the divine will concerning the regulation of the sexes and the manner in which the human race was to be propagated clearly made known at the dawn of human history.

In His comment upon that divine statute in Genesis 2:24, the Lord Jesus solemnly and authoritatively declared, “Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” (Matt. 19:6), which proves that a valid marriage is not only of divine institution, but of God’s own making: *He* joining the two together, to ever after have the same interests, and to share each other’s comforts or sorrows, even as the members of the same body do. God Himself having yoked them together, each is to have the most conscientious regard to *His* act. In view of the divine nature of this institution and act, no man—be he whom he may—has any warrant from God to separate man and wife, save only for the one reason specified by Christ, namely, adultery. “No man, or set of men, have any authority from God to dissolve this union, except in the case of fornication. Neither crowned heads, bishops, judges, peers, nor commons, jointly or separately, have any right to violate the laws of God. Jehovah has said the man and his wife are one, and whoever separates them insults God” (1851—William Gadsby, 1773-1844).

“Marriage is not a temporary contract, like that between master and servant, but a union of a man and a woman for life. They cannot separate at their pleasure, or at the expiration of a definite period. They are bound to adhere to each other during the term of their natural lives, and neither of them is at liberty to enter into a new engagement without an offence against the law both of God and man. There is one cause, however, which may terminate the relation during their lifetime, namely, the sin forbidden in the seventh commandment. Adultery, whether committed by the husband or the wife, is a just ground for divorce. It is a direct violation of the marriage vow, giving the aggrieved party a right to demand the dissolution of an engagement which the other has broken, by retracting the pledge solemnly given at its commencement. You will observe, however, that adultery does not *ipso facto* dissolve the

conjugal relation: it only invests the sufferer with a right to demand the dissolution of it from the competent authority; if the wife or the husband does not choose to exercise the right, things remain as they were” (Professor John Dick, 1764-1833).

Polygamy was divinely reprobated from the beginning: by God’s creation of but one woman for Adam, and by His command for the husband to “cleave unto his wife”—therein He intimated His will for the regulation of the sexes and under what divine sanction the human family should be propagated. But it was not long after sin had entered this world that men began to defy God’s prohibition, for as early as Genesis 4:19, we read, “And Lamech took unto him *two* wives.” It should be carefully noted that Lamech was one of the degenerate offspring of *Cain*, and that he was the *sixth* (not the seventh) generation from Adam! That evil example of his ensnared good men at a later date. Some have sought to excuse their sin, arguing that polygamy was virtually a necessity in the early generations of the race, when the earth was so thinly populated. But that is carnal reasoning and a presumptuous and impious inference, for the fact remains that God never authorized either Lamech or any of the patriarchs to take unto him a second wife. Moreover, it is to be carefully noted that whereas God gave orders for “sevens” of the clean beasts to be taken into the ark, He restricted Noah and his sons to their own sole wives!

Going back a little, a word needs to be said upon the matter of the propagation of the human race before the Fall, and whether the sons of Adam procured their wives (their own sisters) without the sin of incest. The only writer we are acquainted with who has boldly and honestly faced this problem, and who has, in our humble judgment, dealt with it faithfully and truly, is the late Professor Robert Lewis Dabney (1820-1898), of the Union Theological Seminary, Virginia. He rightly pointed out that, “The command to replenish the earth was given to Adam and Eve in their pure estate: which, had it continued, incest, like every other sin, would have been impossible. Who can deny, but that the marriages contracted between the sons and daughters of our first parents, after the Fall, were sinful in God’s eyes? It is not unreasonable to suppose that, thus, the very propagation of the human race, to which its present earthly existence under the mercy of God is due, began in sin and shame; that its very

perpetuation is the tolerated consequence of a flagrant crime!” To which we will add only one remark: in view of *this*, how could the course of human history be different from what it has been? From such a foul spring, nothing but polluted and bitter waters *could* issue.

It is ever a delicate matter—and should be a painful one—for any of God’s children to make reference to the failings of their brethren, the more so when they be far more eminent than ourselves in piety and fruitfulness. Though the Holy Spirit has recorded both the virtues and the vices of the patriarchs, yet the latter are to be regarded by us as a warning and not for our imitation. We should remember, too, that the best of men are but men at the best. Only One has walked this earth who remained “without blemish and without spot” (1 Pet. 1:19). That such men as Abraham and Jacob took unto themselves a plurality of wives or concubines may be accounted for perhaps—though certainly not excused—by their heredity and environment. Abraham, we know, was reared amid idolatry, and in all probability spent the first half of his life among those who practised polygamy; and thus, he learned “the way of the heathen” (Jer. 10:2). Nor were moral conditions in Canaan any better than in Chaldea, and Jacob and others were no doubt guilty of following “a multitude to do evil” (Exod. 23:2). But the cases of Gideon, Elkanah, David, and Solomon, after the giving of the Decalogue, are harder to account for.

It has been pointed out by some writers who sought to extenuate this sin of the patriarchs that Scripture contains no record of God’s reproving them for the same; and therefore, it is very reprehensible for us to do so. But that is nothing to the point, for the argument from *silence* is much too precarious to build anything upon it: what *is* recorded in Holy Writ, and not drawing inferences from what is omitted, is our sole rule. Yet, while we do not read what God expressly admonished them for this offence, nevertheless, His Word makes it clear that His providential frowns fell upon them for the same. Two things should be duly noted. First, that in the earlier instances, some sin or other is specifically mentioned as being the occasion thereof. Thus, Abraham’s taking Hagar was because of Sarah’s unbelief (Gen. 16:1-2). And Jacob’s taking Rachel to wife after Leah, and his own discontent arising from it, was occasioned by Laban’s unjust dealings with him. His cohabiting with Bilhah



was due to Rachel's inordinate desire for children; and his taking of Zilpah by Leah's ambitious desire of having the pre-eminence over Rachel and the number of her children (Gen. 29 and 30).

Second, the displeasure of God upon this sin was almost always intimated by a breach of that peace, which is so desirable a blessing in the family. Accordingly, we read of an irreconcilable quarrel between Sarah and Hagar, and of Ishmael's hatred of Isaac, which the apostle calls being "persecuted" (Gal. 4:29). The repeated contentions that existed in Jacob's family, the envy expressed by the children of one of his wives against those of another, are well known. We must, therefore, conclude that Isaac's example is rather to be followed in this matter, who had but one wife and who loved her better than the other patriarchs did theirs—whose love was divided among several. The opposition which one wife expressed to another appears in the case of Peninnah against Hannah—the wives of Elkanah (1 Sam. 1). In our articles upon the life of David, we showed how heavily the chastening rod of the Lord came upon him and his household each time he took unto him an additional wife. The sorrows which Solomon brought down upon himself by his folly need no particularizing. Thus, the sad disorder in the households of those who kept a plurality of wives is obviously a beacon to those whose eyes are not blinded by prejudice.

Polygamy was clearly contrary to the divine institution of marriage; and the jealousies and dissensions which it introduced into those families, where we have mention of it, imports that such cases are recorded for our caution and not for our approval. In Leviticus 18:18, (see marginal rendering), Moses, in the code which regulated marriage, expressly prohibited the marriage of a second wife in the lifetime of the first, thus enjoining monogamy in terms as clear as those of Christ's. Throughout their ministrations, the Prophets frequently gave instructions how a man was to treat his wife, but never his "wives!" But it is objected that polygamy was practised by men too spiritual and too much blessed and owned by God to be capable of continuing to disobey an express precept. But was not even "the sweet psalmist of Israel" (2 Sam. 23:1) guilty of murder?—and clearly the Decalogue forbade *that!* As one has truly said, "The history of good men, alas, shows us too plainly the power of general evil example, custom, temptation, and self-love, blinding the honest

conscience” (Professor R. L. Dabney).

Finally, attention must be called to Malachi 2:14-15. There, the prophet was rebuking the sins of the Jews, and particularly those among them who were guilty of dealing “treacherously against the wife of his youth.” There he points out, first, that marriage is a “covenant” (Mal. 2:14). Second, that the Lord had been “witness between” the guilty husband and the innocent wife. Third, he takes him back to Genesis 2, reminding him that God made but “one” man for “one” woman at the beginning (Mal. 2:15). Fourth, he points out that God had “the residue of the spirit,” and therefore, could have made Adam a dozen wives, had He so pleased; but instead, He has appointed man but “one” wife, in order that “he might seek a *godly seed*” (Mal. 2:15)—i.e., that his children might be maritally pure and not of different bloods, which polygamy prevents. Rightly did Thomas Ridgley (1667-1734) (the best of all the commentators on the Westminster Confession) point out that the “godly seed” has reference to the “practice of their fathers, and *not* that the character of *godly* refers to the children, for they could not be said to be either godly or ungodly as the consequence of their parents having one or more wives.”

## Part Two

There is but one passage in all the Old Testament which requires us to qualify anything we have said in the earlier paragraphs, only one which taught that a man might divorce his wife for something less than adultery—namely Deuteronomy 24:1-4—and to it we now turn.

“When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house. And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man’s wife. And if the latter husband hate her, and write her a bill of divorcement, and giveth it in her hand, and sendeth her out of his house; or if the latter husband die, which took her to be his wife; Her former husband, which sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after that she is defiled; for that is abomination before the LORD.”

In pondering the contents of those verses, it should be obvious to all impartial minds that they must be interpreted in strict harmony with the Analogy of Faith, that we undoubtedly *err* if our understanding of them clashes with other passages in the Pentateuch. That single, but necessary, consideration at once obliges us to regard the words, “some uncleanness in her” as something other than *moral* uncleanness. “Obliges us,” we say, for the Mosaic Law had passed sentence of death upon both the adulterer and the adulteress (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22; John 8:4-5). Nor could it refer to a serious suspicion of unfaithfulness to the marriage bed, for that would require that the husband should make trial of his wife according to the statute of Numbers 5:12-31, which was expressly given to meet the case of “jealousy” or suspicion. Nor does it seem at all likely that this “uncleanness” was merely of a ceremonial nature, for it was liable to persist so that her second husband “hated” her. Thus, by a process of elimination, it would appear that the allusion was unto some physical defect or disease which caused her to “find no favour” in her husband’s eyes.

Furthermore, if we are to be preserved from drawing wrong inferences from Deuteronomy 24:1-4, we must cast upon it the light supplied by our Lord in Matthew 19. There we read that the Pharisees came to Him, “tempting him” by asking the question, “Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for *every* cause?” (Matt. 19:3). Their design was to discredit Christ in the eyes of a section of the Jewish nation, for there were two conflicting “schools” of teaching among them on the subject, and His enemies imagined that by His answer, they would force Him to antagonize one of them: the one holding that nought but marital infidelity constituted a legitimate ground for divorce; the other affirming that the husband has the right, according to his own pleasure or caprice, to put away his wife for the most trivial offence. In His reply, Christ took His interrogators back to the original institution of marriage by God in Eden, and added, “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” (Matt. 19:6): no human authority has any right to change or tamper with a divine ordinance.

“They say unto him, Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?” To which our Lord replied, “Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you

to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so” (Matt. 19:7-8). Observe, first, that the Pharisees erred in styling Deuteronomy 24:1 a “command”—for it was no part of the Moral Law, but instead pertained to the judicial instructions for Israel’s magistrates. So far from God *ordering* the Hebrews to put away their wives for something less than adultery, He merely “suffered” them to do so; it was a concession made only under special circumstances. What those “circumstances” were, our Lord broadly hints at in His “because of the hardness of your hearts.” It was a providential permission, allowing the magistrate to authorize the putting away of wives in order to spare them from brutal treatment, and perhaps murder, at the hands of their callous husbands. Thus, Deuteronomy 24:1 enunciated no general rule for all times and every occasion, much less did it supply warrant for husbands to put away their wives “for every cause.”

It is to be duly noted that in such a case where a Jewish husband “found some uncleanness” in his wife, he was not permitted, in a fit of temper, to act hurriedly and immediately turn her out of the home, but must wait while a legal instrument (which would require a minimum of two witnesses) was drawn up for “a bill of divorcement.” In permitting this arrangement, God did not “wink at” or connive at a husband’s harshness, but mercifully arranged that the wife should be “divorced” rather than be slain because he wished to be free of her. God’s attitude unto the matter is plainly revealed in Malachi 2:16, where He emphatically declares, “For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he *hateth* putting away.” That same verse (“for one covereth *violence* with his garment...therefore take heed to your spirit [passions], that ye deal not treacherously”) also supplies confirmation of what we have said above, and explains what Christ had in mind when He attributed the arrangement of Deuteronomy 24:1 unto Israel’s “hardness of [their] hearts”—namely, the husband’s brutality.

Return now to Matthew 19:3-9. In this fundamental passage, we find that our Lord, first, affirmed the inviolability of covenant (Matt. 19:4-6). Second, that He showed Deuteronomy 24:1-4 was not an actual “command,” as the Pharisees supposed (Matt. 19:7), but only a merciful concession to meet a particular case, a “sufferance” (Matt. 19:8). Third, He revealed why that special permission had been

given, namely, “because of the hardness of...hearts” of certain Jewish husbands (Matt. 19:8). It was to prevent cruelty and bloodshed. That was also clearly imported by the fact that no such license was accorded the wife, for she being “the weaker vessel” (1 Pet. 3:7), the life of her husband (speaking generally) would not be endangered by a wife who despised him. Fourth, from His emphatic words, “Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication [adultery], and shall marry another, committeth adultery” (Matt. 19:9), Christ taught that Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is for ever set aside, that no man may now put away his wife merely because “she find no favour in his eyes.”

Here, then, is the answer to our first question: a higher and holier standard obtains under Christianity than was tolerated under Judaism. In view of which the disciples said unto Christ, “If the case of the man be so with his wife [that he cannot divorce her for “incompatibility of temperament,” or anything else, short of adultery], it is not good to marry” (Matt. 19:10)—better remain single. To which our Lord answered, “All men cannot receive this saying, save [only] they to whom it is given” (Matt. 19:11)—i.e. those upon whom God bestows the gift of continency. The single state is the ideal one for a Christian (1 Cor. 7:7, 32-34), though in most cases it is fraught with great moral danger, and therefore “it is better to marry than to burn” (1 Cor. 7:9) with consuming lust. Moreover, “marriage is honourable in all” (Heb. 13:4), being a divine institution. It is a gracious provision of the Creator’s for the avoidance of fornication (1 Cor. 7:2) and for the lawful producing of children (Rom. 7:4). N.B.—It is our studied *opinion* that in view of “the present distress” (1 Cor. 7:26), it is the part of wisdom and mercy for married couples to conduct themselves as per 1 Corinthians 7:29, for the time may be near when they shall again say, “Blessed are the barren” (Luke 23:29).

“But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication [adultery], causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery” (Matt. 5:32). Here we have the divinely authoritative and unambiguous answer to our second question. In the Scriptural meaning of the words, “to put away” one’s wife is to legally divorce her, the two expressions being used interchangeably in this very

verse. But to put away one's wife is expressly forbidden by the divine Law, marriage being for life. One exception, and one only to the general rule, is authorized by Christ, as is plain from His "saving for [except only] the cause of fornication"—for since *that* sin be itself the breaking of the marriage contract, it constitutes a valid ground for divorce. In modern terminology, "fornication" is a sin committed by an unmarried person ("adultery" only by one joined in wedlock); but in Scripture, "fornication" is sometimes used as a generic term for *any* moral uncleanness. In Ezekiel 16:29-32, the Lord charges His "Wife" with *both* crimes; and in Revelation 2:20, 22, it is clear that "fornication" and "adultery" are used interchangeably.

It is to be duly noted that in Matthew 19:9, our Lord *repeated* what He had laid down so specifically in Matthew 5:32, "Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery!" Those words are too plain to be misunderstood: nothing but death or unchastity severs the marriage bond. The courts of men may pretend to legalize other grounds for divorce, but they cannot sanctify them, or take away the brand of infamy which the Son of God has placed upon the one who marries another that has not a Scripturally warranted divorce. Something infinitely superior to human legislation must govern and regulate those who fear the Lord. The Word of God, and not our feelings, is to be our sole Rule and Guide in this matter, as in everything else pertaining to our conduct. Neither separation by mutual consent nor desertion dissolves the marriage tie between husband and wife. One thing alone, short of death, does or can do that: namely, *proven* adultery, and not merely suspected.

Any man who declares that because a wife has been abandoned by her husband, she has a legal ground to sue for a divorce, is guilty of the heinous sin of adding to the Word of God, and constitutes himself a liar. Any man who lives with a woman previously married to another and whose husband is not dead, or who has not obtained a legal divorce because adultery was committed, is himself guilty of adultery in the sight of God. Consequently, it follows of necessity that any preacher who recognizes and countenances any pretended or unscriptural divorce is guilty of contravening the Law of Christ.

In his earlier days, the writer was put to the test. One evening, a young man, accompanied by a girl, called at the house where we lodged and asked us to marry them. Seeing a marriage license in his hand, we foolishly assumed that all was in order, and went and called two people to witness the ceremony. But before beginning it, we asked to examine the “certificate,” and then discovered the man was divorced, and merely on the ground of “incompatibility of temperament.” The situation was an embarrassing one, but we told the couple they were not eligible for marriage, and would be sinning before God if they lived together; and we refused to “marry” them.

One of the main proofs that the “Apocrypha” is not inspired of God is its teaching on this subject, for so far from agreeing with Holy Writ, it embodies the loose ethics of the carnal mind. Among the vaporizings of the son of Sirach concerning married women is the following: “If she go not as thou wouldest, have her cut off from thy flesh” (Ecclesiasticus 25:26)—that is, if she displeases thee in any respect, thou art free to put her away. But what better might be looked for when that same book avers, “Almsgiving will make atonement for sins” (Ecclus. 3:20)? Nor need we be surprised that such a system as Romanism, which exalts “human tradition” to the same level of authority as the Word of God (and follows the former when the latter clashes with them!), allows divorce for other causes than the one specified by Christ—even authorizing them for *religious* reasons. But to the Law and the Testimony: “For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth” (Rom. 7:2), even though he mistreats her, refuses to provide for her, or completely deserts her.

It is to be greatly regretted that not a few good men, leaders among the Lord’s people, have taught otherwise; yet highly as we may esteem them, they are not to be regarded as “rabbins” or “fathers.” We are under divine bonds to “*prove* all things,” to weigh every utterance of the most eminent of God’s servants in the balances of the Sanctuary, and to hold fast only “that which is good” (1 Thess. 5:21). Many have concluded that another cause, in addition to adultery, is sufficient to procure the dissolution of the conjugal tie—namely, the wilful *desertion* of one of the parties. Cruel and ungodly as is such a course, and most pitiable the woman’s case when left in ignorance for years whether her husband

and protector be dead, yet the marriage is not annulled thereby. As J.C. Philpot (1802-1869) pertinently asked, “How long must that absence or desertion be to have this effect? Shall it be a week’s, a month’s, or a year’s absence, that shall do it? And if those terms be too short, where are we to put the limit? If one year’s desertion cannot break the marriage tie, can it be broken by ten or twenty years’ absence? ....

“The number of years that he has deserted her, her ignorance where he is, the belief she entertains that he is dead, her desolate condition, her poverty and necessity, her unprotected condition—all these pitiable circumstances do not, cannot, alter the Law of God. He is her husband, and she is his wife till death or divorce dissolve the tie...And though this may occasion individual hardship, yet what a general benefit to married women accrues from it! If desertion could dissolve marriage, thousands of unprincipled husbands would avail themselves of it, and no wife could be sure, as now, that she should continue such till her own or her husband’s decease” (*The Gospel Standard*, 1853). The very evil which the editor of that magazine pointed out now obtains widely in our midst. But our appeal must be to a higher authority, to the divine. The Lord Jesus took no notice of desertion as a just cause when speaking on divorce, nor did any of His apostles refer to it as a valid ground. *That* must be for us the Final Court of Appeal, and nothing must be allowed to counter its decision.

But some have supposed that 1 Corinthians 7:15 authorizes a divorce for something short of adultery. It ought to be sufficient to point out that such a supposition is utterly untenable, for the Scriptures do not contradict themselves. It is an exceedingly grave matter to say that the apostle taught something quite different from his Master. But he did not. It is his interpreters who failed to understand the scope and meaning of 1 Corinthians 7:10-17, and have read into the apostle’s language what is not there, yea, have made him to contradict himself, for he could not intend by verse 15 (“But if the unbelieving depart”—desert the Christian partner—“let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases”) that the believer is then free to sue out a divorce, and upon obtaining it, marry again; and then expressly affirm, “The wife is *bound* by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband



be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:39)! A careful and critical examination of the apostle’s drift in that passage seems to be called for.

From the opening words of 1 Corinthians 7—“Now concerning the things whereof *ye wrote unto me*”—it is evident that not a little in this epistle was written in answer to various questions which had exercised the Corinthian saints during the apostle’s absence, concerning which they asked his elucidation, and which he here resolved for them. Though Paul does not quote their particular inquiries in so many words, yet the topics he took up in this epistle indicate the nature of those matters whereon they had sought his counsel, namely, those problems that were raised by their conversion from heathenism to Christianity. Confining ourselves now to the seventh chapter, it is clear that the Lord’s people at Corinth had desired light from the apostle on three points. First, should young Christians marry? Second, what was the duty of a Christian whose husband or wife remained an idolater? Third, what was the duty of a Christian slave? The first question is dealt with in verses 1-9, and resumed in verses 25-40; the second, in verses 10-17; the third, in verses 18-24, which is outside the range of our present subject.

We should not be in the least surprised at the Corinthians seeking help on such matters, for be it remembered that scarcely anything more of the New Testament than the first three Gospels had then been written. Let the reader try and imagine himself to be a young Christian in the Corinthian church with none of the Epistles to hand! During the brief stay of Paul in your city, you had been converted under his preaching, separated from the world, and given as your blessed hope the coming of Christ to receive His people to Himself. Your whole outlook upon life had been radically changed. But the apostle had left for labours in other parts. You begin to wonder how the great blessings and privileges of which you have recently been made the recipient are to affect and regulate the details of your conduct. Such questions as these now deeply exercise you: would my falling in love with a woman and marrying her cast a serious reflection upon my love for Christ? Does devotion to Him require me to remain in the single state, so that *He* may completely fill my heart? If you, my reader, had no written guidance from God thereon, and had been left to yourself, had you decided rightly or wrongly

upon the point?

Continuing the same flight of imagination, suppose a rather different case in Corinth. God has recently brought you out of darkness into His marvellous light, but so far from being a single person, you are already married, united to an idolater! Will not the question now be seriously raised in your heart, What is my duty? Can it be pleasing and honouring to Christ that I should continue to co-habit with one who despises and rejects Him? I have sought to present the Gospel to her (or him), but instead of duly weighing the claims of the Lord Jesus, she ridicules and opposes me, and persists in attending the idol's temple. True, I still love her dearly, yet in view of the Saviour's words ("If any man come to me, and *hate not* his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple"—Luke 14:26), must I not separate from her? Had *you* been left to your own understanding, yea, had you followed your "spiritual instincts," had you not determined wrongly? How thankful we should be for the completed Word of God in our hands, by which we are "thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Tim. 3:17) and not left in uncertainty of the divine will upon such important matters as these!

Not only had it been "natural" for those young Gentile converts to conclude that it was their duty to separate from their heathen partners, not only would their "spiritual inclinations" prompt them thereto, but if they had conferred with the Hebrew Christians in their assembly, they had assuredly counselled them to do so—for they would at once have appealed unto Ezra 10:3, where those Jews who, during the captivity, had married in Babylon were required to "put away all [their] wives," and their children also. Even though they wavered on the ground that Judaism was obsolete, and consulted the Gospels to see if Christ had uttered any definite word on the subject, they would discover He had said nothing about *mixed* marriages wherein believers and unbelievers were unequally yoked together. Thus, in their perplexity, they sought help from the apostle. In view of Ezra 10:3, there was a real need for him to authoritatively resolve the matter once for all, so that others (such as the newly converted in India or China) might know whether God required them to leave their unconverted partners in marriage, or whether He allowed them to continue living with the same.

### Part Three

That to which we have called attention in the last three paragraphs supplies a forcible illustration and an unmistakable demonstration of the imperative need for the child of God to subject himself unto the written Word, and to be regulated by its teaching in all the practical concerns of his life. The utter inadequacy of his own understanding (even now that it has been renewed by the miracle of regeneration), and the definite insufficiency of his “new nature” to serve as his monitor, appear no more plainly than in the inability of each to solve this problem according to the mind of God. It might be supposed that “sanctified common sense”—and still more so, “the spiritual promptings”—of a born-again Arab or Japanese would intimate that it was his bounden duty to separate from a heathen wife who positively refused to give the Gospel a hearing and who was determined to remain an idol worshipper. Nevertheless, such a decision would be the very opposite of what God has prescribed in 1 Corinthians 7:12: “If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, *let him not* put her away!” Learn, then, dear reader, your imperative need of having a “thus saith the Lord” for your rule.

But we must turn now to an examination of the apostle’s language here. We will not dwell upon 1 Corinthians 7:1-9, where Paul was replying to the question, Should a young Christian remain single or marry? further than to say a few words upon verse 6. From his “I speak this by permission, and not of commandment,” some have drawn the erroneous inference that Paul was not here writing by inspiration of God, but was merely recording his own personal opinion. The reader will find it easier to follow the apostle’s line of thought if he places verses 3-5 in parentheses, for it is evident that verses 7-9 are a continuation of verse 2; and therefore, the “this” of verse 6 looks back to what had been said in verse 2—confirmed by the opening “for” of verse 7. The contrast between “permission” and “commandment” in verse 6 is not that of Paul writing as a private individual and as an inspired apostle (as verse 10 shows); but rather, that marriage itself is a thing allowable, but *not ordered* by God—as the extreme Jewish element taught. God has neither forbidden or commanded His children to marry: it is optional.

Whichever you decide upon, you sin not. He who marries does well; he who marries not, does better—provided he has the gift of continency.

From verse 10 to the end of verse 17, the apostle deals with the matter of a believer who is already married to an unbeliever; and in the case of the Gentile Corinthians, of a believer who previously was a heathen, and whose mate is still an avowed idolater. “And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband” (1 Cor. 7:10). The apostle deals first (as what follows makes clear) with the case of those saints who, in the circumstances described above, contemplated the taking out of a divorce. And he tells them that, so far as *this* matter was concerned, there was no need for them to apply unto him for instruction: Christ Himself had already authoritatively declared that the marriage covenant could not be broken at the option of either of the parties, nor even by mutual consent. Except for the one sin of adultery, the wife had no right to leave her husband under any circumstances whatever, nor was the husband permitted to repudiate his wife for any cause. This the apostle, as His ambassador, emphatically enforces—as his “I command” unmistakably shows. His “yet not I, but the Lord” means that such a binding statement originates not from me; but rather, it is a maintaining of what the Lord Jesus laid down before me.

“Let not the wife depart from her husband” (1 Cor. 7:10) signifies, let her not be unfaithful to her marriage vows, nor under any pretence, desert her husband. Difference of religion is not to cause a separation. No divorce is permissible, save for the one cause which Christ specified. “The Christian calling did not dissolve the marriage covenant, but bound it the faster by bringing it back to the original institution, limiting it to two persons, and binding them together for life” (Matthew Henry, 1662-1714). Even though the husband be an infidel, a persecutor, and a blasphemer, nevertheless, it is the Christian wife’s duty to still live with him and meekly bear his taunts and opposition. The trial of such a union is to be patiently endured, and the duties thereof cheerfully performed; and thereby, she would adorn her profession, and honour and magnify her Saviour. Such a trial, sore and protracted as it may be, affords opportunity for her to prove the sufficiency of divine grace. If God,

in His sovereignty, be pleased to bless her kindness and good example, and hear her fervent prayers, the unbelieving husband may first be ashamed; and then “won,” as his heart is brought to seek and find Christ for himself (1 Pet. 3:1).

“But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife” (1 Cor. 7:11). This is not said as countenancing such a departure, but rather is giving directions what each party is required to do where such a thing had happened. If the wife, upon being made a partaker of the saving grace of God, has hurriedly or rashly forsaken her heathen partner, yet such a procedure has not annulled the marriage; and therefore, she is not free to wed a Christian. She must either remain in the separate-but-married state, or “be reconciled to her husband:” that is, seek him out, acknowledge her fault in leaving him, ask his forgiveness, and avow her willingness to live with him in peace. That was her bounden duty. First, because of her marriage vows; and second, to prevent reproach being brought upon the Gospel, and however humbling it might be unto pride to own her mistake; and though against her spiritual inclinations, yet she must spare no effort to re-establish normal relations with the one who was still her husband.

Widening the scope from this particular case of a Christian woman united to a heathen, let us consider that of a Christian woman whose husband is *not* an idolater, but yet a godless man who mistreats his wife. It has been said, “There are cases undoubtedly which justify a woman in leaving her husband, which do not justify divorce. Just as there are cases which justify a child leaving, or being removed from the custody of a parent” (Charles Hodge, 1797-1878). We agree, yet must add, such cases are not common, and plainness of language is needed to specifically define them—otherwise, too wide a door will be opened, and many not warranted to do so will consider themselves entitled to avail themselves of it. Nothing can possibly justify a man in separating from his wife, nor a woman from her husband—be either one a believer or an unbeliever—except such things as really make it impossible for them to dwell together: neither dislike, differences of opinions, wasteful extravagance, nor even drunkenness and abuse, warrant one to forsake another whom he or she has solemnly

promised to love and live with “till death do us part.”

“We can only conceive of two cases which would warrant a wife’s leaving her husband: (1). If he be abandoned to the vilest profligacy. He may be unfaithful to her, but unless sunk in shameless profligacy, we do not think even that a sufficient cause for her leaving him. But if he bring prostitutes to his house, live in shameless adultery with the servant under her own roof, or by his base conduct entail on her personal suffering, we think she may, after exertion made to reclaim him, leave him—but even then, not fully, nor finally, but be willing to return and forgive him, if he be really reclaimed from his base ways and is desirous for her to come back. (2). Where violence is pushed to the edge of cruelty and life endangered...where there is a continued course of cruelty, an attempt made upon life or limb, and from abandoned drunkenness or insanity, the wife’s life is really in danger, and she cannot procure protection from the law, or from any other quarter; then, we think, she may leave her husband, for who would counsel her to stay to be murdered?”—J. C. Philpot, 1802-1869 (*Gospel Standard*, 1855, page 384). But even should he spend his remaining years in prison or in an insane asylum, she is still his wife, and is not free to marry another.

“But to the rest speak I, not the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:12). We are not acquainted with any commentator who appears to have apprehended the force of the first four of those words. All whom we have consulted assume that the apostle is addressing himself to precisely the same class as he did in verses 10 and 11; yet one had thought the language here used was sufficiently explicit to preclude that idea. In the two preceding verses, Paul was giving counsel to those who wondered if it was their duty to obtain a divorce from their heathen partners. That is clear, first, from his “I command, yet not I, but the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:10), for the only relevant matter upon which Christ had legislated or adjudicated was that of *divorce*. Since nothing but adultery was a just ground for a divorce, “Let not the wife depart from her husband.” Second, from the disjunctive “But” at the beginning of verse 12, and “to the rest [i.e. whose particular problem was not contemplated in verses 10 and 11] speak I” shows that a different class is about to be addressed.

The added words, “speak I, not the Lord” supply further

confirmation that he is taking up another subject or dealing with a separate problem. Before considering the same, however, let us free that clause from a misconception which some have entertained of it. In their hostility to the doctrine of the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures, enemies of God have searched diligently to find something in the Word which seemed to militate against that vital truth; and their *wish* being “father to the thought” led them to conclude they had found what they were looking for in the sentence now before us—i.e. that here the apostle acknowledged, in this place at least, he was giving out his *own* thoughts, that it was not the Lord who was speaking by him; which goes to illustrate the trite saying, “The Bible can be made to prove anything.” So it can—if we fail to understand *what* it says; if we suffer ourselves to be misled by the sound of its words, instead of going to the pains of ascertaining their sense; if we come to the Bible with our minds already made up of what it reveals, instead of humbly approaching it with the sincere and earnest prayer, “That which I see not teach thou me” (Job 34:32).

Nor is it only the more-or-less open enemies of the Truth who have wrested such statements as occur in 1 Corinthians 7:12, etc., for some who, in the main, were sound in their teaching, have erred grievously thereon. One such commentator, who exercised considerable influence in the second half of last century, interpreted the apostle to mean, “I do not claim, in this advice, to be under the influence of inspiration,” which at once repudiates 2 Timothy 3:16. But when the apostle declared, “to the rest speak I, not the Lord,” he was not drawing an antithesis between what is inspired and what is uninspired, but rather between what the Lord Jesus had taught while He was here on earth, and what His servant was now “moved by the Holy Ghost” to give out. “The Lord” is not the equivalent of “God,” but of the Mediator (Heb. 8:6)—compare 7:22; 10:21-22; 11:23; where in each instance, the reference is clearly unto *Christ*. On the subject of divorce, the Lord Jesus had given express commandment (1 Cor. 7:10); but upon the wider problem which the apostle was now taking up, He had said nothing. Since there was not anything in Christ’s teaching which met this particular case, Paul was now authorized by Him to give His people that necessary instruction which met the exigencies of their trying situation.

Under the Mosaic economy, the Lord had expressly forbidden His people to wed any of the heathen: “Neither shalt thou make marriages with them; thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son” (Deut. 7:3). Because some of them had defied that statute in Babylon, upon the return of the remnant of Israel unto Palestine, Nehemiah “contended with them, and cursed them, and smote certain of them” (Neh. 13:23-25); and Ezra the priest (Ezra 7:12) gave orders to “separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the strange wives;” and accordingly, “they gave their hands that they would *put away* their wives, and being guilty, they offered a ram of the flock for their trespass” (Ezra 10:11, 19). Though silent thereon after His incarnation, through Ezra and Nehemiah, the Lord had revealed His will. It had therefore been the very height of presumption had Paul here given such directions without divine warrant. “It would amount to the most outrageous blasphemy if the apostle had not felt that in using this language, he was the mouth of God, and had he ventured to say of his own proper authority, ‘It is not the Lord, it is I! I, I say, and not the Lord’”—Louis Gaussen, 1790-1863 (*Theopneustia*).

Here, then, is a contrast between the requirements of the two dispensations. Under the Old Testament economy, one of God’s people who wedded an idolater must put her away; under the milder regime of the Gospel, he is not to do so. In His earthly ministry, Christ confined Himself to Palestine and restricted His teaching unto those who were under the old covenant. It was therefore fitting that His apostle unto the Gentiles should be His mouthpiece in resolving this difficulty for the Corinthian saints. Having solemnly ratified, as God’s messenger, the primitive ordinance of marriage and asserted its unalterable validity (1 Cor. 7:10-11), he turned to consider a case of lesser gravity—namely, whether a voluntary separation was proper, yea, advisable, where one party was a Christian and the other was not so. In the apostle’s “I command, yet not I, but the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:10) and his “But to the rest speak I, not the Lord,” we have indubitable proof that he was dealing with different cases. In both instances, he was addressing married people, in both instances where one was a believer and the other an unbeliever; but in the former, where a *divorce* was contemplated; in the latter, where a *separation* only was in question.



“If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away” (1 Cor. 7:12). The Corinthian, like most of the first Christian churches, was comprised of believing Jews and believing Gentiles. Some of those Jews had before conversion adhered more or less strictly to the Mosaic law, but others of them were lax (as many of their descendants today) and had learned “the way of the heathen” (Jer. 10:2), and had taken wives from them. But now, with the fear of God in their hearts, they too would be most uneasy, apprehensive that probably they must do as their forebears did in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. No, says the apostle, such a drastic course is not now required, nor is even a separation called for. Christianity requires no believer to turn away from his wife though she be unconverted. On the contrary, if she still loves him and desires to live with him, the Lord Jesus permits her to do so. Christianity is not intended to overthrow the natural relations of life, but to strengthen, to enrich, to elevate them.

“And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him” (1 Cor. 7:13). The apostle puts the case both ways, so that there might be no uncertainty. There was also a needs-be for him to do so, for since the husband be “the head of the woman [wife]” (1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:23) and her “lord” (1 Pet. 3:6), she is required to be in loving subjection. The wife, recently converted, might think that her unconverted partner no longer *had* any authority over her, and that she was at full liberty to follow her own inclinations. Not so—even though her husband be destitute of faith, if he is willing for her to remain with him, she must do so. The marriage vows are to be held sacred, and not broken because any difference of religious opinion or experience has arisen. When the love of God is shed abroad in the heart, its favoured recipient will not be less, but far more solicitous for the welfare of those near and dear unto them. A Christian wife whose husband is an unbeliever has a God-given opportunity to let her light shine before him and to commend unto him the excellency of Christ. Then let her—by affection, kindness, patience, and prayer—seek to win him.

“For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy” (1 Cor. 7:14). Care needs

to be taken to interpret this verse in strict accord with its context, and not read into it what is entirely foreign to the subject under discussion. To make it teach the eligibility of such children for Christian baptism, is to *force* into it what is far removed from the matter which the apostle was speaking of, as some pedo-baptists have themselves honestly admitted. In this fourteenth verse, as its opening “For” intimates, the servant of Christ was pointing out the *needlessness* of any separation, since the unbelieving one is “sanctified” by the believing partner. And second, he shows how *disastrous* would be the consequence if the idea were entertained that the conversion of one makes the marriage void and requires that they should part: if such were the case, then it would necessarily follow that the children born unto them were “unclean.” The precise meaning of the words “sanctified,” “unclean” and “holy” in this verse, we must now endeavour to show.

Bearing carefully in mind the nature of the particular case that the apostle was here dealing with—that of a Christian united to a heathen—it is clear that in this fourteenth verse, he was anticipating an objection. In the preceding verse, he had bade the believing wife to remain with her unbelieving husband. By so doing, her conscience was likely to demur and say, Shall I not be spiritually polluted by maintaining such a connection? Shall I not incur moral defilement in the sight of God by continuing to live with one who is an open idolater? If an Israelite during the Mosaic economy who had married a heathen became legally defiled, and his offspring were legally “unclean”—as is obvious from Ezra 10:3—then will not *my* children be in the same deplorable case? No—the cases are by no means parallel. Those Israelites had contracted unlawful marriages. But your case is otherwise: the matter upon which you have sought my counsel is one where the conversion of one has occurred *after* a legal marriage. That is easily resolved: the sanctity of the marriage relationship still obtains.

“For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by [or ‘to,’ as the same Greek preposition is rendered in the next verse] the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by [‘to’] the husband” (1 Cor. 7:14). First, let us point out what these words *do not* signify. They cannot mean that God regards the unbeliever as a Christian, merely because he is united to a wife who has become such; nor that he is internally

sanctified, for that is effected only by the operations of the Holy Spirit. It does not mean that her having become a believer has brought the husband into a holier relationship, or (as one expresses it) has “diffused a kind of holiness over the unbelieving partner.” There is no reference either to moral character or ecclesiastical status. He or she is “sanctified” *only* in connection with that which is here under discussion: they are “sanctified” *maritally*. The unbelieving member is “sanctified” to the purpose of the marriage relation—otherwise conjugal contact could not be maintained. Since marriage is a divine institution, cohabitating therein is a holy thing, sanctioned by God Himself. In His sight, the twain are “one flesh;” and therefore, by continuing in the marriage state, it is “sanctified” to *both* of them.

The word “sanctified” is by no means used uniformly in the Scriptures, but instead, in a variety of senses. It rarely expresses any subjective or internal change. Occasionally, it imports the bare separation of one thing or person from others; but much more frequently, the setting of it (or him) apart unto God, for His service. “The unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife” neither means that he is made inwardly holy nor “federally holy,” but that he is sanctified unto her *as an instrument* for a holy purpose. Marriage is as sacred as the Sabbath: by continuing in the marriage relationship, it was sanctified to each of them. Though an unbeliever, nevertheless, the husband is sanctified to his wife for a sacred *end*—for the lawful enjoyment of marital privileges. The question at issue was, Is it proper for such a couple to continue living together? The answer is, Yes, because they were—and still are—indissolubly united by the holy ordinance of God.

In *proof* thereof, the apostle points out by logical inference what the other alternative would necessarily entail: “else [otherwise] were your children unclean.” Not spiritually so—for all are “shapen in iniquity” and conceived in sin (Psa. 51:5)—nor ceremonially so; but *legally*. If your connection has become unlawful and an abomination before God, then your children are bastards. If you take the ground that a separation is now necessary, then you are saying to the world that your marriage is no longer valid, that it has become improper for you to remain with your husband, and thereby, you expose your children to the stigma of disgrace. “But now [rather] are they holy”

shows the error of such a supposition: therefore, a continued cohabiting with your husband must be sanctioned by God. “But now are they holy” means in the *same* sense that the parents are “sanctified”—i.e. in a legal and civil way: your children are *legitimate* offspring. They are “a godly seed” (Mal. 2:15)—that is, they are reckoned by God as being born in lawful wedlock.

## Part Four

“But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace” (1 Cor. 7:15). So far as we are aware, this is the *only* verse in all the Bible appealed unto by those who insist that the case of desertion or abandonment constitutes a valid ground for divorce. It therefore calls for the closest scrutiny, in order to determine whether there be anything in it which obliges us to take such a view, or even offers weighty support thereto. Before recording our own understanding of its terms, let the reader give the verse a careful perusal and seek to supply his or her own answer to the question, What is there in it which definitely and unequivocally favours such an idea? We say “definitely and unequivocally,” for surely something more solid and satisfactory than uncertain conjectures or vague interferences are required in such a solemn and radical matter—a matter which involves pitting the teaching of the apostle against that of the Lord Jesus! Be not carried away by what any “great and godly men” have said thereon, but form your own judgment of what the verse really teaches.

Above, we have said, that to make 1 Corinthians 7:15 mean that desertion severs the marriage tie, sets the apostle at direct variance with the ringing declaration of his Master; and so far as we are concerned, that single consideration settles the question, and compels us to reject the common interpretation of that verse. The words of Christ are too plain to be misunderstood: “But I say unto you [against all who aver otherwise], That whosoever shall put away his wife, *saving* [only] for the cause of fornication [adultery], causeth her to commit adultery [should she cohabit with any other man]: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced [on any other ground] committeth adultery” (Matt. 5:32). He repeats the same thing in Matthew 19:9. Christ is both the Prophet and the Head of

His Church, and beyond *His* authoritative decision, there is no appeal. That is abundantly clear from the commission which He has given His servants: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe *all* things whatsoever I have *commanded* you” (Matt. 28:19-20).

But again, the popular view of 1 Corinthians 7:15 is entirely against the scope and method of the passage in which it occurs. In the preceding paragraphs, we have been at some pains to make clear Paul’s line of thought therein, and have considered, first, his directions unto those who were contemplating a divorce (1 Cor. 7:10-11), affirming that being united unto an idolater did not constitute a ground for such. And second, that such a situation did not even call for a separation (1 Cor. 7:12-14). Thus, to regard verse 15 as treating of something which supplied cause for a *divorce*, is to suppose the apostle guilty of a literary lapse, and what is worse, make verse 15 flatly contradict what he said in verse 11. But the apostle is to be charged with no such confusion as that: it is the minds of his expositors which are befogged. In verse 15, Paul does *not* go back to the matter dealt with in verses 10 and 11, but instead, continues and completes the subject under discussion in verses 12 to 14.

The question resolved in 1 Corinthians 7:12-15 is, Does a Christian married to a heathen call for a separation, as is clear from the apostle’s “But to the rest speak I, not the Lord”—i.e. Christ Himself had given out no decision thereon. In verses 12 and 13, orders were given that where the unbelieving partner *is willing* for the Christian mate to continue cohabiting, there must be no separation. In verse 14, he amplifies that injunction. First, by showing that a separation is needless; and second, that it would be disastrous for the children. Then in verse 15, he contemplates the other alternative, namely, Suppose the idolater is *unwilling* for the Christian mate to remain, then what shall the latter do? Most probably there were cases where a devout heathen was bitterly opposed to Christianity, and therefore, violently hostile to the idea of continuing to live with a husband or wife who had become an avowed Christian. When this was the case, and no appeal of either reason or affection had any effect, then what policy ought the believing partner to adopt? *That* is the question to which the apostle

here furnishes answer, nor does there appear to us the least ambiguity in his language.

“But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart” (1 Cor. 7:15). If he has deliberately deserted you because of a difference of religion, you must bow to the will of God. If it has not pleased Him to subdue the prejudice of your husband and soften his heart toward you, you must acquiesce with the divine providence. The onus rests upon him, and you must accept the situation with good grace. “A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases” is explained by the words that immediately follow: “but God hath called us *to peace*.” In such a case, the believing wife is not to have recourse unto litigation and insist that the deserter be compelled by law to return unto her. The Christian wife is under no moral bonds to pursue her husband into the courts and demand that he make provision for her support, for that would be to follow a policy the very reverse of that “peace” which God has enjoined upon His children (Rom. 12:18, 14:19; Heb. 12:14). Believers are the sons “of peace” (Luke 10:6), followers of the Prince of peace, and where no principle is involved, they must avoid all contention and strife.

Not a word does the apostle say in 1 Corinthians 7:15 about desertion or dissolving the marriage tie; still less that in such a case, the believer is free to marry again—that is *man’s* presumptuous *addition* to the Word of God. Furthermore, that which immediately follows militates against such an idea. “For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband? or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save thy wife?” (1 Cor. 7:16). The opening “for” obviously has the force of “because” and introduces an important consideration to *deter from* all precipitate and extreme action. Unmistakably, it makes directly against the erroneous view taken of the preceding verse, for if the wife *has* divorced the husband, what hope could there be of God making use of her in winning him! Verse 17 supplies an additional reason why neither divorce nor separation should be insisted upon: “But as God hath distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk. And so *ordain I* [proving it was far more than a mere personal advice which the apostle was here proffering!] in all churches.” Paul was averse from breaking up the conjugal relation or any social position the Christian had occupied before conversion.

Christianity is not a revolutionary and disorganizing element, but is designed to promote the general good. Loyalty to Christ does not forbid, but requires, husbands and wives to dwell together in peace, servants to obey their masters, subjects to honour the king.

It is little to be wondered at that the profane world now entertains such lax views on the sanctity of marriage, when so many professing Christians advocate such an anti-Scriptural sentiment as the permissibility of divorce merely for desertion. It is greatly to be regretted that so many good men during the last three centuries taught that error, for they but paved the way for the well-nigh total moral breakdown which obtains today. When the leaders of Christendom sowed such seed, no other harvest could be expected. Better taught were the early Puritans. One equal in spirituality and scholarship to any member of the Westminster Assembly wrote fifty years earlier, “A man with a good conscience cannot give a bill of divorcement for any cause but adultery, and therefore, those laws which permit divorce for other causes are greatly faulty before God. If any should ask whether men’s laws may not make more causes of divorcement than this one? I answer, No, for marriage is not a mere civil thing, but partly spiritual and divine, and therefore, God only hath power to appoint the beginning, the continuance, and the end thereof”—William Perkins (1558-1602), 1587.

Turning now to the last division of our subject. When the marriage bond has been broken by one party, is the innocent one, after a divorce has been obtained, free—in the sight of God, we mean—to marry again? Or is he or she shut up unto a life of celibacy? This question need not detain us very long, yet it is one that calls for a brief consideration at least, for Christendom by no means returns a uniform answer thereto. Probably many of our readers are aware that one of the errors of the Mother of harlots concerning marriage is that it is *unlawful* for a man who has repudiated his wife for adultery to marry again. Nor is that view entirely peculiar to Romanists, for some Protestants have entertained the same idea, being misled by our Lord’s words in Mark 10:11, “Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her,” regarding that as an unqualified and absolute restriction. But that is a mistake, through failing to read this verse in the light of Matthew 5:32 and 19:9.

Scripture must be explained by Scripture, and briefer statements read in the light of fuller ones, and never must one be pitted against the other. Particularly is this the case with the first three Gospels; parallel passages should be consulted, and the shorter one read in the light of the longer one. Thus, when Peter asked Christ, “How oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?” our Lord’s answer “Until seventy times seven” (Matt. 18:21-22) must not be taken to signify that we are to condone wrongs and exercise grace at the expense of righteousness, for He had just previously said, “If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear [heed] thee, thou hast gained thy brother” (Matt. 18:15). No, rather, must His language in Matthew 18:22 be interpreted by His amplified declaration in Luke 17:3-4, “If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and *if he repent*, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him!” God Himself does not forgive us until we repent (Acts 2:38; 3:19). While we must not entertain any bitterness or malice in our hearts against those who wrong us, yet not until they acknowledge their offence are we to fellowship with them as if no offence had been committed.


So, too, in order to obtain a right conception of the great commission which the Redeemer has given to His ministers, we need to bring all three accounts thereof together, and not confine ourselves unto only one of them: “That *repentance* and remission of sins should be preached in his name” (Luke 24:47) is equally essential as bidding sinners, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 16:31). Thus with the matter we are now discussing: Mark 10:11 is to be interpreted by Matthew 5:32: “Whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced [for any other cause] committeth adultery”—repeated by Christ in Matthew 19:9. In those words, Christ propounded a general rule [“*Whosoever* putteth away his wife causeth her to commit adultery, and he that marrieth her committeth adultery”]; and then He put in *an exception*, namely, that for adultery, he *may* put her away, and such a one *may* marry again. As He there teaches the lawfulness of divorce on the ground of adultery, so He teaches it is lawful to marry



again after such a divorce, without contracting the guilt of adultery.

In his comments on Matthew 19:9, rightly did John Owen (1616-1683) point out, “Hence it is evident, and is the plain sense of the words, that he who putteth away his wife for fornication and marrieth another *does not* commit adultery. Therefore, the bond of marriage in that case is dissolved, and the person that put away his wife is at liberty to marry. While He denies putting away and marrying again for every cause, the exception of fornication allows both putting away and marrying again in that case. For an exception always affirms the contrary unto what is denied in the rule, whereto it is an exception; or denies what is affirmed in it in the case comprised in the exception. For every exception is a particular proposition contradictory to the general rule: so that when the one is affirmative, the other is negative; and on the contrary. The rule here in general is affirmative: he that putteth away his wife and marrieth another committeth adultery; the exception is negative: he that putteth away his wife for fornication and marrieth another does not commit adultery.”

Consider the alternative. If the husband prove unfaithful to his marriage vows, is it in accord with God’s revealed character of righteousness and mercy to penalize the innocent wife to remain in the single state the rest of her life? If she has divorced her husband, does God now inflict upon her the sentence of perpetual widowhood because of the infidelity of her partner? For her to be deprived of her right by the sin of another is against the very law of nature, and in such case, it would lie within the power of every wicked husband to deprive his wife of her natural right. The right of divorce specified by Christ for the injured party to make use of is manifestly designed for his or her liberty and relief; but on the supposition that he or she may not marry again, then it would prove a snare and a yoke. As John Owen also pointed out concerning such a supposition, “It may, and probably will, cast a man under the necessity of sinning. For suppose he has not the gift of continency, it is the express will of God that he should marry for his relief.” Surely 1 Corinthians 7:2 and 9 make it clear that God would not have the injured one exposed to a life of immorality.



*“And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh”*

**Genesis 2:23-24.**

