

## **What About Divorce?**

### **When may a Christian obtain a divorce?**

#### Introduction.

Generalities are the peril of the preacher who has a fine scorn of technicalities. One must be able to make the proper generalization out of a mass of details, but he is no theologian who is not first a grammarian, as Dr. A. M. Fairbairn said. The preacher who ridicules word-studies merely exposes his own ignorance. The lexicon may point the way to life. The preacher is of necessity a student of words. He is the interpreter of language and employs language to convey his interpretation of life to the minds of men. They understand his words in their own sense, not in his. He understands the New Testament in his own sense, not in that of the writers, unless forsooth he has managed to grasp the fullness of that meaning. Thus there are all sorts of pitfalls for the preacher as the exponent of the message of the New Testament. If the blind guide leads the blind, they will both fall into the ditch. One simply has to know his parts of speech if he is to keep out of the ditch and avoid dragging his followers after him. Schisms have arisen around misinterpretations of single words. Grammar is a means of grace.

Vital to our understanding of Scripture is to use proper interpretation principles. We are well aware that the book of Revelation has been twisted and warped by literalists taking passages literally when they are obviously figurative from the evidence in the book itself. The use of context to interpret will yield the truth. There are figurative passages in Scripture and there are passages to be taken literally. The way you determine which is which is through a use of context and the use of other passages to tell you what that certain passage in question states.

One very simple principle of interpretation is very common sensical – take the obvious and clear sense of the passage unless clearer passages of Scripture directs you to do otherwise.

In my study here presented I have used those principles that I have outlined. I have of necessity also gone back to the Greek. My presentation will be as follows: I A Study of Pertinent Passages

- A. Adultery as a cause of divorce
  - B. Desertion as a cause of obtaining a legal divorce
- II The Refutation of Error on Malicious Desertion

## I A Study of Pertinent Passages

Before considering adultery we should take a brief look at what marriage is. We start at the beginning with Genesis 2:24 “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.” Marriage is a leaving and a cleaving. Marriage is the most intimate union between man and woman. It is to be welded together. As our Lord says, Mt. 19:6 “...What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder.” It is to stay together and not be broken. It is to be a union for life. I Cor. 7:39 “A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives...”

### A. Adultery as a cause of Divorce

In Matt. 5:31-32 Our Lord says

“It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' 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.” The context of this statement is the sermon on the mount. In this sermon Jesus struck against hypocrisy – saying we believe in God and we uphold His Word and then freely violating it. It is immediately in the section where Jesus explains the commandments. It is followed by warnings directly against hypocrisy.

With the use of the word 'except' Jesus eliminates other reasons for 'putting away, dismissing, divorcing'. The one exception is “adultery, fornication, unchastity”.

In Matt. 19:3-9 we read “And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, 'Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?' He answered, 'Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female. And said, For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one? So they are no longer two but one. What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder.' They said to him “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?’ He said to them, 'For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery.’”

It would appear to be a pretty clear and obvious passage in what it says. Here the context is responding with truth to the Pharisees' hypocrisy and testing of Him.

If divorce could be had for any other reason, the Lord would certainly have said so at these times. In Matt. 19:8 the Lord said that Moses' law practice should not be, and from the beginning it was not so. The parallel references to Matt. 19 are in Mk. 10 and Lk. 16. And Moses' ruling under law was a civil ruling for Israel.

The Lord does not say 'if she commits adultery by all means divorce.' There is no command to and no obligation 'well you committed adultery so I must divorce you.' In the title of this essay we have the word 'may'. The Lord says under this circumstance you may initiate a divorce or putting away. Some cannot live with and relate to an unfaithful partner. The intimacy of marriage is no longer so intimate and private after adultery. The marriage was broken by adultery, that is by the act not the word or thought. With the incidence of adultery one may divorce even though both are yet together in the home. The dismissing, loosing, putting away may be initiated by the innocent party.

To summarize, marriage is leaving and cleaving, not temporarily but until death parts the couple. And only for the cause of fornication or adultery may one initiate a putting away of the unfaithful partner.

#### B. Desertion as a Cause of Obtaining a Legal Divorce

We now come to I. Cor. 7 where we have the question or the problem on other than adultery as a cause of divorce. Keep in mind that in interpreting Scripture it is never of one's own private interpretation II Pet. 1:20-21. The Spirit will interpret a more difficult passage to us through other passages that are simpler to understand. We also take the clear and obvious meaning unless a clearer passage indicates otherwise. (The unclarity of course is in man's mind not in Scripture.) Clearly and obviously Jesus has stated for us twice 'except for fornication.' You should at this point open your Bible to I. Cor. 7.

We concern ourselves with the first sixteen verses of I. Cor. 7. The following is a breakdown of these verses:

- vv.1-7 They are addressed to the Christian husband and wife and deal with the body and sex. It is obviously addressed to the Christian husband and wife because he speaks of prayer and fasting. The first four verses could be said to be a statement of principle for any husband and wife.
- vv.8-9 This is addressed to the unmarried and widows.
- vv.10-11 This is addressed to the married. Here Paul makes reference to the Lord's teaching which we have already established. 'Yet not I, but the Lord.'

vv.12-16 These passages deal with the 'rest'. We can tell from the reading of it that we are considering mixed marriages of believer to unbeliever.

In vv. 10-11 we have reference to what our Lord taught as recorded in Mt. 5 and 19. We read in verse 10 that a woman is not to be separated from her husband. In verse 11 the word 'separate' is used again. And the husband should not leave his wife. The clear and obvious sense of these two words in the context of marriage is 'separate' and 'leave', that is physically leaving and ending up in separate localities.

Now in verse 12 we have the word 'dwell' used. If she consents to live or dwell with him, he should not divorce or leave her. In verse 13 we have the same wording of 'dwell' and 'leave' with the husband as the unbeliever. To leave, divorce except for adultery/fornication is wrong.

But what if the unbelieving one separates? He leaves and abandons. V15 "But if the unbelieving partner desires to separate, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound..." Here is the passage on so-called 'malicious desertion'. Divorce in the sense of the active getting rid of a spouse, putting away, loosing is still sin. But Paul says if one leaves, separates, ceases to dwell with, then it is a fait accompli that the one left has been divorced and need not be enslaved. The partner left can remarry and is not bound to remain single.

Our Lord spoke of the action of putting away. Paul likewise spoke of the action of leaving as always wrong, unless as the Lord said 'except for fornication'. But here in I. Cor. 7 it is one who has been left and what is he or she to do? The brother or sister who is left is not under bondage. In I. Cor. 7 we are discussing in verse 15 not one who precipitates the action of divorce but one who is left and must face the reality of being single again in fact. Divorce here when we speak of it is not putting away but acknowledging the fact.

## II Refutation of Error on Malicious Desertion Interpretation

To answer the question of the essay: 1. If one partner has committed adultery, then the other may obtain a divorce. 2. If one partner has been abandoned, the one left may remarry without sinning.

### A. Something New

If there are any among us who have taken the hook, may the Spirit bring them as well as all of us to a proper understanding of I. Cor. 7 that we may speak to the

world as with one voice on what God says.

Let's get the end-view first off of letting the circumstances or situation dictate doctrine. Joseph Fletcher who coined the term 'situation ethics' writes, The new morality, in short, subordinates principles to circumstances, the general to the particular, and forces the 'natural' and the 'scriptural' to give way to the personal and the actual.

And then listen to him expound on the 'it is wrong but' hypothesis which becomes in the end 'it is not wrong', 'it is an exception to the rule'.

I think there are no normative moral principles whatsoever which are intrinsically valid or universally obliging. I would contend that we may not absolutize the norms of human conduct or, if you like theological rhetoric, we may not make idols of any finite and relative rules of life. Whether we ought to follow a moral principle or not would, I contend, always depend upon the situation. This is, of course, a reasonably straightforward statement of ethical relativity. If we are, as I would want to reason, obliged in conscience sometimes to tell white lies, as we often call them, then in conscience we might be obliged sometimes to engage in white thefts and white fornications and white killings and white breakings of promises and the like.

This is merely to stress the end result of abandoning the proper scriptural position on morality.

#### B. Some Have Said

“The most direct form of malicious desertion is local separation. It is desertion when a husband or wife moves out of the house, literally deserts living under the same roof with the other...The Greek word that is used in I. Corinthians 7:15, however, does not refer only to local separation. (Cf its use, for examples, in Rom. 8:35 and Heb. 7:26.) Its meaning is to separate, divide, part, in whatever way this occurs. Here it would refer to a desertion of the marriage vow in whatever way this comes into evidence.

Permanent refusal of sexual intercourse is a departure from the marriage promise. Such refusal thus constitutes another form of malicious desertion. However, if illness, incarceration, reasons beyond the person's control, force cessation of intercourse, this cannot be considered desertion, even if the illness, e.g., results in sexual intercourse ceasing for the remainder of the spouse's life. Persistent actions that make life together in the same home impossible are another form of malicious desertion. The husband who resorts to physical violence, endangering the life of his wife and family, who maliciously continues to refuse

support is thereby deserting his marriage promise.”

This position hinges as they state it on the word 'depart, separate'. Of this word they say that 'here it would refer to a desertion of the marriage vow in whatever way this comes into evidence'. How” When” Why? What evidence is there for this? They cite the following as examples of malicious desertion of the marriage responsibilities that one promised in the marriage vows”

permanent refusal of sexual intercourse

persistent actions that make life together in the same home impossible

- a husband who threatens his wife
- a husband who resorts to physical violence
- one who maliciously continues to refuse support

It is not surprising that with the definition there are others who have added to this list of deserting responsibilities which allow one to get a divorce.

“...the out and out prevention of any pregnancy, most notably done by the use of 'the pill' today, does deprive the couple of a part of what the marriage vow leads one to expect. One of the purposes of marriage is the propagation of the human race; the begetting, bearing, birth and rearing of children. God commanded the spouses to be fruitful and to multiply. Thus in marriage the partners are given to expect the joys of parenthood. The prevention of pregnancy, persistently and maliciously done, deprives one or the other or both of this joy. Would not the prevention of pregnancy, then, be a desertion of at least a part of the marriage vow? And would not the same be true of abortion?...Thus, abortion, consistently resorted to and without good cause, would also be an evil desertion of the marriage contract.”

What you can see developing is a Pandora's Box with this definition of deserting the marriage vows or contract in this word that we translate depart or separate. Does Scripture itself tell us that that word as used in I. Cor. 7:15 warrant such an interpretation.

### C. The Word, the Context, the Clear and Obvious Sense

“To gain a complete picture of what Scripture says about divorce, those passages having a bearing on it need to be studied with care. They must not be made to say less, or more, than they are intended to say. Care must be exercised lest in translation they appear to say something different from what is conveyed through the original Greek in the New Testament.”

Practice should not dictate doctrine.

Some zero in on the word 'separate or depart'. This is in verse 15 of chapter seven. But what about 'to dwell or live with' in Verse 12-13. It is my contention that the dwelling in verses 12-13 are in direct juxtaposition to separate in verse 15. If the unbeliever consents to dwell as opposed to the unbeliever separating or departing. In verses 12-13 we have the injunction to the believing spouse to not leave. Then in verse 15 what do you think the depart or separate means?

In the context of these verses addressed to those married to an unbeliever if dwell and leave are talking about a physical presence then why isn't separate also referring to the same? Or to put it another way, as some have said, let us change the dwell to mean continue to uphold marital vows and leave to mean abandon marital vows. It would really be a twisting of the clear Word and a forcing of the context as well as the words dwell and leave. Paul warns the believer not to leave. He then in verse 15 makes the assumption that the unbeliever may just decide to leave. In the end of this section of chapter seven he comes back to what the Lord said, I Cor. 7:39 "A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives." If the unbelieving spouse leaves, then he has divorced his wife and she is not bound.

Let's return to the word that so much hangs on. This same word for separate is used elsewhere in this chapter besides verse 15. Listen to how some explain the word for separate used in verses 10-11:

St. Paul addresses himself to the subject of desertion in I. Corinthians 7. He points out that the Lord has given the command: 'Let not the wife depart from her husband' (I Cor. 7:10). That is the way it should be among Christian spouses. If, however, she departs, he advises her to remain unmarried or to be reconciled. He does not want a Christian to make the separation permanent.

If two Christians in their marriage find themselves at odds with one another, quarreling and unable to live together in peace, the solution may be separation, not however one that is permanent as in a divorce, not one in which either married another, which makes the separation permanent. The hope is that their living apart will make them realize the need they have for one another so that a reconciliation can come about.

So, some say in verses 10-11 the separation mentioned is a physical one. But in verse 15- not so, 'it does not refer only to local separation'.

In vv.10-11 the word is used in connection with the married. In v. 15 still it is used in connection with the married except in this case it is with mixed marriages, that is believer/unbeliever marriages. But some see more of a difference than that.

They refer to two examples of the use of the word separate in Scripture showing that it can mean other than a local separation. Romans 8:35 “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?...” Hebrews 7:26 “For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners...”

A very selective use of passages. The word is found in Scripture as following: (the pertinent word is underlined)

Romans 8:35,39 “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?...nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Hebrews 7:26 “For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy... separated from sinners...”

Matthew 9:6 “they are no longer two but one. What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder.”

Mark 10:9 (parallel reference to Mt. 19:6)

Acts 1:4 “And while staying with them he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait...”

Acts. 18:1,2 “After this he left Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, lately come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome...”

Acts 15:39 “And there arose a sharp contention so that they separated from each other;...”

Philemon 15 “Perhaps this is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back for ever.”

I Corinthians 7:10,11,15

There you have all the reference in Scripture using this word. In the I Corinthians reference it is variously translated 'leaves' in NASB and NIV; 'separate' in RSV, 'departs' in KJV; 'sich scheiden' in Luther's. The root word for the verb is 'apart'.

These passages and the root of the word indicate that the primary meaning is a separation this is physical.

## CONCLUSION

If there is not a clear and definitive reason to take 'separate' in other than a physical separation sense then it is physical because:

1. The root of the verb is 'apart'.
2. The preponderance of passages indicates the primary sense of physical separation.
3. The context dictates it with the parallel use of 'dwell' and 'leave',
4. The clear and obvious sense of the passage indicates it,



5. And if it were otherwise there begins to be a contradiction with our Lord's 'except' statement on divorce which is crystal clear.

The only reason to take the word in a more figurative sense is because we are facing a mounting divorce rate and our doctrine is being challenged everyday with 'what shall we do in practice'. If in the course of this essay questions have arisen, may the Lord grant us scriptural answers. May the Lord give us all a good grasp of principles of interpretation of Scripture, above all letting Scripture interpret Scripture. If we once abandon the divine standard of morality and make our own, it becomes a sliding scale with ever-widening permissibility.