

Billingslyism, a Response – Who Has Fallen From Grace?

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Introduction

In order to please God, the doctrine of Christ must ever control our desires. Conversely, men behave exceedingly dangerously when desire becomes the father of their doctrine. This very phenomenon is apparent in the several attempts that have been made in recent years to escape the restrictive nature of Jesus' words in Matthew 19:9 relating to marriage, divorce, and remarriage: “And I say unto you, 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.”¹ The attentive apostles obviously recognized the serious import of His words immediately, suggesting, “If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry” (v. 10).

The lengths to which men will go in their efforts to eliminate the force of the Lord's teaching in this passage seem to have no end, either in number or extreme. One of these extreme efforts affirms that the four Gospel accounts—except for a bare smidgen of each—are all merely a part of the Old Testament.

The Principal Proponent and His Assertions

I was first introduced to this sort of “reasoning” as a very young preacher in 1961 when I heard of a brother who alleged that only the teachings of Christ that the inspired writers repeated after Pentecost were binding on us. He argued that, since the teaching of Matthew 5:31–32 and 19:9 is not repeated/quoted in Acts through Revelation, it does not apply to us. I deemed this an extreme and erroneous assertion at the time and still do.

The outspoken advocate of such teaching among us in recent years has been (and is) an apostate brother by the name of Dan Billingsly, but, as already noted, it is by no means original with him. I engaged him in an oral debate in 1986 on a related issue—whether or not alien sinners are amenable to all of the law of Christ (I affirmed that they are, and he affirmed that they are amenable to none of it except the “first principles”).² One thing I emphasized in our debate was that novel doctrine always requires the invention of novel terminology. With little effort I listed thirty-five novel expressions (requiring two charts) he had liberally sprinkled throughout his sermons and articles over the three or four years leading up to our debate. (These included “covenant sin,” “non-covenant child of God,” “covenant church of salvation,” et al., but my favorite was “covenant repentance to covenant Jews for covenant restoration for those who were already covenant children of God.”)

So far as I know, he did not at that time deny that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are part of the New Testament. His affirmation that the alien sinner is not accountable to the law of Christ implied that the non-Christian would thereby be exempted from Jesus' teaching on marriage, divorce, and remarriage, but he never argued his case on the basis that Matthew is not part of the New Testament. I therefore inferred that at that time he correctly considered Matthew 5:31–32 and 19:9 to be a part of the law of Christ, but per the doctrine of the late James D. Bales, that it applies only to Christians.

My, how he has “progressed” through the years! Apparently, that which he affirmed in our debate was merely a “stepping stone” toward his present passionate position. He is not merely involved in a false doctrine, but in a maze of doctrines that he has developed into an entire system of theology. Like the premillennialist who seems to see the “rapture” and a literal one thousand-year reign of Christ on earth in almost every verse, and the AD 70 adherent who sees eschatology in every passage, Billingsly views every verse through his warped covenant-tinted glasses.

For the past several years his be-all, end-all hobby has been that all but a tiny portion of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John belong in the **Old** Testament rather than the **New** Testament. In a desperate effort to advance his novel distinction between the Biblical Testaments, Billingsly has at various times mailed out a small folder which, in effect, is a new “title page” for the New Testament. He tells recipients to place his folder (which includes many of his covenant theology notes, of course) between Acts 1 and Acts 2 so that they may be properly informed and duly reminded of his amazing discovery.

However, he is inconsistent to place this bogus “title page” after Acts 1. Remember, to hear him tell it, every word Jesus spoke before He died is part of the Old Testament. Billingsly must therefore identify the last word the Lord uttered on the cross as the end of the Old Testament. This word is found in Matthew 27:50 in Matthew's account. Verse 51 then becomes the first word of the New Testament (and so with the other Gospel accounts). Obviously, Billingsly should place his new “title page” **between verses 50 and 51 of Matthew 27**, and in like places in Mark, Luke, and John. It would be simpler if he would just publish a new Bible that would incorporate his brilliant division of the covenants. If the Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons can produce their own Bible versions that incorporate their peculiar theologies, why should not Dan Billingsly?

As his doctrine has evolved, so has his terminology. In keeping with his system of theology, he has come up with an abbreviation—*MMLJBC*. He repeats this strange abbreviation twenty-four times in three small pages of text in one of his brochures, which brochure urges people to buy his 465-page “True New Testament of Jesus Christ.” He understands (correctly) that the New Testament

went into effect and the Old Testament lost its authority in the same act—the death of our Lord (Col. 2:14; Heb. 10:9–10). Since the story of the cross and Jesus’ words and actions on earth thereafter consume the final portions of each of the Gospel accounts, Billingsly is forced to include them in the New Testament. To avoid having to laboriously write out *Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—before the cross*, to which he so frequently refers, he has invented his novel abbreviation, *MMLJBC*.

By assigning the Gospel accounts to the Old Testament almost in their entirety, he conveniently exempts everyone who has been born since the cross (saint and sinner alike) from the Lord’s restrictions on marriage, divorce, and remarriage (along with all else that He taught before the cross). This is an extreme case of “throwing the baby out with the bath water.” He has engaged in at least four oral debates since 1993 in which he has denied that Matthew 19:9 is New Testament teaching based on his assertion that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are Old rather than New Testament legislation. He is constantly challenging others to debate him, and his obsession with this doctrinal aberration has dominated both his preaching and his writing for several years.

How Does Billingsly’s Theology Relate To “Falling From Grace”?

In what way does the theology described above relate to falling from grace? If Billingsly were correct in claiming that substantially all of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are part of the Law of Moses, then we must not submit ourselves to any of Jesus’ teachings before the cross. Thus the great bulk of what the Lord taught personally is as inapplicable to those who have lived since the cross as any other parts of that Law (e.g., the priesthood, the sacrifices, the feasts, the jubilee years, et al.). According to Billingsly, the Christ nailed to His cross all of His own teachings delivered before His crucifixion (Col. 2:14). These teachings include Matthew 5:31–32 and 19:9 and their parallels, of course.

Again, if Billingsly were correct, then, on the basis of Galatians 5:4, one who places himself under or seeks to enforce Jesus’ teaching on marriage, divorce, and remarriage has “fallen from grace”: “Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace.” In the brochure that he loads so heavily with his novel acronym (*MMLJBC*), Billingsly argues as follows: “It [i.e., Billingsly’s doctrine] means that a New Testament Christian cannot use *MMLJBC* as New Testament doctrine without ‘falling’ from New Testament ‘grace’ (Gal. 5:4). It means that a Christian cannot serve Christ by keeping the Law of Moses!”

To Billingsly, if one holds that Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 (and their parallels in Mark and Luke) apply to anyone after the cross, he has not only fallen from grace, but he is a Roman Catholic-influenced “traditionalist.” Shortly before our Annual Denton Lectures in 2002, He widely

distributed an “open letter” addressed principally to me. In the letter, among other things, he generously offered his services as a speaker, humbly describing himself as “a faithful gospel preacher with the real New Testament doctrine on marriage, divorce and remarriage.” Among other things, he stated: “If Andrew Connally could speak from hell to your 2002 lectureship, he would certainly set you straight for he now knows the penalty for lying about New Testament doctrine and brethren in the new covenant.” Below, taken from the same letter, is a sample of his attitude toward those who believe and teach that Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5:31–32 and 19:9 apply to men today:

If Dub McClish and his clan of “traditional” preachers were “all mouth” they could not preach the New Testament “truth” on marriage, divorce and remarriage—because they are “tongue-tied” by the false teaching of the father of all error and sin. Dub attempts to pass himself and his work off as “conservative”—but in fact Dub takes as much liberty with the Scriptures as the whole of the sectarian world. Dub is the epitome of the ultra liberal....

There can be no doubt about it—he believes that my “clan of ‘traditional’ preachers” and I, and, I suppose, any who agree with us rascals, are all “fallen from grace.” I am confident that many who will read these words will be surprised to learn that they have fallen from grace because they teach and obey what the Lord taught on marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

Billingsly’s Principal Assertions

In Billingslyism we are not dealing merely with a relatively “harmless” doctrinal error or two, but with a system of error that contains a strange and sometimes confusing, convoluted combination of Truth and error. When embraced, this system fundamentally alters one’s entire study and application of Scripture. Not only so, but Billingsly’s theology will also lead one to disregard some of the plainest obligations the Lord lays upon mankind (i.e., marital and sexual purity), which, if violated, will doom one to Hell. Billingslyism encourages men and women who are living in adultery to continue doing so. Further, it encourages those who have no Scriptural eligibility to marry to do so anyway, thus leading to adultery and/or fornication. Paul made it clear that practicing adulterers and/or fornicators will not be in Heaven:

Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God (1 Cor. 6:9–11).

Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:19–21).

In his effort to reclassify and restructure the books and teaching which belong to the Old and New Testaments, respectively, Billingsly engages in partial-truth, plausible-sounding rhetoric. His principal assertions are as follows:

1. Jesus was the last Old Testament prophet, and His message was only for the Jews.
2. Jesus lived and died under the Old Testament.
3. Jesus did not teach anything new, but merely taught the true meaning of Moses and the prophets.
4. Jesus did not contrast His teaching with the teaching of the law, but with that of the rabbis.
5. No writer or preacher after Pentecost ever quoted from the things Jesus taught before His death.
6. Matthew 19:9 is merely a restatement of the legislation in Deuteronomy 24:1.

Responses To This Theological System

My responses to the above-listed assertions will be by number, enabling the reader to follow them more readily.

Assertion 1: It is true that Jesus was a prophet, that He was the last prophet to live and preach while the Old Testament was in effect, and that He was sent to declare the message He preached during His earthly life only to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mat. 15:24). However, these facts in no way imply what Billingsly would have them to—that all of His teaching was merely a repetition of the law and/or that none of it was prospective in nature, both in regard to time and to those who would be affected by it. Jesus not only preached that the coming of the kingdom/church was imminent (Mat. 4:17; 16:18–19, 28; Mark 9:1; et al.). He also taught various things that were not part of the Law of Moses, but were part of His Law that would become effective when His kingdom was established (Luke 22:19–20, 29–30; John 4:23–24; et al.). He taught that the kingdom would be taken from the Jews and given to others (Mat. 21:43) and that His kingdom would contain Gentiles and well as Jews (John 10:16).

Assertion 2: It is true that Jesus was born and died under the Law of Moses (Gal. 4:4; Col. 2:14). This does not at all imply, however, that He only taught (as recorded in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) the Law of Moses, and that therefore all of that which He taught was rendered impotent and inapplicable with His death on the cross, as Billingsly claims.

Assertion 3: It is true that Jesus always upheld and obeyed the Law of Moses. He was the only one who ever perfectly did so and was thereby sinless (Heb. 4:15). Only because of His perfectly sinless life could He, as our High Priest, offer His blood as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of all mankind—“the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29; Heb. 7:26–27). Further, He constantly demonstrated His unqualified respect for the law—not only by His obedience,

but also by His words. Since He and His contemporaries were still living while the law was in force, He taught them to obey it without fail (Mat. 5:17–19; 19:17; 23:1–3; Luke 17:14; et al.). He certainly taught and applied the Law correctly.

However, this does not at all imply that He taught no new principles or doctrines in preparation for the coming kingdom, which would become effective when the Law was annulled. I have already called attention to some of these New Testament doctrines (see Assertion 1 above), and there are many, many more. By observation of the context of His teachings, plus the very wording of those teachings in some cases, one may determine whether the Lord was enjoining obedience to the Law or was issuing new law that would become effective after the passing of the Law of Moses.

Assertion 4: It is true that the Lord sometimes called attention to the abuse and misapplication of the Law by the Jewish leaders of His time. By their tradition, the rulers of the synagogue forbade Jesus to heal on the Sabbath, but He demonstrated that correct reasoning concerning the Law proved that it was lawful (Mat. 12:9–13). He rebuked the Pharisees and scribes for their traditions, which they exalted above the Law (15:1–6). To the resurrection-denying Sadducees, Jesus said, “Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures...” (22:29). Numerous other similar instances exist. In such circumstances the context always make clear that He is rebuking and correcting their traditions, and, by contrast, is teaching them the meaning of the Law.

However, recognition of this practice does not at all imply that the Lord never contrasted His own new teaching with that which Moses taught. A favorite assertion of Billingsly is that, in His Sermon on the Mount, the Lord merely corrected rabbinical tradition and gave a true exposition of the Law of Moses in His *but I say unto you* statements (Mat. 5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44).

Unfortunately, faithful brethren who oppose Billingslyism have at times in all innocence and without thinking it through, fallen into the trap of making similar assertions in their exposition of these passages. If Jesus merely corrected rabbinical abuses of the law and correctly stated the law in Matthew 5, then Billingsly is right in his contention that these things were nailed to the cross and they do not apply to us today. But are we ready for the consequences of this view of the matter? Matthew 5:31–32 is one of the statements in this sermon: “But I say unto you, that everyone that putteth away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, maketh her an adulteress: and whosoever shall marry her when she is put away committeth adultery.” Again, are we ready to concede this passage to Moses, as Billingsly argues?

He reasons as follows: (1) In Matthew 5:31–32 Jesus was only teaching the true meaning of Moses' statement in Deuteronomy 24:1–2. (2) Matthew 19:9 is equivalent to Matthew 5:31–32, and is

also merely a declaration of the meaning of Deuteronomy 24:1–2. (3) Since both passages are a part of the Law of Moses (a la Billingsly) and since the Law ended at the cross, these teachings have not applied to anyone since the cross. Please note: One cannot consistently hold Jesus' statements of contrast in Matthew 5 to be responses to rabbinic tradition (and thus accurate statements of the law) and at the same time continue to apply His statements to those who have lived since the Law was abrogated. **If they were merely Mosaic Law, Billingsly is right—they were nailed to the cross!**

However, Jesus was **not** quoting rabbis when He repeatedly said, “Ye have heard that it was said to them of old time...” He was quoting in each case from the Law of Moses (either its actual words or its implications). Therefore, in each case, when He said, “But I say unto you,” He was giving His own new teaching on the subjects He introduced from the Law—teaching which was far superior to that found in the Law and which was given in anticipation of the imminent kingdom. The multitude that heard Him realized that He had given them His new teaching, which is the reason they were astonished at His bold assertion of authority (Mat. 7:28–29). Thus Jesus' teachings in this Master Sermon (including His legislation concerning marriage, divorce, and remarriage) were/are a part of His own new doctrine. They belong to the Christian age and all men are yet amenable to them.

Assertion 5: It is as misleading as it is absurd (because it is false) to claim that no inspired writer or preacher ever quoted any of the words of the Lord after Pentecost. This averment is supposed to be some sort of “proof” that none of the teachings of our Lord, issued during His earthly life, are binding on men who have lived since His death. Even if it were true, it would not prove Billingsly's case. What a strange religion if this were so: The followers and devotees of the Founder of their religion must discard everything He taught during His life! But it is not so. Paul (1 Tim. 5:18) quoted a statement the Lord made (Luke 10:7). This mischievous little quibble is quickly disposed of by merely noticing that every word our Lord taught (as recorded by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) was written many years **after** Pentecost!

Assertion 6: As in the Sermon on the Mount, so it is claimed that in Matthew 19:9 Jesus merely corrected the traditional error of the rabbis and stated the real meaning of the law. Did Jesus merely restate and/or clarify Deuteronomy 24:1–2 in Matthew 19:9? Does Matthew 19:9 reflect the teaching of Moses at all? Note the following:

- a. Jesus first quoted God's ideal law for marriage “from the beginning” (which did not include divorce) to the hypocritical Pharisees (Mat. 19:4–6 [Gen. 1:27; 2:24]). In an effort to align Moses against the Lord so as to discredit Him, they then cited Moses' concession, which allowed divorce (Mat. 19:7; Deu. 24:1). But Jesus responded that the real ground of divorce Moses allowed was the husbands'

“hardness of heart” (Mat. 19:8). Immediately, Jesus uttered the teaching of our verse 9, giving fornication as the only allowable ground for divorce and remarriage, introducing it with the phrase, *And I say unto you*. Notice that this is almost identical to the phrase He used six times in Matthew 5 to introduce His own new teaching—which, as I have indicated, was **in contrast** with, not a restatement or clarification of, the Law of Moses. I submit that He is doing the very same thing in Matthew 19:9.

b. Billingsly argues, however, that Deuteronomy 24:1 allowed a husband to divorce his wife when he found “some uncleanness” (“some unseemly thing,” ASV) in her and that the Lord defines this “uncleanness” or “unseemliness” as “fornication” in Matthew 19:9. However, at least two considerations falsify this claim:

- 1) The penalty for fornication and/or adultery under the Law had already been repeatedly and clearly stipulated by Moses—it was not divorce, but death (Lev. 20:10; Deu. 22:13–22). Thus the “unseemly thing” in Deuteronomy 24:1–2 was not fornication.
- 2) The Hebrew terms (*dabar ervah*), translated “some unseemly thing,” appear 54 times in the Old Testament and refer to something **indistinct** in every case, although in some cases context determines specific meaning. Significantly, however, they are never rendered *fornication*. There are several Hebrew words that distinctly mean “fornication” and/or “adultery,” but Moses did not use one of these in Deuteronomy 24:1–2. Does it not seem strange that if Moses had intended to refer to fornication in this passage he would **avoid** a word that so specified and **employ** a nonspecific term? Further, when the Septuagint translators brought the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek, they never rendered *dabar ervah* as “fornication” or “adultery.”³

If Matthew 19:9 is merely a clarification of Moses’ Law, it is exceedingly strange that the Law existed for fifteen centuries without such clarification and that the clarification was given only a matter of months before it was annulled with the rest of the Law! Jesus was not teaching Old Testament Law in Matthew 19:9, but His own doctrine that would prevail in the Christian age, soon to begin. **It has prevailed ever since.**

Conclusion

Those who compiled and published our familiar editions of the Bible, identifying the respective books of the Old and New Testaments, did so correctly. If most of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were part of the Old Testament, surely the first-century Jews would have so recognized them and added them to their Bible. They, of course, did not. Jesus most certainly exalted the Law of Moses and ever insisted that His Jewish contemporaries scrupulously keep it. Nevertheless, at the same

time He was teaching new principle and Law that would soon (and did) become effective when the Law of Moses was rendered impotent by Jesus' death. The Lord's Transfiguration narrative is significant on this point (Mat. 17:5 and parallels). When Moses and Elijah were taken back to their Hadean resting places, God thundered from Heaven: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him." Were the Words of His Son to be heard only for the brief balance of His life on earth? This same theme is repeated in the beautiful prologue of the Hebrews epistle: "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds" (Heb. 1:1–2).

All four of the accounts of His life and teaching contain numerous statements that can and do belong to His New Testament. It was to such new doctrines that Jesus referred when He told the apostles to teach those whom they would baptize **after** the cross "to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you" (note the past tense, i.e., "during my life on earth"—obviously, **before** the cross) (Mat. 28:19–20). Further, when the Lord sent the Holy Spirit upon the apostles, one of His functions was to bring to their remembrance all that Christ had taught them (John 14:26). What would the practical value of this power be if all of the pre-Calvary doctrine of Jesus were part of Moses' Law?

The "great salvation" was first "spoken through the Lord" (Heb. 2:3). When did He do this, except through the teachings that would be in His New Testament—which teachings He delivered while He walked the dusty roads of Galilee and Judea in His earthly sojourn? We will someday be judged by the words which Christ spoke (John 12:48). This could not possibly refer to what He taught if all He did was merely to clarify and restate the Law of Moses, per Billingslyism.

The U.S. Constitution was composed and prepared before it was ratified, adopted, and became law, **in prospect** of its becoming law. In the very nature of the case this had to be so; otherwise there would have been nothing to ratify and adopt. A person's will becomes a legally binding instrument when he dies, but it must be prepared **before his death**. So with the Will of Christ (Heb. 9:16–17). He prepared and declared various elements of His new and superior Will (the New Testament) **before His death**, in view of their enactment **upon His death** (8:6).

Matthew 5:31–32 and 19:9 were not idle or useless legislation—they had to be in force in some time frame, in some period or age of time. I have demonstrated that they were not in force as a restatement or clarification of the Law of Moses. **They were distinctly new legislation**. Therefore, they did not apply during the Mosaical Age. They certainly will not apply in Heaven, for marriage does not exist in the realm of spirits (Mark 12:25). The only age in which this legislation **could** apply is the

Christian Age, but Billingsly denies that they apply now. If he is right, these crucial passages were in force for only the last few months of Jesus' life on earth!

Matthew 5:31–32 and 19:9 are part of Jesus' new legislation, delivered in anticipation of the passing of the Mosaical system and the inauguration of His “new and living way” (Heb. 10:20), soon to be accomplished in His death. They are a part of the New Testament, as are the entire books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. All men who have lived since the death of Christ are amenable to Christ's law concerning marriage, divorce, and remarriage; all will be judged by His doctrine in the Last Day (John 12:48).

It is not those who correctly teach that we are amenable to Jesus' teaching on marriage, divorce, and remarriage who have fallen from grace. Rather, it is such men as Dan Billingsly, who, by their doctrine, seek to release men from laws God has bound. In their apostasy they are “fallen from grace.”

Endnotes

1. All Scripture quotations are from the King James Version unless otherwise indicated.
2. Dub McClish and Dan Billingsly, *The McClish-Billingsly Debate* (Denton, TX: Valid Pub., Inc., 1986).
3. For full documentation of the relevant word studies, see *The Tarbet-Billingsly Debate* (Denison, TX: Don Tarbet [215 W. Sears, Denison, TX 75020], 1997) and Mac Deaver, *Studies in Matthew*, ed. Dub McClish (Denton, TX: Valid Pub., Inc., 1996), pp. 545–64.

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