

Is Matthew 19:9 A Part of the Law of Christ?

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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 for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and he that marrieth her when she is put away committeth adultery. (Mat. 19:9)

The apostles obviously recognized the severity of His words immediately, suggesting that it might therefore be better not to marry (v. 10). The lengths to which men will go in their efforts to eliminate the import and application 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 are all merely a part of the Old Testament. The assertion is then made that since the law was nailed to the cross by and with Christ (Col. 2:14), all that the Savior taught while he was on earth (including Mat. 19:9, of course) was done away and has not applied to anyone since that time.

The Principal Proponent and His Assertions

I was first introduced to this sort of "reasoning" in 1961 when I heard of a brother who was teaching that only the teachings of Christ which the inspired writers repeated after Pentecost were binding on us. Since Matthew 19:9 is not 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) 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 the alien sinner is amenable to the law of Christ (which he denied and I affirmed).¹ So far as I know he did not at that time deny the inclusion of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in 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. I therefore inferred from his argumentation in our debate that he correctly considered Matthew 19:9 to be a part of the law of Christ.

My, how he has “progressed” through the years. Apparently, that which he affirmed in our debate was merely a “steppingstone” toward his present position. Now, by getting rid of the Gospel accounts in their entirety, he thereby exempts everyone (saint and sinner alike) from the Lord’s restrictions on marriage, divorce, and remarriage (along with all else that He taught before the cross). He has engaged at least three brethren in oral debates since 1993 in which he has denied that Matthew 19:9 is New Testament teaching on the basis that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are a part of the Old rather than the New Testament. 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.

In his effort to restructure the books and teaching which belong to the Old and New Testaments, respectively, he makes the following principal assertions:²

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 Mosaic legislation in Deuteronomy 24:1-2.

When a man taketh a wife, and marrieth her, then it shall be, if she find no favor in his eyes, because he hath found some unseemly thing in her, that he shall 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*.

A Response to This Theological System

We are not dealing merely with a relatively harmless doctrinal error or two, but with a system of error that, when embraced, fundamentally alters one’s entire study and application of Scripture. Thus, as with the errors of the A.D. 70 and dispensational premillennial contentions, the errors of Billingsism constitute a distinct theological system. As with every aberrant system

of theology, so with this one – it contains a strange and sometimes confusing, convoluted combination of truth and error.

I will now respond to the above-listed assertions by number, so as to make it convenient for the reader to follow.

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, this in no way implies what Billingsly would have it to – that all of His teaching was merely a repetition of the law or that none of it was prospective in nature, both in regard to time and to those who would be affected by it. He not only preached that the coming of the kingdom/ church was imminent (Mat. 4:17; 16:18–19, 28; et al.), but He taught certain things that were not part of the law of Moses, but were part of His law which 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).
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.
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” (Heb. 7:26–27; John 1:29). Further, He constantly demonstrated His unqualified respect for the law – not only by His obedience but 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, besides the law, He taught no new principles or doctrines in preparation for the coming kingdom and which would become effective when the law was annulled. I have already called attention to some of these New Testament doctrines (see item 1 above), and there are many, many more. By observation of the context of His teachings, plus the very wording of those teachings, 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.
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). There are numerous other such

instances. In such circumstances it is always made 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 was taught by Moses. 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). (Sometimes in all innocence and without thinking it through, faithful brethren who oppose Billingslyism fall into the trap of actually agreeing with him in their exposition of these passages.) If Jesus was merely correcting rabbinical abuses of the law and correctly stating 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 5:32 is one of the statements in this context: “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.” Are we ready to concede this passage to Moses, as Billingsly argues? He reasons as follows: (1) In Matthew 5:32 Jesus was only teaching the true meaning of Moses' statement in Deuteronomy 24:1-2. (2) Matthew 19:9 is equivalent to Matthew 5:32, and is also merely a declaration of the meaning of Deuteronomy 24:1-2. (3) Since both of these passages are a part of the Law of Moses 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. The fact of the matter is that 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 the implication of them). 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 who heard Him realized that He gave them His teaching, and they were astonished at His bold assertion of authority (Mat. 7:28-29). Thus Jesus' teaching in this Master Sermon (including His legislation concerning marriage, divorce, and remarriage) were a part of His own new doctrine which belongs to the Christian age and to which all men are yet amenable.

5. It is utterly misleading (because it is false) to claim that no inspired writer or preacher ever quoted any of the words of the Lord after Pentecost. This is supposed to be some sort of proof that none of the teachings of our Lord which He issued during His earthly life are binding on men who have lived since His death. 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. 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.

6. As in the Sermon on the Mount, so it is claimed that in Matthew 19:9 Jesus is merely correcting the traditional error of the rabbis and stating 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 the Mosaic concession which allowed divorce (Mat. 19:7; Deut. 24:1). But Jesus responded that the real ground of divorce allowed by Moses 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 the identical phrase He used six times in Matthew 5 to introduce His own new teaching which was in contrast with the law of Moses. I submit that He is doing the very same thing in Matthew 19:9.
 - b. Some argue, however, that Deuteronomy 24:1 allowed a husband to divorce his wife when he found “some unseemly thing” (ASV; “some uncleanness,” KJV) in her and that the Lord defines this unseemliness or uncleanness as “fornication” in Matthew 19:9. However, there are at least two considerations that falsify this claim: (a) 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; Deut. 22:13–22). Thus the “unseemly thing” in Deuteronomy 24:1–2 was not sexual impurity. (b) The Hebrew terms translated “some unseemly thing” (*dabar ervah*) 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, it is 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 in favor of a very general 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, but His own doctrine that would prevail in the Christian age, soon to begin.

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. 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 which would soon (and did) become effective when the Law of Moses was rendered impotent by His death. 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 all of the disciples they made “to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you” (Mat. 28:19–20). One of the functions of the Holy Spirit when the Lord sent Him upon the apostles was to bring to their remembrance all that Christ had taught them (John 14:26).

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 has spoken (John 12:48). This could not possibly refer to what He taught if all He did was 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 determined and prepared before 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 (Heb. 8:6).

Matthew 19:9 was not idle or useless legislation – it had to be in force in some time frame, in some period or age of time. I have demonstrated that it was not in force as a restatement or clarification of the law of Moses. It was distinctly new legislation. Therefore, it did not apply during the Mosaic Age. It certainly will not apply in the age of eternity, for marriage does not exist in the realm of spirits (Mark 12:25). The only age remaining in which it could apply is the Christian Age. It was part of Jesus’ new legislation, delivered in anticipation of the passing of the Mosaic system and the inauguration of His “new and living way” (Heb. 10:20) soon to be accomplished in His death. Matthew 19:9 is 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 this law in the Last Day (John 12:48).

Endnotes

1. *The McClish-Billingsly Debate* (Denton, TX: Valid Pub., Inc., 1986).
2. In a desperate effort to advance his novel distinction between the Biblical Testaments, brother Billingsly constantly mails out a small folder, which is, in effect, a new "title page" for the New Testament. This folder explains that the New Testament actually begins at Acts 2 and instructs its recipients to insert it in their Bibles between Acts 1 and 2 so that they may be properly informed and duly reminded of his amazing discovery.
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. 545-564.

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