

Christ Confronted Error About Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

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Introduction

To shallow Bible students, calling Jesus Christ “the great controversialist” might appear misguided, if not blasphemous. They would propose, contrariwise, that He is the source of peace, rather than of conflict, as *controversialist* implies. No serious Bible student will deny Jesus’ close linkage with peace. Isaiah titled Him “Prince of Peace” seven centuries before He was born (9:6).¹ The angels proclaimed “peace on earth” at His birth (Luke 2:14). He is the “Lord of peace” (2 The. 3:16), and King Jesus reigns over a kingdom of peace (Rom. 14:17), which He governs by the “gospel of peace” (Eph. 6:15). He pronounces a blessing upon those who seek to make and keep peace (Mat. 5:9). His disciples are to live at peace with all men, as much as possible (Rom. 12:18). Jesus’ coming resulted in peace between Jew and Gentile (Eph. 2:14–15). All of these truths have their root in one great principle: “For God is not a God of confusion, but of peace” (1 Cor. 14:33).

Even a simpleton could hardly fail to understand that God’s way is one that seeks peace among all men and between mankind and Himself. One of the most compelling attractions of Heaven is the promise of its atmosphere of perfect, everlasting peace. However, if the peace-related facet of Jesus’ nature and of His purpose for coming into our time-bound sphere is all one sees in the Son of God, He has either quit reading too soon in the Sacred Text, or He has absorbed and/or read portions of it very selectively.

Besides His mission of peace, the Lord also warned that He came to “cast fire upon the earth” and division rather than peace (Luke 12:49, 51). When Jesus first commissioned the apostles, they were to preach the soon-to-come kingdom and to spread peace (Mat. 10:7, 13), but not peace at any price. He also cautioned them: “Think not that I came to send peace on the earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword” (v. 34). (His statement does not contradict the peace-filled motivation of His work, but His obvious meaning is, “Think not that I came **only** to send peace...”). They would thereafter see this principle at work continually in their Master’s frequent controversies with both religious and civil authorities of the time. His message was one of peace for those wise enough to imbibe it, but one of conflict for those who rejected it. The

Lord never once shrank from nor apologized for the controversy His Word engendered, nor may His disciples.

The fact that He did not run from truth-stirred controversy does not indicate that He either sought it or enjoyed it (nor do those today who are “set for the defence of the gospel” [Phi. 1:16]). He rather confronted error as a matter of duty in defense – rather than sacrifice – of principle, truth, and righteousness. The Lord must shake His head in dismay as He observes the mania over “conflict resolution” – one of the curses of our time. Liberals in the church are so fascinated with it they have created departments in their universities (e.g., Pepperdine University, Abilene Christian University) dedicated to this *how-to-be-a-successful-compromiser* field. They ought to be good at it, for they have been practicing it with error for several decades. They are basically training students in the fine art of the way to “go along in order to get along.”

This mentality in our State Department in Washington, D.C., seems willing to negotiate away almost any principle (including basic Constitutional tenets) – anything to avoid conflict with even the most lawless and threatening nations. It has seriously weakened America’s position of world leadership. Jesus undeniably did not preach His Word or do His work among men with the infamous “Rodney King” attitude: “Can’t we all just get along?”

Jesus’ Confrontation of the Pharisees

Among the subjects upon which the Lord confronted enemies of the Truth was that of marriage, divorce, and remarriage. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus issued some basic principles regarding this subject:

But I say unto you, that every one 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” (Mat. 5:32).

It may be that this statement sparked discussion among the Pharisees, prompting them to approach Jesus later with some questions about the subject:

And there came unto him Pharisees, trying him, and saying, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? And he answered and said, Have ye not read, that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh? So that they are no more two, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. They say unto him, Why then did Moses command to give a bill of divorcement, and to put her away? He saith unto them, Moses for your hardness of heart suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it hath not been so. 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. 19:3-9).

It is certain that these querists were not sincerely seeking Truth, but they apparently sought to discredit Jesus before the multitudes by arraying His doctrine against that of Moses, their revered lawgiver (v. 7). Their devious questions resulted in Jesus' reproof and rebuke of the Pharisees because of their erroneous views regarding marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

The guile-laden questions of the Pharisees indicate their liberal attitude toward divorce and remarriage, implying that they believed it **was** lawful, that is, permissible by God's law. Were the Lord on earth today, their initial question would still be altogether appropriate because it reflects the prevalent view in our nation, if not the whole world, namely, that divorce and remarriage are acceptable on almost any pretext. It is little better among a host of our brethren. Over the past few decades they have devised a dozen or more corrupt (as they are clever) "loopholes" in an effort to circumvent Jesus' statement of Divine law in Matthew 9:3-12.²

We need not wish Him here in person in order to gain His answer to this question. His definitive answer in about A.D. 30 is the same one He would give now, so let us examine it for our edification and education.

Analysis of Jesus' Answer to the Pharisees

The Lord's immediate answer to their question, "Is it lawful...?" strongly implies, "No, it is not lawful." In a later confrontation with the Sadducees, He answered their question about the resurrection with the sharp rebuke, "Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures..." (Mat. 22:29). Similarly, His response to the Pharisees' Question is a rebuke of their ignorance: "Have ye not read?" (19:4). Had they read (and correctly applied) what God had said about the matter when He created the first man and woman, they would have known better than to ask their question.

Casual Divorce Amounts to Rejection of God's Law

Jesus stated that casual and careless divorce is a violation of God's law because it rejects:

1. The authority of the Creator of man, woman, and marriage "from the beginning" (v. 4; Gen. 1:27).
2. God's explicit law, intended to govern marriage permanently: "a man [singular]...shall cleave to his wife [singular]; and the two [only the two, a man and a woman] shall become one flesh [singular]" (v. 5; Gen. 2:24) — assuming both are eligible to marry.

3. The fact that the two are joined (made one) not merely by men or by the man and woman, but by God (v. 6).
4. The fact that no man has any right to tamper with the Divine arrangement of marriage, nor can any man undo a God-made marriage by mere human declaration or legislation (v. 6)
5. The fact that this is neither a new teaching, nor a new interpretation of an old teaching, but it has been God's law from the beginning (vv. 4, 8).
6. The fact that divorce on various grounds came in by human reasoning and weakness (vv. 3, 7-8).
7. The fact that God allows one to divorce one's Scriptural mate only because of fornication by that mate (v. 9).
8. The fact that divorce and remarriage for any but the one stipulated exception of fornication makes one an adulterer (v. 9).

Jesus left no doubt in the minds of the scheming Pharisees, nor should there be any in our minds, about Divine law on divorce and remarriage.

Jesus' Boldly Asserted His Authority

As earlier mentioned, the Pharisees' strategy was to place Jesus in conflict with Moses (or at least with one of the popular rabbinical interpreters of Moses), thereby discrediting Him with the multitude (vv. 7-8). Paraphrased, they responded to Him: "You say divorce is unlawful, but Moses commanded it. Whom should we follow?" After identifying human rebellion ("hardness of heart") as the basis of Moses' concession to which they referred (Deu. 24:1-4), Jesus immediately took His stand upon God's law from the beginning, although it meant:

1. Correcting Moses, the Jews' most revered prophet and teacher.
2. Directly condemning the Jews for their "hardness of heart."
3. Contradicting the moral compromise of His time, particularly of these Pharisees (cf. Mark 6:18).
4. Calling upon His hearers to change their thinking and practice completely.
5. Arraying His authority against the Jewish judicial/legal authorities.
6. Contradicting the religious leaders of His time, including those presently questioning Him.

When we stand uncompromisingly upon the teaching of Christ on this issue, **we find ourselves in almost the identical relationship toward comparable contemporaries, including many compromising brethren.**

A Brief Analysis of Jesus' Exception

To the rule of lifetime marriage (v. 6), Jesus states an exception in verse 9, involving two elements: (1) The conditional **right** to divorce and remarry and (2) the **only Scriptural condition**

upon which God allows such. By asking their question (i.e., “May I divorce my wife and marry another on any pretext?”), the Pharisees apparently had selfish excuses in mind for doing so. This spirit prevails in our nation and has done so for decades.

It was not always so, however. Until the 1960s, divorce was almost universally stigmatized, and it was difficult to divorce one’s mate apart from the stated cause of adultery. Then the liberal social engineers did their work. Legislators followed their lead in the early 1960s by liberalizing divorce laws, the multiplication of which has steadily discouraged lifelong marriage commitment. “No fault” divorce is now almost universal. The “sexual revolution” of the late 1960s and the “Women’s Liberation” movement of the 1970s strongly contributed to abandonment of and negativism toward the Biblical concept of marriage and the home. These developments so cheapened marriage that millions of couples have adopted long-standing Hollywood “morals” and now shamelessly cohabit and breed, no more bothering to marry than brute beasts. Latest statistics indicate that almost fifty percent of babies are born to unmarried couples. The casual view of divorce and remarriage has led to a *Why bother?* attitude in this regard for the past few generations.

By contrast, Jesus gives the only Divinely authorized exception to lifetime marriage: fornication in one’s spouse. *Fornication* translates the Greek word *porneia*, the “umbrella” Greek term for every sort of sexual impurity, including harlotry, homosexuality (both male and female), bestiality, and adultery. Divorcing one’s mate for such behavior points to a basically **unselfish** reason—not in order to take up with a new mate, but to protect one’s own person and home from the corrupting influence of immorality. The Lord does not **command** divorce or remarriage in such cases, but He **allows** both divorce **and** remarriage of the innocent mate, or His words mean nothing.

Modern Attempts to Alter the Force of Jesus’ Doctrine

As mentioned above, liberals have by numerous crafty theories sought to circumvent the plain statement of Jesus on marriage, divorce, and remarriage. His teaching in this passage, either explicitly or implicitly, confronts all such false teachers and their errors. We now turn our attention to brief reviews of some of the subterfuges most frequently advanced.

“Jesus’ Teaching Applies Only to Christians”

One of these contrivances seeks to limit the application of Jesus’ doctrine only to Christians. Some assert that since Jesus’ spoke these words to Jews (God’s “covenant” people at the time), they therefore now apply only to Christians (God’s “covenant” people since Calvary).

The implication (if not the purpose) of this assertion (as absurd as it is baseless) is to allow men and women to divorce and remarry without limit **before** they obey the Gospel (i.e., become God's "covenant" people) and then **remain** with their last-married mate. However, Jesus based His dogma on God's law governing marriage **from the beginning** of man's existence (v. 4 [Gen. 1:27]; v. 5 [Gen. 2:24]). He emphasized Deity's all-time, universal, fundamental principle for marriage: **one** man, **one** woman, joined by the **one** God to become **one** flesh for life (**not** one man joined to one man, one woman joined to one woman, or one woman or man joined to a goat, incidentally). Obviously, God's statements in Genesis 1 and 2 predated by many centuries the distinction He later made between Jew and Gentile by giving His covenant/law to Israel through Moses.

Jesus also indicated the universality of His teaching by applying it to "whosoever" (Mat. 19: 9). There is no justification for limiting *whosoever* unless (or to what extent) the Lord Himself limits it (which, incidentally, He does in v. 12). Any such limitation must be restricted solely to that which He sets. In His complementary statement (Mat. 5:31-32), Jesus used *whosoever* twice and *everyone* once to emphasize the universal application of His teaching.

Another forceful indication of the universality of Jesus' marriage doctrine in the context deserves more emphasis than it has received. The disciples obviously understood the import of Jesus' words and mildly complained at their perceived strictness (v. 10). Jesus responded, "Not all men can receive this saying, but they to whom it is given" (v. 11). In other words, *whosoever* in verse 9 does have one exceptional class, which He proceeded to identify. The **only** ones Jesus excludes are eunuchs (those unable even to consummate a marriage) – whether thus born, man-made, or self-made for the kingdom's sake (v. 12). Note who are **not** excepted: **Neither Gentiles** before the cross **nor non-Christians** since the cross (i.e., "non-covenant" people). The Lord's teaching thus applies to **all others** but those He excepted, namely eunuchs; no one has the right to exclude **any others**. Whatever Jesus teaches in this passage thus applies to all mentally accountable human beings except eunuchs.

"Adultery Does Not Refer to a Physical Act of Immorality"

Others would mitigate the force of Jesus' words by defining *adultery* to mean merely repudiating the marriage contract rather than to sexual unfaithfulness to one's Scriptural mate. They argue that one can thereby abandon one's mate upon any selfish pretext and "repent" of so doing by merely saying, "I'm sorry for breaking up our marriage." Obviously, by this stratagem, they assert that one is then free to marry another. Just as obviously, this is the motive

behind such an absurdity. Those who introduced this silliness should have been laughed to scorn. Instead, some have so feverishly sought some detour around the Lord's teaching that they have adopted it, seriously argued it (even in public debate), and have split churches over it. They have also made people feel comfortable in adulterous marriages, which will cause those thus deceived — along with him who deceived them — to be lost.

Admittedly, inspired writers used *adultery* in a figurative sense. The prophets characterized Israel's idolatry and apostasy as spiritual "adultery," but even in doing so they employed graphic descriptions of the literal, physical meaning of the term (Jer. 13:27; Eze. 16:25, 32; Hos. 2:2). Similarly, James uses *adulteresses* figuratively to describe Christians who had been unfaithful to their spiritual "Husband" by their friendship with the world (Jam. 4:4). The Greek authorities universally attest that one cannot define the word *adultery* or the act of adultery in connection with literal, physical marriage apart from unlawful sexual intercourse. While adultery **demonstrates** the Scriptural basis for divorce and remarriage, the immoral act itself **constitutes** the basis.

"Adultery Is a One-time Sinful Act"

Another common ploy is the assertion that adultery in an unscriptural marriage is only a one-time act (i.e., the **first act** of copulation in the marriage), rather than a continuing behavior or state of being. Advocates then argue that those in unscriptural marriages are not thereafter committing or "living in adultery" (they even allege that it is impossible to "live in" adultery). Thus, they allege that they can continue in marital unions if they "repent" of (i.e., say they are sorry for) that initial act. This outlandish position reveals the desperation of some to mitigate the force of Jesus' teaching. Its advocates conveniently reserve this idea of "non-continuous" sin for adultery alone.

First, note that *committeth adultery* (twice stated) in Jesus' statement is a present tense form that conveys the idea of continuous or "linear action," with the force of "begins and keeps on committing adultery." The adultery of Matthew 19:9 is thus a condition, a way of life, in which one is living; **it is a forbidden union polluted by adultery**. The only way to repent of an adulterous union is to sever it and cease the intimacy it involves. Further, Colossians 3:5-7 mentions "fornication" (which includes adultery) and other sins and then says that the Colossians had formerly "**walked**" and "**lived** in these things" (cf. 1 Cor. 6:9-11; Eph. 2:1-3; emph. DM). The Bible thus indeed speaks of "living in adultery." But some argue that the separation of unscripturally married partners is "intractable" (i.e., overly inconvenient,

difficult). However, in light of Jesus' teaching (and of the eternal consequences of approaching the Judgment as an adulterer), living in — **remaining in** — an adulterous, unscriptural marriage is the "intractable" course.

"The Guilty Mate Has the Right to Remarry"

As early as 1950, the late James D. Bales set forth the concept that the fornicating spouse has the right to remarry, and the late Gus Nichols stated his agreement with it in a lecture at Harding University in 1973 (Elkins, 406). On our first Annual Denton Lectures (1982), Lewis Hale affirmed the following in one of our Discussion Forums: "The guilty party in a divorce (i.e., the fornicator), has the Scriptural right to remarry." He wrote a book in 1974 advocating this position. These brethren assert that, if the marriage is dissolved for one mate (the innocent), it must also be dissolved for both, and that if the dissolution allows one to remarry, it allows both to do so.

Champions of this contention fail to recognize the significance of Matthew 9:6: "What therefore **God** hath joined together, let not man put asunder." Every Scriptural marriage therefore involves not only two, but three persons: (1) The man, (2) the woman, and (3) God. While the fornicator is indeed no longer bound to the mate who puts him away, he is nonetheless still bound to and by the law of God concerning divorce and remarriage. Jesus' statement in Matthew 19:9 specifies to whom He grants the right to remarry, namely, the innocent spouse.

If the guilty party has the same Scriptural right to remarry as the innocent one does, fornication is thus a sin that brings the sinner both pleasure and advantage. Again, if so, **why did the Lord even bother to discuss the matter?** His words actually imply a strong **prohibition** of remarriage for the fornicating spouse. A.T. Robertson, a recognized Baptist Greek scholar, commenting on Matthew 19:9, made this very point: "Jesus by implication, as in [Mat.] 5:31, does allow remarriage of the innocent party, but not the guilty one" (25).

"God Recognizes Every Divorce and Marriage Sanctioned by Civil Law"

A cadre of otherwise conservative brethren has become rather vocal the last few years in their insistence that God honors and is bound by the decrees of civil courts in matters of divorce and marriage. Although the Lord stated that men **did/do not** have the ability or the right to sunder a man and woman whom He has joined in marriage (Mat. 19:6b), advocates of this position assert, by implication, that men **can** indeed do so. The consequence of their contention

is to deny an innocent spouse the Scriptural right to remarry, in spite of the fact that his/her spouse has committed fornication/adultery.

The following hypothetical (but not at all unrealistic) case brings the consequence of this position into focus:³

Joe divorces Jane because he finds Mary more attractive (no fornication involved at this juncture). The civil divorce decree says that the marriage no longer exists, freeing Joe **legally** to marry Mary. But is Joe free **Scripturally** to marry Mary? In Matthew 19:9, the Lord, by implication, teaches that Joe and Jane are still married, although the civil-law divorce says that they are not. Would Joe's marriage to Mary be an adulterous marriage or a Divinely sanctioned one? If Joe and Jane were **not** still bound to one another by God's marriage law (despite the civil divorce decree), why would Joe's marriage to Mary constitute adultery – adultery against Jane, in fact, whom he divorced without Scriptural cause (Mark 10:11)? Here we have a marriage (Joe to Mary) which men say is **legal**, but which God says is nonetheless **forbidden** – because it constitutes adultery.

The foregoing case leads us to the one exception Jesus gave that can break the absolute permanency of a God-ordained marriage, apart from death (Rom. 7:2–3). That one exception is fornication. Now, let us revisit the case of Joe, Jane, and Mary:

1. Joe sought and obtained a civil-law divorce from Jane, with no fornication involved on the part of either. At this point, on the basis of Matthew 19:9 and related verses, **neither** of them can remarry with God's approval, for to do so would be to commit adultery. This is so in spite of the civil-law divorce, because by Divine law they are still married/bound to one another. Their only Scriptural marriage option in the present circumstance is reconciliation (1 Cor. 7:11). Note this additional element not mentioned earlier: Jane resisted the divorce and sought to prevent it. She even sought reconciliation to Joe, but he would have none of it. Another way of looking at it is to say that **legally** the marriage of Joe and Jane has been dissolved, but **Scripturally** (i.e., "in God's eyes") it is still intact (because neither of them has committed fornication). As far as God is concerned, the divorce decree involving Joe and Jane is no more than a blank piece of paper – they are merely **separated from** each other, but still **bound to** each other.
2. Remember, however, that Joe was already smitten with Mary before the divorce (the reason he divorced Jane). Refusing reconciliation with Jane, Joe now **legally** marries Mary, and they both thereby become adulterers/fornicators (regardless of **her** eligibility to be married) (Mat. 19:9). As with their divorce, this "marriage," though **legal**, is merely a "marriage on paper," but not a marriage at all according to God's law (as in the case of Herod Antipas and Herodias [Mark 6:16–18]). Joe and Mary are fornicators because, as far as God's law is concerned, they are not married, but are merely cohabiting illicitly.
3. Note that Jane did nothing to bring about the divorce. Rather, as already noted, she sought to **prevent** the divorce. She sought reconciliation to Joe and would have forgiven him, but he refused. By marrying Mary, Joe committed fornication – the very ground upon which Jesus said an innocent spouse may be free from the original marriage bond and free to marry again. (Of course, fornication does not in **itself** dissolve a marriage, but it gives the offended party the **right** to dissolve it and remarry.) Jane is an innocent victim, the very one to whom the Lord's statement in Matthew 19:9

gives the **right** to remarry. However, she cannot now obtain a civil-law divorce on her own initiative, for legally, Joe has already done that, and the civil authorities no longer recognize Joe as still being her husband (although God still does). However, as we have already seen, the legal divorce Joe obtained is meaningless before God. I submit, therefore, that Matthew 19:9 gives Jane the moral and Scriptural right to honor/accept – because of Joe’s fornication – the divorce he earlier obtained. The marriage that was only **legally** ended earlier is thus **Scripturally** ended, giving Jane the **Scriptural** right to remarry, if she chooses. (One grossly errs to label what I have described on Jane’s part as “the waiting game,” in which both parties in a separation “wait” to see which one will be the first to commit fornication, thus “technically” giving the other the right to remarry. Obviously, no such thing occurred in the case of Joe and Jane.)

4. That (1) Jane did not obtain the civil-law divorce from Joe, (2) neither Joe nor Jane had committed fornication at the time the civil-law divorce was granted, (3) the divorce papers did not specify “fornication” as the cause for the divorce, or (4) Joe’s fornication did not occur until **after** the meaningless (to God) “paper” divorce was granted **are all irrelevant**, for the Lord honored neither Joe’s and Jane’s **legal** divorce nor Joe’s and Mary’s **legal** marriage. What the Lord **did** take knowledge of was Joe’s fornication with Mary, giving Jane the right to divorce Joe and remarry if she chooses to do so. To say that Jane does not have the right to remarry in such cases is to exalt human/civil law above Divine law. It implies that God binds himself to honor human law even when it contradicts His own law. To deprive Jane of the right to remarry represents placing more emphasis on the **timing** of the act of fornication than on the **act itself**, which is where the Lord placed the emphasis. Surely, to deprive Jane of the right to remarry cannot be correct exegesis.

Certainly, where civil laws exist that are in harmony with Divine laws (on MDR or any other subject), we must comply with them (Rom. 13:1–7; et al.). However, when the laws of men conflict with God’s law, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). Though well-meaning they may be, brethren who would deny Jane the right to divorce Joe are nonetheless implying that we must obey **men** rather than **God**. Their contention is basically one of “anti-ism” – forbidding that which God allows and binding where God has not bound.

Conclusion

Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit upon the apostles when He returned to the Father. Among other things, Jesus promised that the Spirit would “guide them into all the truth” (John 16:13). One of the implications of this promise is that Satan would never be able to invent a false doctrine that has not already been refuted in anticipation. This implication is as true for errors on marriage, divorce, and remarriage as it is for any other subject. Although men have invented many strange doctrines on this subject, the Lord, through His own words and through the words of the Spirit-inspired men, have answered them all.

Jesus did not seek controversy, but He certainly never shrank from it when error and sin rose to challenge Him and the Truth. The occasion of His verbal fisticuffs concerning marriage, divorce, and remarriage with the wicked and hypocritical Pharisees is a marvelous case in

point. We will do well to remember John's apropos exhortation: "He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also to walk even as he walked" (1 John 2:6).

Endnotes

1. All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
2. Some of the material in this part of this MS is dependent in part upon material I originally wrote as an "Editorial Perspective" for *The Gospel Journal*. It appeared in the September 2001 issue of said journal, of which I was editor at the time.
3. I initially used this illustration in a 2005 written discussion on this subject with Eddie Whitten, available at [www.scripturecache.com/documents/long manuscripts>Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage – Civil Vs. Divine Law](http://www.scripturecache.com/documents/long%20manuscripts/Marriage,%20Divorce,%20and%20Remarriage%20-%20Civil%20Vs.%20Divine%20Law).

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