

PCA Ad Interim Study Committee Report on Domestic Abuse and Sexual Assault

Attachment 11: Divorce and Domestic Abuse

1. Introduction

For Christians, perhaps the most controversial topic involving domestic abuse is the subject of divorce. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* states that adultery and desertion are the only biblical grounds for the dissolution of a marriage.^[1] Yet some argue that desertion functions as an umbrella category encompassing several ways that a person can abandon his/her spouse. Carl Trueman succinctly summarizes this position when he says that the essence of desertion is a dereliction of duty, rather than an abandonment of space.^[2] In other words, desertion is about more than geography. This view is shared by the Report of the Ad-Interim Committee on Divorce and Remarriage from the twentieth General Assembly of the PCA. It argues that domestic abuse is a form of desertion because the abuser's violence creates a forced separation between spouses that is equivalent to abandonment.^[3] Our report affirms this position and defends it with biblical and practical arguments.

2. The Biblical Argument

As we examine Scripture, it is important to also examine our own assumptions. In theological inquiry, the answer we produce can be greatly influenced by the way we frame the question. Therefore, this section not only studies Scripture, but also identifies and challenges one of the key assumptions we bring to the interpretive task, especially concerning biblical grounds for divorce.

That assumption has to do with what we expect the Bible to say. Some pastors limit the grounds for divorce to the specific situations mentioned in Scripture, which are sexual immorality and an unbeliever deserting a believer. Doubtless this position is motivated by sincere desires to protect the covenant of marriage and faithfully obey God's Word. But it contains an assumption that usually goes unidentified and unchallenged: why would we expect the Bible to list all of the situations in which divorce is permissible? The answer is because we are interpreting Scripture through the lens of modern law, instead of ancient law.

In determining biblical grounds for divorce, we are operating in the theological category of the law of God. That is, we are asking what the law of God allows and does not allow in regard to ending a marriage. But if we interpret Scripture through the lens of modern law, we will most likely arrive at a very different answer than if we read it as law from the Ancient Near East.^[4] Most modern societies use exhaustive law codes. Every practice a society wishes to regulate must be listed in a separate law. As a result, when we investigate the issue of divorce, we assume the Bible will explicitly mention every situation in which the practice is allowed. But ancient law did not work this way. The Ancient Near East used case law, which gives rules that govern a specific situation. From that specific case, we are expected to deduce a general principle that we can apply to other situations. In keeping with its Ancient Near Eastern context, the Pentateuch is filled with case law. Old Testament scholar Douglas Stuart writes, "...the Israelites had to learn to see the underlying principles in any law and not let the specifics of the individual [situation] mislead them into applying the law too narrowly."^[5] This is why it is best to view desertion as an umbrella category that encompasses multiple ways that a person can abandon their spouse. The Report of the Ad-Interim Committee on Divorce and Remarriage states:

Further, taking into account both the general principles of Biblical ethics and the Scripture's characteristic manner of ethical instruction, viz. the statement of commandments in a general form to which is added case law sufficient to indicate the manner of application, it seems to us that those Reformed authorities are correct who have argued that sins which are tantamount in extremity and consequence to actual desertion should be understood to produce similar eventualities.^[6]

With the proper understanding of how biblical law functions, it is important to apply this framework to the apostle Paul's teaching on desertion and divorce in 1 Corinthians 7:15. Paul writes, "But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace." In this verse, Paul permits a believer to divorce his/her unbelieving spouse if the unbeliever abandons the marriage. An accurate interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:15 depends on its literary context and the entire chapter's flow of thought. In v. 1 Paul writes, "Now concerning the matters about which you wrote..." Everything Paul says about marriage, divorce and remarriage in 1 Corinthians 7 is in response to specific questions posed by the Corinthians in a previous letter. He spends the entire chapter answering

questions about marriage regarding different groups of people within the Corinthian church. The following is a brief outline of the questions Paul addresses:

- vv. 1-7 – To those considering a renunciation of marriage: remain married with full conjugal rights.
- vv. 8-9 – To the unmarried and widows: it is good to remain unmarried, but those who cannot exercise self-control should marry.
- vv. 10-11 – To the married (both partners are believers): remain married, but if you divorce you must remain single or be reconciled to your spouse.
- **vv. 12-16 – To the married (one partner is an unbeliever): remain married, unless the unbelieving partner separates.**
- vv. 17-24 – The general principle: remain as you are.
- vv. 25-38 – To the betrothed: it is good to remain unmarried, but if you marry you have not sinned.
- vv. 39-40 – General precepts for the married and widowed.^[7]

In a New Testament epistle, the subjects an author addresses are largely determined by the situation in the receiving church. This means that Paul did not write a treatise on divorce and list all of the biblical grounds. Rather, Paul received a letter from the Corinthians asking about several situations in their church. He answers those questions in 1 Corinthians 7. The reason Paul addresses an unbeliever deserting a believer is because the Corinthians had asked him about mixed marriages. Therefore, it is entirely appropriate to ask, “Why did Paul allow divorce in this specific situation? And using that same reasoning, might there be other situations in which divorce is permitted?”

Another reason we should ask these questions is because of the nature of ancient case law. As a former Pharisee, Paul was steeped in the Pentateuch. When he thought of ethical issues, case law was in the front of his mind. This means that when Paul gives a command governing a specific situation, such as a Christian being deserted by an unbelieving spouse, we should try to discern the universal principle behind his command.

The principle behind 1 Corinthians 7:15 is that believers are not allowed to actively seek a divorce from their spouses, but if one spouse effectively deserts his/her marriage responsibilities, the other spouse is not obligated to remain married. Based on the Greek grammar, the key element in Paul’s line of reasoning is the passivity of the believing spouse in the action that instigates divorce. In this verse Paul makes a pronounced switch from the active voice to the passive. In the original Greek, verse 15a literally reads, “But if the unbeliever separates, be separated.”^[8] Paul uses a middle indicative form of χωρίζω (separates), immediately followed by a passive imperative form of the same verb (be separated). He uses the same verb twice in a row, but the second time the verb is passive. Paul’s point is that a believer is not allowed to actively instigate divorce. But when one spouse effectively abandons the marriage, the other spouse can let the separation take place.

This interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:15 is strengthened by research from Wayne Grudem, who recently changed his position on this issue. Grudem focuses on the phrase “in such cases” (Greek: ἐν τοῖς τοιούτοις). This phrase is not used anywhere else in the New Testament or the Septuagint. But Grudem studies the use of this phrase in extra-biblical Greek literature, including Philo, Lysias and Euripedes. He concludes that the phrase “in such cases” refers to a broader category of situations other than the example given. According to Grudem, the use of the phrase in 1 Corinthians 7:15 means, “*in this and other similarly destructive situations* (that is, situations that destroy a marriage as much as adultery or desertion).”^[9] Such a definition fits perfectly within the framework of case law discussed above.

Some pastors and elders maintain that desertion is only grounds for divorce if the deserting spouse is an unbeliever. However, while a mixed marriage is a circumstance of the case, it is not the determining factor in Paul’s permission to dissolve the marriage. The determining factor is the act of abandonment. In the above discussion of case law, Douglas Stuart warned against allowing the specifics of the individual case to lead us into applying the law too narrowly. We fall into this trap if we require an abandoned person to be married to an unbeliever in order to qualify for divorce.

In view of these considerations, domestic abuse clearly qualifies as an act of desertion. It creates an oppressive environment in the home that often forces the victim to leave for her own safety and well-being. A man who abuses his wife or children has abandoned his role as a husband and father, and has therefore broken the marriage covenant. The Report of the Ad-Interim Committee on Divorce and Remarriage shares this position:

This is so precisely because his violence separates them, either by her forced withdrawal from the home or by the profound cleavage between them which the violence produces, as surely as would his own departure, and is thus an expression of his unwillingness “to consent” to live with her in marriage (1 Cor. 7:12-13; Eph. 5:28-29).^[10]

When a victim of abuse must leave her home to protect herself and her children, it is the perpetrator's abusive actions that have caused the separation, not the victim's decision to leave. The same can be said of a victim's choice to file for divorce. Taking such a step does not violate Paul's prohibition against actively instigating the dissolution of a marriage. Her spouse is the one who has broken the marriage covenant through his abuse, and she is merely seeking the formal recognition of a state of brokenness that already exists. A victim's decision to divorce does not kill the marriage. Abuse kills the marriage, and divorce is merely seeking the death certificate.

3. The Practical Argument

The purpose of this section is to build on the biblical argument that abuse breaks the marriage covenant. By bringing to light the oppressive effects of abuse on the victim and her children, this section will strengthen the case that domestic abuse creates a forced separation in the marriage that is tantamount to desertion. An abusive marriage damages the physical and psychological health of the victim and forces her to leave the abuser to pursue healing and safety. The following are just some of the ways that domestic abuse can impact the victim:

- Severe anxiety
- Panic attacks
- Questioning her own sanity
- Intense nightmares
- Insomnia
- Digestion problems
- Depression
- PTSD
- Suicidal ideation
- Physical injuries
- Life threatened (in the most severe cases).
[\[11\]](#)

It is common to think that only physical abuse would be an adequate reason to leave. It is possible to infer this from the above quote from the Report of the Ad-Interim Committee on Divorce and Remarriage, due to its repeated use of the word "violence." Yet such a position severely underestimates the effects of all types of abuse on the victim. All abuse results in the physical symptoms listed above. Emotional, verbal and spiritual abuse often cause the victim to experience panic attacks, depression, PTSD, and suicidal thoughts, all concurrently. Even in physically abusive relationships, the greatest damage the victim suffers is almost always psychological. Physical damage can heal in a matter of days or weeks, but psychological wounds take years to overcome. In fact, it is common for victims who have experienced both psychological and physical abuse to say that psychological abuse is worse. All types of abuse are absolutely devastating to a victim's health and well-being. All types of abuse create a forced separation in the marriage, just like physical abuse. And therefore all types of abuse qualify as a form of desertion.

It is also important to consider the sexual dimension of marriage. In many cases, abuse does not stop when the couple enters the bedroom. There are many abusive men who have never hit their wives, but have sexually violated them in ways that are degrading and inhumane. Examples include:

- Forcing her to watch pornography under the threat of violence
- Rape
- Forced sodomy
- Requiring her to engage in sexual acts with other men, also under the threat of violence.

Victims of sexual abuse are on high alert the moment their husbands climb into bed and suffer from intense nightmares and insomnia as a result. Yet the sexual dimension of an abusive marriage is so humiliating that many victims will not disclose it even if they are asked, especially to male pastors and elders. Limiting biblical grounds for divorce to physical abuse fails to account for this destructive yet secretive aspect of the marriage.

Another factor is the impact of domestic abuse on children. Living in an abusive home scars children, even if the abuse is not perpetrated directly against them. Children who grow up in a family where dad abuses mom experience many of the following effects:

- Failure to thrive in infants
- Fear
- Anxiety
- Insecurity
- Self-blame
- Defiance
- Poor grades
- Bed-wetting in children over four
- Intense nightmares
- Eating disorders
- Substance abuse
- Teen pregnancy

- Cutting
- Suicidal thoughts
- Girls are more likely to marry abusive men.^[12]
- Boys are more likely to become abusive

It is common for pastors and elders to pressure victims of abuse to remain in their marriages, and one of the primary motives is the impact of divorce on children. This is a mistake. While divorce is always unfortunate, and the effect on children is undeniable, the impact of domestic abuse on children is worse than the impact of divorce.^[13]

Another reality we have to grapple with is that abusers rarely change.^[14] Unless you are a victim of domestic abuse or an expert in the field, you do not fully appreciate the depth of blindness and self-deception that plagues abusive men. It is something you have to experience to fully grasp. This blindness and self-deception make the change process much more challenging than other types of sanctification. We can trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to transform the human heart, but that should not cause us to ignore the fact that counseling programs for abusive men have low success rates. One rigorous study of batterer intervention programs found only a five percent improvement rate in perpetrators ceasing physical abuse.^[15] Couples counseling and anger management fared even worse.^[16] Therefore, asking a victim to remain married could be tantamount to asking her to endure a lifetime of abuse. If Scripture permits victims of abuse to divorce, as this report argues, then pastors and sessions should not deny what Scripture allows. They should humbly and compassionately shepherd a victim towards an abuse-free life, be it through the abuser's repentance and the restoration of her marriage, or the ending of her marriage.

Protecting the marriage covenant is a biblical desire, but so is protecting a human being. As people created in the image of God, victims of abuse and their children have inherent value and dignity that should be protected. Pastors and elders who pressure victims to remain in abusive marriages usually do not fully comprehend the damage abuse inflicts on a human being. When ministering to families impacted by domestic abuse, the physical and psychological safety of the victim and her children should take priority over keeping the marriage together.

4. The Question of Remarriage

If a victim of domestic abuse divorces her husband, is she allowed to remarry? Deuteronomy 24:1-4 assumes that divorced people can remarry, and Jesus permits remarriage if the divorce was for sexual immorality (Matt. 19:9). Some strengthen the case for remarriage after desertion by appealing to the second half of 1 Corinthians 7:15, which reads, "But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace." When Paul writes that "the brother or sister is not enslaved," many understand him to be saying that the believer is not enslaved to the previous marriage and is therefore free to remarry.^[17] This interpretation is often referred to as the "Pauline privilege." We agree that Paul is saying that a deserted spouse is not enslaved to the previous marriage, but it is doubtful that Paul addresses remarriage. He goes on to write, "God has called you to peace. For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?" Paul's point is that the deserting spouse's lack of salvation does not obligate the believer to stay in the marriage for the sake of evangelism. Doing so produces a state of perpetual marital conflict, which is the antithesis of the peace and reconciliation that characterizes the gospel. The believing spouse is not enslaved in that they are free to divorce. However, the freedom to remarry is simply not addressed.^[18]

Nevertheless, the language of not being "enslaved" should hold special significance for victims of abuse. As unfortunate as divorce is, the Lord does not require them to remain in the oppression that they have suffered. The God who led His people out of slavery in Egypt (Ex. 20:2), and the Savior who came to liberate the oppressed (Luke 4:18), now tells victims of abuse that they are no longer enslaved (1 Cor. 7:15). Throughout Scripture, the Redeemer of the oppressed bids His people to run free.

Although 1 Corinthians 7:15 does not speak to remarriage, there is another passage in the same chapter that does address the issue. We read in vv. 10-11, "To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife." Some theologians think these verses prohibit remarriage after divorce in all circumstances.^[19] They argue that Paul is issuing a strict, over-arching command which applies to all Christians in all situations. There are two factors which make this interpretation unlikely.

First, we must understand the cultural context of first century Corinth, which had a view of marriage and divorce that fell far short of the biblical standard. Anthony Thiselton writes, "In the Roman world of the first century divorce was undertaken both frequently and often for selfish, trivial reasons."^[20] We face a similar situation in our culture today. The difference is that in ancient Corinth, the Christian view of marriage would not have been seen as traditionalist dogma, but

as a strange and unrealistic novelty. In light of the audience Paul is addressing, it is best to view vv. 10-11 as a general statement against the prevailing cultural attitude toward divorce. In general, Christians may not divorce their spouses at will. Those who do so are not allowed to remarry.

Second, the Greek construction *ἐὰν δὲ καὶ* (translated “but if”) introduces a general condition that qualifies the preceding prohibition.^[21] Despite the fact that Paul has prohibited divorce, he acknowledges the practice will nevertheless continue, and so he regulates it. Paul has given a general command not to divorce your spouse. If someone disobeys this command, that person is not allowed to remarry. But if the divorce is for biblical grounds, that person has not disobeyed God, as v. 15 clearly shows. In other words, Paul only prohibits remarriage for people who have divorced their spouses on unbiblical grounds. In light of the fact that remarriage is assumed in Deuteronomy 4:1-4 and allowed in Matthew 19:9, it is safe to conclude that people who divorce on biblical grounds are free to remarry. This includes victims of abuse.

Some Pastors and Sessions are in the practice of advising victims to remain permanently separated from the abuser, but to refrain from divorce. Such an option may seem like the best of both worlds: the marriage covenant is preserved, and the victim is safe. However, this course of action is not recommended. If the victim has no intention of ever living with the abuser as husband and wife, one should question if they are truly married. They may be married on paper, but they are functionally divorced. This is certainly how the apostle Paul would view such a situation, as there was no category of legal separation in the first century. A couple was either married or divorced; there was no middle ground. Furthermore, without a divorce the victim is not able to remarry. Many victims are in their 20s or 30s when they leave their abusive spouses. It is tragic to rob them of the freedom to remarry when Scripture allows it, especially at such a young age.

Those who argue against remarriage usually believe that the marriage bond is indissoluble, except by death. As appealing as such a view may be, it is hard to square with Deuteronomy 4:1-4 and Matthew 19:9. Scripture teaches that marriage is a covenant (Prov. 2:17; Mal. 2:14). This means that it is a binding relationship that should ideally never be broken. But despite this ideal, it *can* be broken. Geerhardus Vos illustrates:

We may have on our parlor table a beautiful and costly vase. It ought to be handled carefully. It ought not to be broken. It was not made to be smashed; it was made to exist as a thing of beauty and grace. But it is not impossible to break it. And if a member of the family breaks it through carelessness, or in a fit of temper smashes it deliberately, there is nothing to do but sweep up the broken fragments and dispose of them. We will not say, “This vase was not intended to be broken; therefore it is impossible to break it; the vase is unbreakable; therefore in spite of the fact that it lies in shattered fragments on the floor, we will not throw it away; we will keep it forever.” No one would say that about a broken vase; yet that is substantially the argument of those who say that the marriage bond is “indissoluble” and “unbreakable.”^[22]

5. Conclusion

In the experience of the authors of this report, most Christian victims of abuse are deeply committed to their marriages. In fact, it would be difficult to find a group of people who have paid a higher price for their commitment to the marriage covenant. Many victims have courageously stayed with their spouses for years and continued exposing themselves to abuse in hopes that their marriages would be saved. They do not want to smash the beautiful and costly vase that Geerhardus Vos describes. Rather, they are sitting on the floor surrounded by shattered fragments, desperately trying to put the pieces back together, hopeless and confused as to why nothing they try seems to work. Sometimes God will perform a miracle and bring healing and restoration to the marriage. But many times, He does not, and in such cases victims should not be forced to endure a lifetime of abuse. God has declared that they are no longer enslaved. He declares this because of who He is: the God of the exodus; the God of redemption. If we in the PCA want to respond to oppression the way God does, we will support victims of domestic abuse on their difficult journey to freedom.

NOTES

^[1] *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1978 – 2005), 24.6.

^[2] Carl Trueman and Todd Pruitt, “What Is the Church to Do?” Mortification of Spin Podcast, <https://www.reformation21.org/mos/podcast/21100>.

^[3] Paul B. Fowler, et al., “Divorce and Remarriage,” in *Position Papers 1973–1998*, PCA Digest Vol. 2, Part V, ed. Paul R. Gilchrist (Lawrenceville, GA: Presbyterian Church in America, 2003), 188-189, 229. Also see the section on “unjust divorce, or desertion” in the Biblical and Confessional Foundations for Understanding Abuse in our report.

^[4] The difference is explained in Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2, *New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 442-445.

^[5] *Ibid.*, 443.

^[6] Fowler, et al., “Divorce and Remarriage,” 229.

^[7] Adapted from Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 268.

[8] To avoid redundancy, the ESV translates v. 15a, “But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so.”

[9] Wayne Grudem, “Grounds for Divorce: Why I Now Believe There Are More Than Two,” *The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, <https://cbmw.org/2020/06/10/grounds-for-divorce-why-i-now-believe-there-are-more-than-two/>.

[10] Fowler, et al., “Divorce and Remarriage,” 229.

[11] For a more complete list see Christiane Sanderson, *Counseling Survivors of Domestic Abuse* (Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008), 54-55.

[12] For a more complete list see Lundy Bancroft, *When Dad Hurts Mom: Helping Your Children Heal the Wounds of Witnessing Abuse* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2004), 72-74.

[13] Brenda Branson and Paula J. Silva, *Violence Among Us: Ministering to Families in Crisis* (Valley Forge, PA, Judson Press, 2007), 44.

[14] “‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed” (Isaiah 6:9–10). G.K. Beale writes, “Whenever the organs of spiritual perception were seen to be not functioning, a certain kind of language was used. We might call this sensory-organ-malfunction language. When this language is used in the Old Testament, almost without exception, it refers not just to sinners in general but to only one particular kind of sin—the sin of idol worship” (G.K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship, A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 41). Isaiah is speaking to this specific type of sin. He later tells us God Himself “smeared over their eyes so that *they cannot see* and their hearts so that *they cannot comprehend*” (Isa. 44:8, emphasis mine). At its root, abuse in marriage is the sin of self-worship. “An abusive person uses his God-like faculties to overpower those same faculties in someone else to get what he wants. Instead of using his powers to arrange the world to God’s glory, he uses his powers to arrange the world for his own” (Jeremy Pierre, Greg Wilson, *When Home Hurts, A Guide for Responding Wisely to Domestic Abuse in Your Church* (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2021), 24). God does not share his glory with another, and the judgment for such sin, for those who worship any other, is to be “made spiritually insensitive like the idols they worship.” Beale, *Worship*, 47. Beale continues, “the reversal of spiritual blindness and deafness into spiritual ‘seeing and hearing’ is the gift of God and cannot occur by any independent human determination” Ibid, 270. Only God can reverse this condition. While those contributing to this report believe God can and will change anyone, these passages emphasize both the difficulty and the utter dependence on God that pastors, leaders, and counselors must acknowledge when shepherding those who abuse.

[15] National Institute of Justice, *Practical Implications of Current Domestic Violence Research: For Law Enforcement, Prosecutors and Judges* (Washington DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2009), 65.

[16] Ibid., 66.

[17] For example, see Fowler, et al., “Divorce and Remarriage,” 228 and John Murray, *Divorce* (Philadelphia, PA: P&R, 1961), 74-75.

[18] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 303.

[19] Gordon J. Wenham and William E. Heth, *Jesus and Divorce*, Updated Edition (Carlisle, CA: Paternoster Press, 1984), 144 and Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 296.

[20] Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians, New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 540.

[21] Walter Bauer, et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, Third Edition (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 267 and Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 295.

[22] Quoted in Loraine Boettner, *Divorce* (Nutley, NJ: P&R, 1960), 13.