

WHAT ABOUT THE MENTAL DIVORCE?

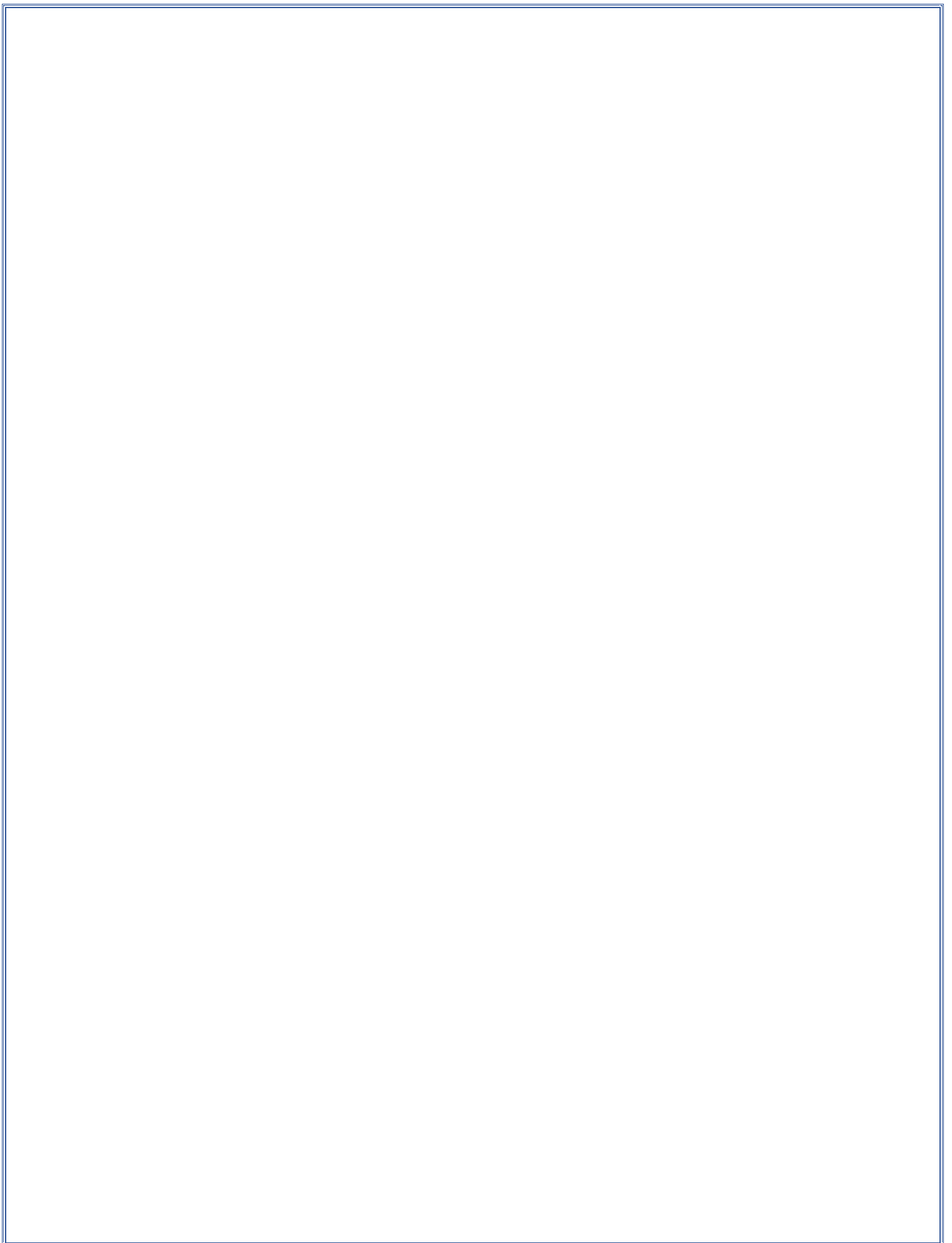
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SPECIAL THANKS

This book represents the second edition of a work I originally completed on July 10, 2024. Although I was thankful to finally bring the first edition of the book to completion, I was never fully satisfied with the finished product. As time passed and I continued studying, teaching, writing, and discussing these issues with others, I became convinced that certain portions of the book needed greater clarity. Some sections required expansion, others benefited from being condensed, and others contained information that, while perhaps interesting, was not especially pertinent to the primary purpose of this work. Consequently, I undertook creating a substantial revision of this book.

In addition to expanding certain sections and condensing others, I also took on the task of correcting any errors and improving clarity, as well as restructuring and rearranging portions of the material in an effort to present the evidence in a more logical, organized, and accessible manner. In many respects, this revision is less a simple update and more a complete reworking of the original manuscript. It is my sincere hope that this edition better serves those who are seeking to understand what the Bible teaches concerning marriage, divorce, and remarriage, especially on the matter of mental divorce.

This book would not exist without the support, encouragement, and patience of many brethren who have helped me throughout my study of this subject. While I alone am responsible for any mistakes that may appear in these pages, I am deeply indebted to those who challenged me to think more carefully, study more thoroughly, and communicate more clearly and compassionately.

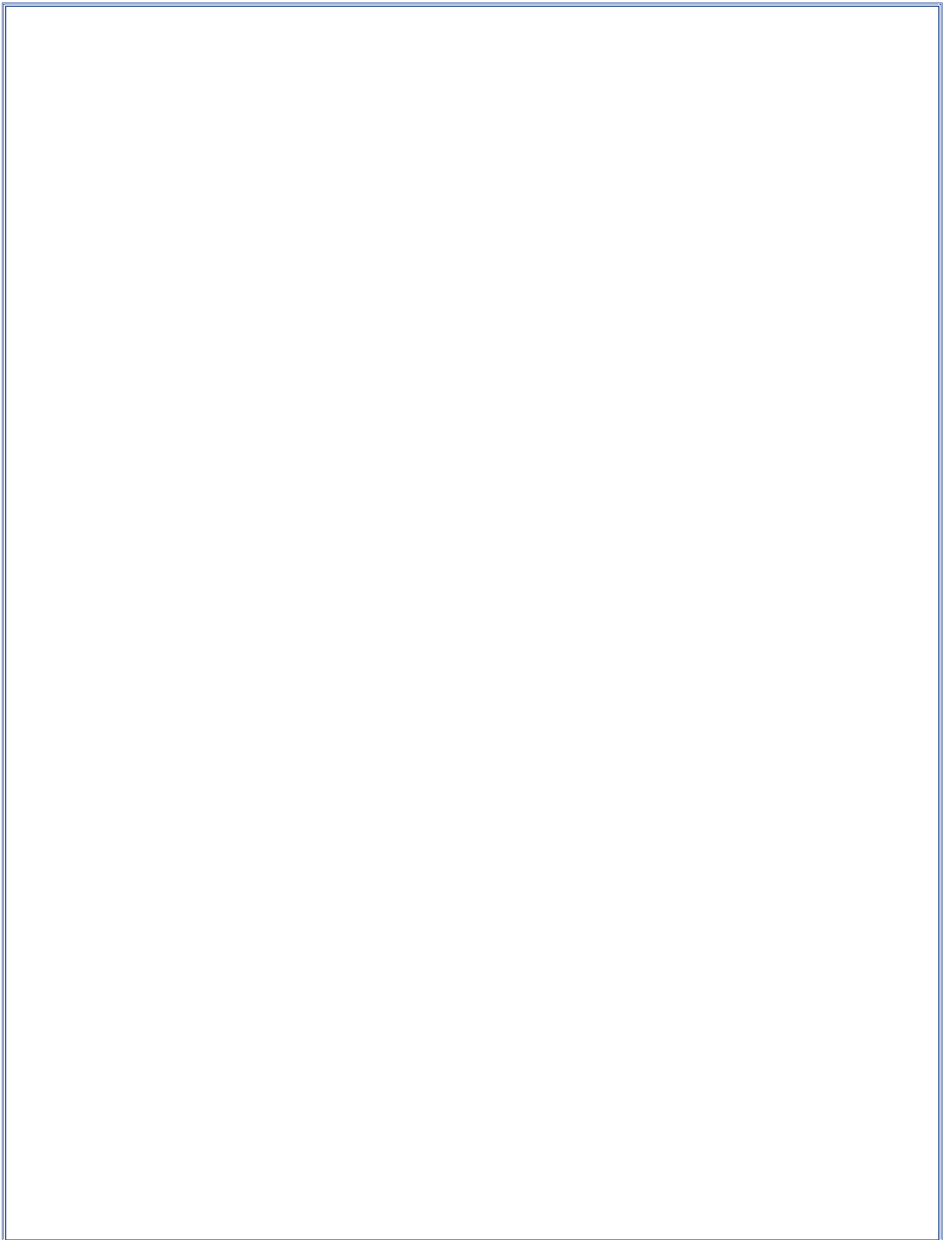
First, I want to thank the elders of the East Albertville church of Christ. Their friendship, confidence, mentorship, and continual concern for my spiritual well-being have been tremendous blessings. I am thankful for the opportunities they have given me to teach, preach, write, and grow in my understanding of God's word. I am deeply appreciative of the fellowship we share in Christ and the encouragement they provide to me as friends and brothers in the Lord.

I also want to thank the many brethren who spent time discussing these issues with me over the years. Whether through Bible classes, private studies, articles, debates, emails, social media discussions, or simple conversations among friends, their willingness to examine the word of God with me sharpened my thinking and strengthened my conviction to follow God's word wherever it leads. Some agreed with my conclusions, while others challenged them. Both proved valuable.

I am likewise thankful for the faithful gospel preachers, teachers, and writers whose work aided my studies. Though I have not always agreed with every conclusion reached by every author, I have benefited greatly from their dedication to the careful study of God's word.

Lastly, I want to thank my grandfather, Harry Stewart, for everything he did in guiding me to obey the gospel. I doubt I would have become a Christian without his influence. I love you and miss you, Ding. I can only hope you would be proud of the man I am today.

In Christian Love,
Dylan Thomas Stewart
June 7, 2026



THE NEW TESTAMENT AND MARRIAGE

Preface

Generally speaking, both sides of the mental divorce debate agree on much of the information contained within this section. However, there are some “minor” as well as “major” points of disagreement regarding marriage, divorce, and remarriage that impact this debate. As such, before we examine the many errors with this false doctrine, I believe it is necessary to establish some basic points of truth regarding marriage, divorce, and remarriage that will help inform our understanding of what God demands on this very important topic. In spite of any previous knowledge you may have on this subject, I encourage you not to skip over this section. At the very least, use this as an opportunity to be reminded of truths from God’s word, of which each person will eventually have to give account (John 12:48).

Marriage Began "at the Beginning" – Divorce and Polygamy Did Not

Marriage is not some man-made institution nor is it a mere construct derived from social/political ideologies. Rather, God instituted marriage in the beginning. Originally, God only created man. God did not intend to leave Adam alone, but God had a purpose in creating Adam first (Genesis 2:18-24; Ephesians 5:21-33; 1 Corinthians 11:7-12; 1 Timothy 2:13-14). Yet, God knew it was not good for man to be alone, so He provided Adam with a suitable helper and, thus, instituted marriage during the formation of the world. In the beginning, we see God's picture, and thus definition, of what He intends marriage to be: a lifelong commitment between one man and one woman. Jesus appealed to this fact when He discussed the subject of marriage in Matthew 19. Jesus taught:

"HE WHO MADE THEM AT THE BEGINNING 'MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE,' AND SAID, 'FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH'? SO THEN, THEY ARE NO LONGER TWO BUT ONE FLESH. THEREFORE WHAT GOD HAS JOINED TOGETHER, LET NOT MAN SEPARATE"
(MATTHEW 19:4-6).

Unfortunately, due to the sinfulness of man, what God instituted in the beginning was quickly set aside, attempted to be redefined, or altogether ignored.

As Jesus said, marriage as God ordained began "*at the beginning.*" Divorce and polygamy, on the other hand, did not. These sinful acts began with the will of man and not with the will of God. For example, regarding divorce, Jesus explained to His Jewish audience, "***Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so***" (Matthew 19:8). For a time, God chose to permit divorce among His people by regulating it (Deuteronomy 24:1-4), but this regulation was due to God recognizing humanity's hardened hearts. Man, due to sinful desires, instituted divorce and, as result, God permitted divorces for numerous causes under the Law of Moses. In the same way, God never desired polygamy, but He regulated it

under the Law of Moses (Exodus 21:10; Deuteronomy 21:15-17) until prohibiting it under the Law of Christ (Matthew 19:5; 1 Corinthians 7:2). Both polygamy and divorce are acts that God never desired for man to engage in; this point is especially obvious when we realize how God made the Law of Christ stricter than the Law of Moses when it comes to the matter of marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

Christ's Law is Stricter Than the Law of Moses

Many in the religious world – including brethren – claim that when Jesus preached on marriage, divorce, and remarriage He simply repeated or laws that were binding under the Law of Moses or corrected false interpretations of those laws and, therefore, people today are under the same laws of marriage, divorce, and remarriage as the Israelites of old. Such a conclusion is false for multiple reasons.

Matthew 19:9; Mark 10:11-12; and Luke 16:18 are parallel accounts of the same event. How do we know that Jesus was not repeating or correcting the Law of Moses in these three passages? In Luke's account, we read, "***The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it . . . Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced from her husband commits adultery***" (Luke 16:16, 18). The Law of Moses stopped being preached (not entirely but for the most part) once John the Baptist, Christ's forerunner, came onto the scene. Once John started preaching, that was when "***the kingdom of God,***" i.e. New Testament law, began being preached (again, not entirely but for the most part). That means when Jesus preached, "***Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and whoever marries her who is divorced by her husband commits adultery***" (Luke 16:18, MEV), He did not repeat or clarify what Moses taught. No, He taught New Testament law.

Those who claim that Jesus's teachings on marriage, divorce, and remarriage are the same as what Moses taught in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 do so with the intent of us having looser restrictions than what Jesus actually requires. However, Moses's laws on marriage, divorce, and remarriage (or any other subject) do not apply today (Galatians 5:1-4). Based on what is recorded for us in the gospel accounts, when Jesus discussed marriage, divorce, and remarriage He never taught the requirements of the Law of Moses, nor did He correct false interpretations of it. Countless gospel preachers hold the position that Jesus was simply correcting false interpretations of the Law of Moses in Matthew 5:31-32 because they misunderstand the primary reason why Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. Jesus did not preach this sermon to correct false interpretations of the Old Law. Rather, He preached this sermon to illustrate how much stricter (Matthew 5:19-20) His New Testament Law would be in comparison to the Law of Moses and those who claimed to have been diligent law-keepers.

In Matthew 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, and 43, Jesus repeatedly says something to the effect of, "***It has been said . . . But I say unto you.***" The repetition of this thought highlights six different contrasts between the Law of Moses and Christ's New Testament law that would be replacing it upon His death on the cross (Colossians 2:14). In all six instances, Jesus quotes or accurately represents an Old Testament passage in order to introduce His stricter gospel teaching. For example, in Matthew 5:31-

32, Jesus says, ***“Furthermore it has been said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.”*** In v.31, Jesus quotes Moses’s law from Deuteronomy 24:1-4 to explain how if a man wished to divorce his wife for ***“uncleanness,”*** referring to something short of fornication since adulterers were to be stoned (Leviticus 20:10), he would need to give her a ***“certificate of divorce.”*** However, Jesus does not stop at simply repeating the Law of Moses. Instead, in the next verse, He introduces His teaching that divorce is no longer permitted unless the spouse commits fornication. Regarding the contrast being made in these verses, Pat Donahue wrote:

A few say Matt 5:31 is not a quote from Deut 24:1, but I ask you to look at them side by side. In the KJV we have “let him write her a bill of divorcement” and “let him give her a writing of divorcement.” What is the significant difference? Just like the other five cases [in Matthew 5], Jesus is quoting what the old testament said and then giving his new stricter law. Deut 24:1ff allowed divorce for any uncleanness, while Jesus’ teaching is divorce only for the cause of fornication. Jesus does the same thing (contrast the new testament divorce law with the old testament divorce law) in Matthew 19:8-9, which reads in the NKJV “... Moses ... permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you ...” Notice that Jesus is contrasting his law with “precept” that Moses “wrote” (Mark 10:5), and is also reinstating the divorce law that was in effect at the beginning of creation. Jesus does not contrast his divorce teaching in Matt 5 and 19 with false teaching. Instead he contrasts it with the actual divorce teaching of the law of Moses (Donahue, What is the Contrast in Matthew 5:20-48?, 2014).

Jesus’ law on divorce is stricter than Moses’ law . . . Those who try to bring Deut 24:1-4 into the new covenant do so with the intent that the looser teaching of Moses on the subject applies to situations today. But Moses’ law does not apply today; Jesus’ law does. Jesus shows this in Matt 5:31-32 by quoting Moses’ law from Deut 24:1, and then giving his contrasting (“But”) teaching that divorce is wrong except for fornication. Jesus shows this again in Matt 19:8-9 by admitting Moses did allow divorce for reasons other than fornication, before pointing out ... “but from the beginning it was not so.” Verse 9 shows Jesus’ teaching was going to be the same as in the beginning, that his teaching was – divorce except for fornication, followed by remarriage, is adultery (Donahue, Is Jesus Just Explaining The Divorce Law Of Deut 24:1-4?, 2022).

Pair this text with Matthew 19:3-9 and we see that Jesus’s New Testament teaching would be the same as God had it in the very beginning when He first instituted marriage and would not be as loose as what Moses, by God’s permission, allowed under the Old Covenant (Matthew 19:8). Again, it is clear that Jesus was not merely repeating what Moses taught. He taught something entirely different during the Sermon on the Mount from what the Law of Moses required. When Jesus preached on marriage, divorce, and remarriage during the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 He taught His New Testament law – the ***“gospel”*** (Matthew 4:23).

Jesus's New Testament law is much stricter on matters pertaining to marriage, divorce, and remarriage. The Pulpit Commentary explains:

By the repeal of the Mosaic relaxation and the restoration of marriage to its original principle, Christ not only enforces the high dignity of this ordinance, but obviates many opportunities of wickedness, such, for instance, as collusion between husband and wife with a view to obtain freedom for marriage with others (The Pulpit Commentary, 1962).

Jesus reiterates this point in Matthew 19:8-9 by admitting Moses did allow (or permit) divorce for reasons other than fornication, but concluded, "**From the beginning it was not so.**" Matthew 19:9 shows Jesus's New Testament teaching was going to be the same as God established in the very beginning when He first instituted marriage (the general rule being divorce is always wrong) and not as loose as Moses, by divine permission, allowed under the Old Covenant. That means divorce, unless on the grounds of fornication, is a sin, and if a divorce not for fornication is followed by remarriage, that constitutes adultery.

Only One Scriptural Reason for Divorce

Jesus taught there is only one scriptural reason for divorce. Matthew 5:32 helps us to see that a person can only divorce his spouse if he has concrete evidence (1 Corinthians 13:5; 2 Corinthians 13:1; Matthew 18:16; Proverbs 18:17) that the person sexually cheated:

"BUT I SAY TO YOU THAT WHOEVER DIVORCES HIS WIFE FOR ANY REASON EXCEPT SEXUAL IMMORALITY CAUSES HER TO COMMIT ADULTERY; AND WHOEVER MARRIES A WOMAN WHO IS DIVORCED COMMITS ADULTERY" (**MATTHEW 5:32**).

We conclude the following from this text:

- If a person divorces his spouse for sexual immorality (fornication, KJV), he does not commit sin.
- If a person divorces his spouse for "**any reason**" other than sexual immorality, he does commit sin.

We can find the reason behind Jesus's words in Romans 7:2-3. Paul explains, "**For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband lives, she marries another man, she will be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from that law, so that she is no adulteress, though she has married another man.**" Husbands and wives are bound to each other as long as they live. Once a spouse dies, the marriage bond and the laws that dictate it cease. Passages such as Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9 provide the exception to that rule, which is why Jesus used the word "**except**" (NKJV) in both passages to explain the only circumstances in which divorce is ever justified.

Why is it so important to understand and obey Jesus's teaching on marriage, divorce, and remarriage? Simply put, we want to avoid the punishment described in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10:

"DO YOU NOT KNOW THAT THE UNRIGHTEOUS WILL NOT INHERIT THE KINGDOM OF GOD? DO NOT BE DECEIVED. NEITHER FORNICATORS . . . NOR ADULTERERS . . . WILL INHERIT THE KINGDOM OF GOD" (1 CORINTHIANS 6:9-10).

If we unscripturally divorce our spouse or if we are unscripturally married, Heaven is unobtainable unless we correct course by seeking reconciliation with the divorced spouse or terminating the adulterous relationship, respectively (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). If a person divorces his spouse for any reason other than sexual immorality (fornication, KJV) and remarries, Jesus says that person commits adultery, and no unrepentant adulterer will inherit the kingdom of God. It really is that simple.

What if an Unbelieving Spouse Departs?

Many religious people – including some members of the Lord's body – claim that Paul, in 1 Corinthians 7:15, provides another scriptural cause for divorce that would permit remarriage. Is this true?

"NOW TO THE MARRIED I COMMAND, YET NOT I BUT THE LORD: A WIFE IS NOT TO DEPART FROM HER HUSBAND. BUT EVEN IF SHE DOES DEPART, LET HER REMAIN UNMARRIED OR BE RECONCILED TO HER HUSBAND. AND A HUSBAND IS NOT TO DIVORCE HIS WIFE. BUT TO THE REST I, NOT THE LORD, SAY: IF ANY BROTHER HAS A WIFE WHO DOES NOT BELIEVE, AND SHE IS WILLING TO LIVE WITH HIM, LET HIM NOT DIVORCE HER. AND A WOMAN WHO HAS A HUSBAND WHO DOES NOT BELIEVE, IF HE IS WILLING TO LIVE WITH HER, LET HER NOT DIVORCE HIM. FOR THE UNBELIEVING HUSBAND IS SANCTIFIED BY THE WIFE, AND THE UNBELIEVING WIFE IS SANCTIFIED BY THE HUSBAND; OTHERWISE YOUR CHILDREN WOULD BE UNCLEAN, BUT NOW THEY ARE HOLY. BUT IF THE UNBELIEVER DEPARTS, LET HIM DEPART; A BROTHER OR A SISTER IS NOT UNDER BONDAGE IN SUCH CASES. BUT GOD HAS CALLED US TO PEACE. FOR HOW DO YOU KNOW, O WIFE, WHETHER YOU WILL SAVE YOUR HUSBAND? OR HOW DO YOU KNOW, O HUSBAND, WHETHER YOU WILL SAVE YOUR WIFE?" (1 CORINTHIANS 7:10-16).

This passage pictures a Christian married to a non-Christian, and the non-Christian gives up on the marriage and leaves/divorces the believer. Paul says the Christian in this situation "***is not under bondage in such cases.***" Does this mean the Christian is free to remarry? According to this view, the phrase "***not under bondage***" supposedly means the marriage bond has been dissolved, thus allowing remarriage. However, that interpretation fits neither the context of Paul's instructions nor the specific language employed by the apostle.

First, in the context, remarriage is not the subject under consideration in 1 Corinthians 7:12-16. Rather, Paul addresses whether a Christian should remain with an unbelieving spouse. His answer is clear: if the unbeliever is willing to dwell with the believer, the marriage should remain intact, but if the unbeliever chooses to leave, the Christian is not required to fight endlessly to prevent it. That is Paul's point when he says the believer is "**not under bondage**." The Christian is not "**enslaved**" (ESV) to the unbeliever's decision to abandon the marriage. The believer is not obligated to chase after the departing spouse, force the marriage to continue, or live in constant turmoil trying to prevent the separation because "**God has called us to peace**."

Secondly, the word translated "**under bondage**" in 1 Corinthians 7:15 is not the Greek word that Paul repeatedly uses elsewhere to describe the marriage bond. Here, Paul uses the Greek word "douloo," which means to enslave, make a servant, or bring into bondage (see Vine, Thayer, Strong, Mounce, etc.) By contrast, when Paul discusses the marriage bond elsewhere, he uses an entirely different Greek word – "deo." In Romans 7:2, Paul says a wife is "**bound**" (deo) to her husband as long as he lives. Likewise, twice in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul uses the word "deo" in reference to the marriage bond (v.27, 39). Yet, in 1 Corinthians 7:15, Paul does not use the word "deo;" he, instead uses the word "douloo." That distinction matters.

In purposefully using the word "douloo" rather than "deo" in 1 Corinthians 7:15, Paul is not saying the marriage bond has been dissolved when an unbeliever divorces a believer. Instead, Paul is saying the believer is not "**enslaved**" (ESV) to maintain the relationship at all costs when the unbeliever insists on leaving. If Paul intended to teach that desertion dissolves the marriage bond and grants the right to remarry, it would be strange for him not to use the very word he uses in this same chapter (v.27, 39) in reference to the marriage bond. Instead, he deliberately uses a different word with an entirely different meaning in v.15 that numerous credible Greek scholars are in agreement as to its definition being in reference to enslavement, servitude, etc.

Furthermore, Jesus taught that if someone is on the receiving end of a divorce, regardless of the reason, they have no right to remarry (Luke 16:18), until the divorcing spouse dies (Romans 7:2-3). If Paul's point was that desertion is a scriptural cause for remarriage, then 1 Corinthians 7:15 would be adding a second exception that Jesus never mentioned. Therefore, Paul is not adding a second exception. Paul is simply teaching that Christians are not required to remain in constant conflict and turmoil when an unbelieving spouse refuses to stay.

It is a very real possibility that an unbeliever may depart from their believing spouse. As 1 Corinthians 7:15 teaches, the Christian is not enslaved to stop that from happening. However, that is not the same thing as saying the marriage bond has been dissolved or that remarriage is now permitted – neither of which are true.

Defining Fornication and Adultery

Since Jesus said the only scriptural ground for divorce is “**fornication**” (KJV) in passages such as Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, we must, therefore, define what this word means.

Some believe a person may divorce his spouse for lust, viewing pornography, etc. since these acts fit the definition of “**sexual immorality**” (NKJV) in the way the phrase is commonly used today. However, the Greek word “porneia,” translated as “**fornication**” in the KJV and “**sexual immorality**” in the NKJV, is defined by:

- **Bauer** – “Unlawful sexual intercourse, prostitution, unchastity, fornication.”
- **Strong** – “Properly, of illicit sexual intercourse in general.”
- **Thayer** – “Illicit sexual intercourse in general.”
- **Vine** – “Illicit sexual intercourse.”

“Porneia” involves sexual intercourse. What does that mean? According to the Oxford Languages Dictionary, sexual intercourse means “sexual contact between individuals involving penetration.” Therefore, “porneia” (fornication/sexual immorality) requires the literal act of sex to have taken place. That means lust and viewing pornography do not fit the definition of the original Greek since neither involve sexual intercourse, i.e. physical contact/penetration.

Of course, Jesus certainly taught that it is possible to commit sexual immorality/fornication in the heart (Matthew 5:28), but Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 are referring to literal physical fornication (sexual intercourse). Therefore, discovering evidence of lust, a spouse viewing pornography, etc. are insufficient grounds for scripturally divorcing someone. There must be evidence that literal illicit sexual intercourse took place and not evidence of one’s desire to engage in such in order for a person to have scriptural grounds for divorce.

Next, we must also define “**adultery**” since Jesus uses this term when preaching on the consequences of unlawful marriages in passages such as Matthew 5:32, 19:9; Mark 10:12; and Luke 16:18. Adultery is a broad term that is used to convey numerous different meanings throughout the scriptures. However, as it pertains to marriage and sexual activity, W.E. Vine’s Bible Dictionary defines “adulterer” as “one who has unlawful intercourse with the spouse of another.” Adultery, then, like fornication in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, involves sexual intercourse. Defining adultery, Kevin Cauley explained:

Ezekiel 16:32 perhaps gives us the clearest definition, “But as a wife that committeth adultery, which taketh strangers instead of her husband!” So we conclude from these scriptures that adultery is fornication with someone else’s spouse. This is the basic biblical definition of adultery. Other passages that place adultery within the realm of sexual sins are: Proverbs 6:26; Hosea 4:13; 1 Corinthians 6:9; and Hebrews 13:4 . . . There are those who have suggested that adultery is merely covenant breaking. While committing adultery is certainly being unfaithful to one’s spouse and thereby involves breaking a covenant, adultery is not merely covenant breaking . . . As we have seen from the scriptures, adultery involves fornication . . . Adultery is still the sexual

sin of fornication with another's spouse. That is how it is used in the context of Matthew 5:32. That is how the word was understood in the day of Jesus as well. John 8:1-11 bears out this definition. Those who came to Jesus with the woman caught in adultery said that she had been taken "in the very act." Was this woman caught divorcing and remarrying someone else? That is obviously not what the Pharisees were accusing her of doing. She was taken in the act of fornication with another's spouse. Jesus recognized this definition and was not seeking to redefine adultery in Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9 . . . marriage does not legitimize adultery (Cauley, Sin of Adultery, 2024).

Similarly, Warren King stated:

The term "adultery" is often misused. Some view it as a one-time act, rather than an on-going condition. Of course, one act of unfaithfulness would certainly qualify as adultery, but an individual who is in an adulterous marriage is in a perpetually adulterous condition as long as their rightful spouse lives (Rom. 7:2-3). Furthermore, Paul argues that it is possible to "live in" adultery, implying a perpetual condition (Col. 3:5-7). Another abuse of the concept of adultery confuses the metaphorical use of the term with the literal use. Quoting from Jeremiah 3 and James 4:4, we are told that adultery may include virtually any sin, from abuse to drunkenness. Such sloppy exegesis is a violent twisting of the Scripture. Jesus is not speaking metaphorically in Matthew 19. We have no right to so interpret it (King, 1994).

As we stated when discussing the scriptural definition of fornication, we recognize that it is certainly a sin to commit adultery in the heart (Matthew 5:28), but that sin is not a justifiable reason for a man to divorce his wife. Only adultery in the bed, so to speak, serves as scriptural grounds for divorce. Although the Law of Moses does not serve as our law today, Leviticus 20:10-13 shows how God defines adultery as a physical/sexual act:

"THE MAN WHO COMMITS ADULTERY WITH ANOTHER MAN'S WIFE, HE WHO COMMITS ADULTERY WITH HIS NEIGHBOR'S WIFE, THE ADULTERER AND THE ADULTERESS, SHALL SURELY BE PUT TO DEATH. THE MAN WHO LIES WITH HIS FATHER'S WIFE HAS UNCOVERED HIS FATHER'S NAKEDNESS; BOTH OF THEM SHALL SURELY BE PUT TO DEATH. THEIR BLOOD SHALL BE UPON THEM. IF A MAN LIES WITH HIS DAUGHTER-IN-LAW, BOTH OF THEM SHALL SURELY BE PUT TO DEATH. THEY HAVE COMMITTED PERVERSION. THEIR BLOOD SHALL BE UPON THEM. IF A MAN LIES WITH A MALE AS HE LIES WITH A WOMAN, BOTH OF THEM HAVE COMMITTED AN ABOMINATION. THEY SHALL SURELY BE PUT TO DEATH. THEIR BLOOD SHALL BE UPON THEM"
(LEVITICUS 20:10-13).

Passages like Matthew 5:31-32 and Matthew 19:8-9 are talking about the same literal (physical/sexual) act of adultery/fornication discussed in Leviticus 20:10-13, which is what we might call "following through" on the lust present in a person's heart.

We know for a certainty that adultery, when in reference to matters of marriage, is speaking about the physical act of “following through” due to how the term is used in the following passages:

- **John 8:4** – *“They said to him, ‘Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery.’”*
 - The woman was not caught in the middle of a marriage ceremony, but, rather, she was caught having sexual intercourse with a man who was not her husband.
- **Hebrews 13:4** – *“Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.”*
 - “Bed” is a euphemism for sexual activity. Therefore, adultery is something committed in the “bed” and is outside the bounds of those who are in a scriptural “marriage.”
- **Matthew 5:28** – *“But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”*
 - “Adultery” here is defined as the act of “following through” on the lustful intent present in one’s heart. Adultery, therefore, refers to the literal/physical act of unlawful sexual intercourse.

While examining Mark 10:11-12, a parallel account of the Lord’s teaching in Matthew 19:9, L.A. Stauffer stated:

Marry is a one time act of a man joining himself to another woman. Committeth adultery, however, is present tense and denotes an ongoing adulteration of the man and woman who remain in the marriage. Marriage implies and includes the union of two as one flesh in sexual relations and, as result, encompasses in an unholy union an ongoing practice of adultery (Stauffer, 1999).

It is important that we recognize how the Bible defines adultery as it pertains to the marital relationship because it helps us see why the second marriage of Matthew 19:9 is adulterous due to the sexual relations occurring within that marriage.

Adulterous Marriages Must Be Terminated

Jesus, in defining marriage, said: ***“Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife’ ... What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate”*** (Matthew 19:4-6). If we unscripturally divorce our spouse, then we unjustly separate what God has joined together. If we ever are guilty of such, our response must be as follows:

“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” (1 CORINTHIANS 7:10-11, ESV).

This passage teaches us that one who sins by leaving his spouse for any reason other than sexual immorality should seek reconciliation with (try to remarry) the divorced spouse, if possible. Since sin can often have long-lasting earthly consequences, it is not guaranteed that an unscripturally divorced spouse will accept a plea for reconciliation. If a person seeks reconciliation from his divorced spouse and the spouse refuses to take him back, 1 Corinthians 7:10 requires the person to remain unmarried since God says the two are still bound together by His law as long as the live (Romans 7:2-3).

We must not loosen where God has bound (Matthew 16:19, 18:18); if we do so, corrective actions must be taken, including in the case of an unscriptural divorce/remarriage. That means if the divorced spouse will not accept reconciliation, we must remain unmarried (1 Corinthians 7:11). Likewise, if we remarry another person after an unscriptural divorce, we must terminate that marriage since God does not recognize that marriage as honorable (Romans 7:2-3; Mark 6:18) and because we have violated Paul's command in 1 Corinthians 7:11 to "**remain unmarried.**" When we say adulterous relationships must be terminated, many will argue "two wrongs don't make a right," but the flaw in that logic is that such reasoning is essentially calling repentance "wrong." It is never wrong to repent of sin!

For God to forgive one who commits adultery, the adulterer must repent by turning away from the adulterous marriage. In the case of an adulterous marriage, terminating an unscriptural marriage is not a wrong – it is a correct course of action; it is a "**fruit**" of repentance (Matthew 3:8). Consider three Bible parallels which serve as further proof that terminating unscriptural marriages is not wrong but absolutely right, i.e. what God requires:

- i. The book of Ezra describes the Israelites marrying foreign women in direct violation of Deuteronomy 7:3-4. As a result of their sin, God through Ezra told these people, "**Now then make confession to the Lord, the God of your fathers and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives**" (Ezra 10:11, ESV). Though the Israelites were not under New Testament law, we can see the parallel. When people today violate passages like Matthew 19:9 and Romans 7:2-3, God expects them to get out of those unscriptural marriages.
- ii. Mark 6:17-18 records the following in regards to the marriage of Herod and Herodias: "**For it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. For John had been saying to Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.'**" The word "have" denotes possession, ownership, or continuing to undergo and experience something. In this case, based on his rebuke, do you think John the Baptist wanted Herod to keep ("**have**") his wife or terminate the adulterous marriage? I believe we all know the answer.
- iii. If a person was in a homosexual marriage and wanted to become a Christian, would God accept him if he did not turn from the sin of homosexuality? If we say one in an adulterous marriage does not need to terminate the marriage, we must also say the homosexual can continue in his homosexual marriage even though the Bible clearly says it is sinful (Romans 1:26-27; etc.). If we can see why a homosexual relationship must be terminated upon repentance in order to be right with God, then we must apply the same logic to adulterous marriages, which, like every sin, must be forsaken (Job 11:14).

Adulterous marriages are like any other sin we commit – we must stop committing them (Romans 6:1-12). It is just like Pat Donahue said:

Repentance means those who steal must quit stealing (Eph 4:28); those who cuss must quit cussing (Eph 4:29); those who lie must quit lying (Rev 21:8); those in homosexual relationships must terminate those relationships (Rom 1:26-27); and those in adulterous marriages must quit committing adultery – they must terminate those marriages (Luke 16:18). Just like with any other sin, repentance means we “walk away” from that sin (Donahue, Why Adulterous Marriages Must Be Terminated, 2020).

No one is claiming that repentance in such situations is easy. We are simply saying it is required because that is exactly what God’s book says.

Marital Separation and Divorce Not for Fornication (Even Without a Remarriage) are Sinful

In 1 Corinthians 7:2-5, Paul tells us one of the key responsibilities husbands and wives have toward one another in marriage – the fulfillment of each other’s sexual needs.

"BECAUSE OF SEXUAL IMMORALITY, LET EACH MAN HAVE HIS OWN WIFE, AND LET EACH WOMAN HAVE HER OWN HUSBAND. LET THE HUSBAND RENDER TO HIS WIFE THE AFFECTION DUE HER, AND LIKEWISE ALSO THE WIFE TO HER HUSBAND . . . DO NOT DEPRIVE ONE ANOTHER EXCEPT WITH CONSENT FOR A TIME, THAT YOU MAY GIVE YOURSELVES TO FASTING AND PRAYER; AND COME TOGETHER AGAIN SO THAT SATAN DOES NOT TEMPT YOU BECAUSE OF YOUR LACK OF SELF-CONTROL" (1 CORINTHIANS 7:2-5).

This passage helps us understand one of the reasons why it is wrong for a married couple to divorce (save for the Lord's one exception) due to their responsibility to fulfill the sexual needs of the other person. However, 1 Corinthians 7:2-5 also helps us see that it is wrong to separate even without divorcing.

Marital separation even without an official divorce goes directly against what Jesus commanded when He said, ***“Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate”*** (Matthew 19:8). Additionally, there is no way around the simple truth of the matter that husbands and wives are expected to live with another and not separate from each other. Peter said as much in 1 Peter 3:7 when he commanded:

"HUSBANDS, LIKEWISE, DWELL [LIVE, ESV] WITH THEM WITH UNDERSTANDING, GIVING HONOR TO THE WIFE, AS TO THE WEAKER VESSEL, AND AS BEING HEIRS TOGETHER OF THE GRACE OF LIFE, THAT YOUR PRAYERS MAY NOT BE HINDERED" (1 PETER 3:7).

The Oxford Languages Dictionary defines dwell as to "live in or at a specified place." Of course, what is being emphasized by Peter is the husband dwelling with his wife in a compassionate and "**understanding**" way, but it is impossible for a husband to dwell with his wife "**with understanding**" when he is not dwelling (living in the same house) with her in the first place.

Separation without divorce is a sin just like divorce for any reason other than the spouse sexually cheating. Just as Peter did, Paul made this truth especially clear by saying:

"NOW TO THE MARRIED I COMMAND, YET NOT I BUT THE LORD: A WIFE IS NOT TO DEPART [SEPARATE, ESV] FROM HER HUSBAND" (1 CORINTHIANS 7:10).

Examining 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, Keith Sharp explained:

First Corinthians 7:10-11 does not allow separation or divorce without remarriage. The apostle forbids both separation and divorce. He instructs the wife what her options are if she sins or has sinned by separating . . . There is no scriptural difference between divorce and separation. The wife who leaves her husband is unmarried (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). The same Greek word translated "leave" (1 Corinthians 7:10, "chorizo") is the term the Lord used to denote divorce (Matthew 19:6; Mark 10:9). The Pharisees asked about divorce, and Jesus replied, "let not man separate" ("chorizo") (Sharp, 2016).

In place of "**depart**" in 1 Corinthians 7:10, the ESV, RSV, NRSV, YLT, AMP, and NIV all say "**separate**." So, a wife is not to "**separate**" from her husband. That is now three reasons why marital separation is sinful. That should settle the matter then, shouldn't it? Marital separation, even without an official divorce, is wrong; God's book says so.

Additionally, divorce for any reason besides the one Jesus listed, even without remarriage, is a sin because of what the Lord taught in Matthew 5:32:

"BUT I SAY TO YOU THAT WHOEVER DIVORCES HIS WIFE FOR ANY REASON EXCEPT SEXUAL IMMORALITY CAUSES HER TO COMMIT ADULTERY; AND WHOEVER MARRIES A WOMAN WHO IS DIVORCED COMMITS ADULTERY" (MATTHEW 5:32).

However, some contend that God allows divorce beyond the sole exception listed in Matthew 19:9 as long as the divorcing person does not get remarried. People who contend for such use 1 Corinthians 7:11 to support their argument. Continuing the thought from the previous verse, Paul explains, "**But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife.**" Many have claimed that Paul would not have told the woman in these verses what to do if she departed unless departing was not inherently wrong. Of course, this conclusion is riddled with errors.

Firstly, 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 contains what has been termed as “contingency legislation” (otherwise known as “if ... then” legislation). This type of legislation gives instructions about what to do if something occurs but does not necessarily give approval for the that particular something which occurred. An example of such legislation is found (among other places) in Deuteronomy 22:28-29:

"IF A MAN FINDS A YOUNG WOMAN WHO IS A VIRGIN, WHO IS NOT BETROTHED, AND HE SEIZES HER AND LIES WITH HER, AND THEY ARE FOUND OUT, THEN THE MAN WHO LAY WITH HER SHALL GIVE TO THE YOUNG WOMAN'S FATHER FIFTY SHEKELS OF SILVER, AND SHE SHALL BE HIS WIFE BECAUSE HE HAS HUMBLED HER; HE SHALL NOT BE PERMITTED TO DIVORCE HER ALL HIS DAYS" (DEUTERONOMY 22:28-29).

See how contingency legislation in these verses does not necessarily condone, nor condemn the contingency? Rather, instructions are simply presented to follow in case a particular situation occurs. The same thing is happening in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11. But if we apply the same logic some brethren are using with 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, then that means fornication is actually “right” in Deuteronomy 22:28-29 because there a couple is told what to do if they commit fornication. See the problem? Steve Klein explained:

In 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 Paul first gives a command . . . Second, he introduces the possibility that the command might be violated . . . Third, he gives further positive instruction in the event the first command is violated . . . Notice the following passages which as far as I can tell, are the only ones in the New Testament constructed in exactly this way . . . (1) According to Galatians 5:14-15, is it OK for me to "bite and devour" Christians so long as I am careful not to be consumed? (2) According to James 3:13-14, is it OK for me to have "bitter envy and strife" so long as I don't glory in it or lie against the truth? (3) According to Romans 11:18, is it OK for me to "boast against the branches" as long as I remember that "the root supports" me? (4) According to 1 Cor. 7:10-13, is it OK for me to "depart" from my spouse so long as I "remain unmarried" or am later "reconciled?" These questions seem to demand the same answer: No, it is not alright for me to violate the first command! (Klein, "But Even If She Depart", 1988).

1 Corinthians 7:10-11 does not permit divorce as long as no remarriage follows because Jesus taught that unscriptural divorce is a sin, not just unscriptural divorce followed by remarriage.

Matthew 5:32 teaches it is wrong for a man to divorce his wife and gives the only exception to that rule – fornication/sexual immorality. Put in the words of the text, if a man divorces his wife for a reason other than fornication, he sins by putting her into a place of undeserved temptation (“**causes her to commit adultery**”), even if no remarriage follows. In other words, he leaves her in a position where she is much more likely to commit adultery. It is a sin for a man to divorce his wife even if no remarriage follows because God says divorcing her contributes to (“**causes**”) her potentially sinning. Therefore, unscriptural divorce is a sin even without subsequent remarriage. As a reminder, remarriage is not even mentioned in the first half of Matthew 5:32. The text simply says divorce “**for any reason except sexual immorality**” is wrong. That means even if the divorcing person never remarries, sin has been committed.

When discussing Jesus's teaching in Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9, two gospel preachers explained:

Divorce itself is sinful unless it is for the cause of fornication . . . Consider Matthew 5:32 . . . if one divorces his wife for any cause other than fornication, he places her in a position of temptation to commit adultery, and shares the guilt when she does commit adultery (Hall, 1986).

One who causes another to commit adultery is guilty of sin! Yes, divorce (except for fornication) without remarriage is sinful (Sutton, Is Divorce Without Remarriage Sinful?, 2005).

So, no, 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 certainly does not permit divorces for reasons other than fornication just as long no remarriage follows. It really is true what the prophet said: **God hates divorce itself.**

"FOR I HATE DIVORCE,' SAYS THE LORD, THE GOD OF ISRAEL" (MALACHI 2:16A, NASB).

God hates divorce because in every instance of divorce, whether scriptural or unscriptural, sin has occurred. If a scriptural divorce has taken place, the person on the receiving end of the divorce sinned by sexually cheating. This sin of sexual immorality provides the innocent person the liberty to divorce their unfaithful spouse. In an unscriptural divorce, the person who divorces their spouse sins and, consequently, leaves their spouse susceptible to sins of the flesh by divorcing them without scriptural cause. God hates sin (Psalm 11:5); therefore, He hates divorce since it is always indicative of sin in some form or fashion. God hates divorce, which means we should hate it too.

God Expects Christians to Marry Christians

The New Testament teaches Christians should only marry Christians. In Paul's first letter to Corinth, we learn that the apostles had a "***right to take along a believing wife***" (1 Corinthians 9:5). The passage does not say the apostles had a "right to take along a wife." Paul could have made his point about family support without the inclusion of the phrase "***believing wife***." There is an obvious implication in the employment of that phrase. Secondly, 1 Peter 3:7 pictures a husband and wife as being "***heirs together of the grace of life***." How could a husband and wife be heirs together if one of them is an unbeliever? Thirdly, 2 Corinthians 6:14 reads, "***Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?***" Although this verse, in its context, does not specifically condemn marriages to non-Christians, it does condemn unequal yokings of any and every kind. Therefore, marriage to non-Christians would be included.

One of the most common attempts to limit 2 Corinthians 6:14 is to claim that Paul was only discussing business partnerships, friendships, or religious associations and, thus, the passage has nothing to do with marriage. While I certainly agree that, contextually, the verse does not address marital relationships, marriage, by its very definition is one of the clearest and strongest examples of being yoked together.

We know marriage qualifies as a “yoking” due to the following definitions provided from Merriam-Webster:

- **Yoked** – “To become joined or linked.”
- **Marriage** – “The state of being united as spouses in a consensual and contractual relationship recognized by law; the institution whereby individuals are joined in a marriage; an intimate or close union.”

To be “**yoked**” is to be joined or “**bound**” (NASB) to someone. The imagery is taken from the Old Testament to describe two animals being bound together under the same yoke. A yoke joined two animals so that they would move in the same direction, pull the same load, and work together as one unit. If the animals were fundamentally different, the partnership would be difficult, strained, and often destructive (Deuteronomy 22:10). Paul gives this instruction because believers and unbelievers operate from fundamentally different priorities, values, standards, goals, and loyalties. That is why marriage cannot be excluded from Paul’s warning. Furthermore, God Himself described marriage as a yoking, or joining together / binding relationship. Jesus said, “***For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh ... Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate***” (Matthew 19:5-6). Likewise, Paul spoke of a “**bond**” existing between a scripturally married couple (Romans 7:2-3; 1 Corinthians 7:27, 39). Thus, there is no way around it – marriage is, by definition, a yoking, and God says we must not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers.

Marriage is not merely a legal contract. It is a union in which two people are joined so closely that the conduct, decisions, priorities, and direction of one will inevitably affect the other. That is why marriage between a believer and an unbeliever is one of the clearest and strongest examples of being unequally yoked. A husband and wife are joined together emotionally, physically, sexually, financially, and practically. They build a home together, make decisions daily together, raise children together, and influence one another in nearly every area of life. If being “**unequally yoked together**” applies to something as limited as a business relationship, it would have to apply to something as significant as a marital relationship. Even if the unbelieving spouse is moral, kind, and supportive in many ways, there is still a deep division at the most important level of life. One person is trying to move toward God while the other is not. That is the very definition of being unequally yoked. Therefore, Christians should not place themselves into binding relationships that join them closely with unbelievers.

David Lipscomb said the following when he was asked whether or not 2 Corinthians 6:14 applies to marriage:

To be yoked together is to be so connected as to be compelled to walk together in such a manner that the walk and conduct of one is necessarily influenced by the walk and conduct of the other. Wherever a relationship of this kind exists between a Christian and an unbeliever, they are unequally yoked together. The marriage relation is certainly of this character. So also are all the associations in which a Christian is controlled by the actions of others and made responsible for the deeds of others. In the marriage relation the Christian has many duties to perform that would greatly be hindered or prevented by the conduct of the other party. Outside of this scripture, it is plainly contrary to the spirit and letter of the teachings of the Bible that Christians should marry those without. Paul says of the widow: “Let her marry whom she will, only in the

Lord" (1 Corinthians 7:39). He here merely applies a general law to the widow. The same truth and principle are clearly taught in the prohibition of Jewish marriages with those of other nations, and the evils resulting therefrom are recorded for our warning (Lipscomb & Sewell, 1921/1969).

Many object to my and Mr. Lipscomb's conclusion because of Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 6:1. There, Paul said, "***Come out from among them and be separate.***" Some interpret that statement as instructions for what to do after someone becomes unequally yoked, and since such an interpretation would contradict 1 Corinthians 7:12-16, they argue that marriage cannot be included in 2 Corinthians 6:14. However, Paul's teaching in 2 Corinthians 6:1 is preventative, not corrective. "*Come out from among them and be separate*" is not telling Christians what to do after they have become unequally yoked. Rather, it is explaining why we should never become unequally yoked in the first place. The reason Christians are not to become unequally yoked with unbelievers is because we are supposed to be separate; we should never enter such unions.

A Christian who is already married to a non-Christian must not dissolve the marriage. Paul plainly said if a believer is married to an unbeliever and if the unbelieving spouse is willing to continue in the marriage, the Christian must not divorce the unbeliever (1 Corinthians 7:12-16; 1 Peter 3:1-2). However, in 1 Corinthians 7:12-16 and 1 Peter 3:1-2, Paul and Peter addressed Christians who were already unequally yoked in marriages with unbelievers, not encouraging Christians to knowingly enter such unions. A believer must not yield to the temptation to marry an unbeliever, but if the Christian does marry an unbeliever, repentance does not demand termination of the marriage, unlike with adulterous and homosexual marriages.

When Paul said, "***Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers,***" marriage is not an exception to the rule. Marriage is one of the clearest examples of what Paul meant. Marriage is not a casual or distant relationship. It is the deepest earthly bond that exists between two people. A faithful Christian is trying to serve God, put the kingdom of God first, raise children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, worship faithfully, live by scripture, and prepare for eternity. A non-Christian does not share these same priorities. Believers and unbelievers are fundamentally incompatible in the spiritual sense. Therefore, a believer must not enter into marriage with an unbeliever.

Conclusion

Thus far, we have established several foundational truths regarding marriage, divorce, and remarriage under the New Testament. These principles are not unique to one side of the mental divorce debate; in fact, many who advocate for the mental divorce doctrine would agree with much of what has been said to this point. However, agreement on these foundational truths does not resolve the central question before us. The real point of contention is whether a person can be unjustly put away and, if so, what consequences follow from such a divorce. It is at this crucial point that the doctrine of mental divorce diverges from the plain and simple teaching found in God's word. Therefore, having established the biblical framework governing marriage, divorce, and remarriage, we are now prepared to examine the specific claims upon which mental divorce is founded and determine whether those assertions can be harmonized with the words of Christ and His apostles.

IT IS POSSIBLE TO BE UNJUSTLY PUT AWAY

Proponents of mental divorce deny that a person can be unscripturally put away (divorced) against their will. However, all of the divorce and remarriage texts prove that assertion to be false, especially Luke 16:18. That verse leaves no doubt that it is possible for a person to be unscripturally and unjustly put away.

Examining Luke 16:18

In the latter half of Luke 16:18, Jesus plainly states that a person on the receiving end of a divorce (regardless of the reason) has no right to remarry; if she does remarry, God views that second marriage as adulterous. The Lord said:

"WHOEVER DIVORCES HIS WIFE AND MARRIES ANOTHER COMMITS ADULTERY; AND WHOEVER MARRIES HER WHO IS DIVORCED FROM HER HUSBAND COMMITS ADULTERY" (LUKE 16:18).

Let's consider some other translations of this verse so Jesus's words are crystal clear:

- **GW** – *"Any man who divorces his wife to marry another woman is committing adultery. The man who marries a woman divorced in this way is committing adultery."*
- **YLT** – *"Every one who is sending away his wife, and marrying another, doth commit adultery; and every one who is marrying her sent away from a husband doth commit adultery."*
- **WYC** – *"Every man that forsaketh his wife, and weddeth another, doeth lechery [doeth adultery]; and he that weddeth the wife forsaken of the husband, doeth adultery."*
- **GNT** – *"Any man who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery; and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery."*
- **CEV** – *"It is a terrible sin for a man to divorce his wife and marry another woman. It is also a terrible sin for a man to marry a divorced woman."*

Observe that the woman in this text is on the receiving end of a divorce and, thus, is "**divorced.**" Secondly, observe that this woman, if she marries, will be in an adulterous marriage. That means both parties – the divorcer and the divorcee – are scripturally unable to remarry.

A Question...

Having established the implications of Luke 16:18, let's propose a hypothetical question that happens very often:

Betty and Bob get married. After a few years, Betty discovers that Bob sexually cheated with another woman. Before Betty can do anything, Bob files for (initiates) a divorce for incompatibility and is granted a divorce on those grounds. Where does this leave Betty? Although Bob filed for divorce, can Betty remarry since she discovered Bob's infidelity?

According to Luke 16:18, the answer is a simple no. Two requirements must be met in order for Betty to be eligible for remarriage. She must have evidence of Bob's infidelity (she can check this box in this case), but she must also be the one to doing the divorcing (she cannot check this box since Bob succeeded in divorcing her). Betty may have knowledge of Bob's infidelity, but Bob still divorced her. Thus, she has been put away, and Jesus says in Luke 16:18 that if she remarries she will be in an adulterous marriage.

Again, let me repeat that Luke 16:18 shows it is not enough for Betty just to have knowledge of Bob's infidelity in order to remarry (Matthew 19:9), but she also **MUST** be the one to receive the divorce against Bob. To use American legalese, that means Betty must be the plaintiff and Bob must be the defendant on the final divorce decree. Remember, Jesus said in Luke 16:18 that "**whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced from her husband commits adultery.**" With the hypothetical situation of Betty and Bob, Betty is the woman Jesus speaks about in the second half of the verse. Betty may have knowledge of Bob's infidelity, but if Bob is granted a divorce against Betty, she, even against her will, becomes a person "**who is divorced from her husband,**" and Jesus says she cannot remarry. Only the death of Bob would grant Betty the right to remarry (Romans 7:2-3).

If Betty truly desires to follow the teachings of Jesus concerning divorce and remarriage, she must do so even though Bob has chosen not to do the same (Matthew 19:12). Those who oppose this simple truth argue that divinely unauthorized civil divorces are not legitimate, i.e. not real, divorces in the eyes of God, leading to the conclusion that it is actually "impossible" for a person to be unscripturally put away. This thinking often leads to brethren encouraging (sometimes publicly but more often privately) folks like Betty to just play what has been called the "waiting game" in hopes of her later remarriage.

The Waiting Game

If Bob secures an unscriptural divorce against Betty (that is, a divorce for any number of reasons other than sexual immorality/fornication), many proponents of mental divorce will say Bob's divorce is not real since it is unauthorized by God. Therefore, Betty can just play the "waiting game." Depending on just how far brethren are willing to compromise the truth, the "waiting game" can take on a couple of different forms:

- The more conservative version of mental divorce teaches that if Betty already knows Bob committed fornication before he obtains a civil divorce against her, she may allow the divorce proceedings to run their course and still retain the right to remarry. Advocates of this version of mental divorce argue that since Bob's fornication occurred before the civil divorce was finalized, Betty can mentally put him away for that fornication despite him eventually being granted the legal divorce against her.
- The more liberal version of mental divorce teaches that Betty does not even need evidence that Bob committed fornication before the divorce. Instead, if Bob succeeds in divorcing her and she never has knowledge of him cheating beforehand, she can simply wait until he later remarries another woman and thereby commits adultery, and then mentally put him away for that adultery. According to this view, Betty becomes eligible to remarry after Bob enters the subsequent adulterous relationship.

In both versions of the doctrine, the central assumption is the same: it supposedly does not matter that Bob was the one who obtained the civil divorce. Advocates for this doctrine contend that because God does not recognize unscriptural civil divorces as “real” divorces and, therefore, Betty can mentally put away Bob and be scripturally eligible to remarry. Is that actually true though? Is an unscriptural divorce not a “real” divorce?

An Unscriptural Divorce is a Real Divorce Because God Beholds the Evil and the Good

God sees reality exactly as it is. Sinful actions do not become imaginary simply because God condemns those actions. The wise man made the following statement:

"THE EYES OF THE LORD ARE IN EVERY PLACE, BEHOLDING THE EVIL AND THE GOOD"
(PROVERBS 15:3, KJV).

The inspired statement found in Proverbs 15:3 is important to keep in mind when discussing the matter of unscriptural divorces. A major error in the doctrine of mental divorce is the idea that an unscriptural divorce is not a “real” divorce in the eyes of God. According to this view, if a person unlawfully divorces a spouse for a reason other than fornication, then the civil divorce is not a real divorce. In other words, the divorce happened in the courthouse, but no divorce happened in God’s eyes. It is commonly argued that the couple is “divorced in man’s eyes but still married in God’s eyes.” One proponent of mental divorce, while discussing the idea that unauthorized divorces are not real (thus not recognized by God as actually happening), wrote:

The conclusion is simple - legal action does not determine marital rights. One may be legally divorced and still possess the God-given right to remarry. Civil laws and social customs do not supersede divine law (Haile, Legally Divorced, But Free to Remarry, 2001).

Some opponents to mental divorce similarly described the doctrine of mental divorce as follows:

The contention is that since God’s law supersedes man’s law, God does not ‘sanction’ an unscriptural divorce. Therefore, when an unscripturally put away spouse has fervently protested the divorce, and his/her ex-spouse remarries another (after the divorce), then the unscripturally put away person actually becomes eligible to ‘put away’ (by public declaration) the spouse who had already put them away (Belknap, Mental Divorce, Revamped and Revisited, 2000).

Another recent doctrine redefines what the word “divorce” means. The proponents of this theory say that when a person (usually a man) divorces his mate for a cause other than fornication, the divorce is not a “valid” divorce. They have said that when one divorces his wife for a cause other than fornication, the divorce is a “farce”, not a real divorce. Because it is not for the cause of fornication, God does not recognize the divorce; the legal divorce means nothing in God’s sight. Later, when the former wife realizes that her ex-husband is not coming back to her and was committing adultery all the time, she can then decide to “divorce” her ex-husband for the cause of adultery. Since there is no legal way for her to do this, it is a mental act, thus the reason I call it “mental divorce”. This becomes the “valid” divorce and she, therefore, has the right to remarry. Incidentally, the reasoning that allows the wife to divorce her husband for adultery in her mind after he divorces her legally, will allow her to wait until he commits adultery after the divorce

and then divorce him mentally . . . If the legal divorce is not a divorce, then if the ex-husband commits adultery after the legal divorce, their doctrine will allow the woman to mentally divorce her husband and remarry without sin. This has been called “the waiting game” (Williams, 2005).

The terminology “mental divorce” has been applied to scenarios like this: A divorce occurs but not “for fornication.” Either no fornication has taken place, or it was not discovered at the time of the divorce. Later, one of the previously married people develops a sexual relationship with a third party, or an affair that was already on-going becomes publicly known. According to some, the other mate may now “mentally” put away the former spouse and remarry without sin. It is argued that, since the civil divorce has already taken place, and since no additional legal action can be pursued, this “mental divorce” is the only option available (Gwin, 2002).

Proverbs 15:3 dismantles the argument that God does not see unscriptural divorces since the verse conclusively proves that God sees not only what is good, but He also sees what is evil.

God sees idolatry as really occurring even though He condemns it (Exodus 20:3-5; 1 Corinthians 10:14; etc.). God sees murder as really occurring even though He forbids it (2 Samuel 11-12; etc.). God sees false doctrine being taught even though it He detests and unauthorizes such teaching (2 Peter 2:1-3; etc.). God sees all the false churches that permeate our world even though they are false churches teaching and practicing a different gospel (Matthew 15:8-9; etc.). That is because a sinful action is still real even though God does not authorize it. Take Hosea 8:4, for example, God acknowledged that Israel appointed kings **“but not by Me.”** Those kings were unauthorized, but they were still seen as kings to God. Proverbs 15:3 reminds us that God sees all of these sinful acts. Sin does not become imaginary simply because God condemns it.

God sees both righteous and sinful actions. Just like He sees idolatry, murder, false doctrine, false churches, and kings not appointed by Him, God also sees unscriptural divorces. When Jesus said in Matthew 19:9, **“Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery,”** He plainly acknowledged that unlawful divorces happen. He did not say the divorce was fake or imaginary. Instead, He said the divorce was sinful and that remarriage (which is also real and seen by God) after such a divorce equals adultery. Proverbs 15:3 tells us that God sees all of these sins – they are unauthorized but very real! Maurice Lusk explained:

This business of insisting that one may be divorced ‘in the eyes of men’ and not divorced ‘in the eyes of God’ is nonsense. God may not approve of a given action (divorce or whatever), but that does not mean that the action does not occur because God does not approve of it . . . The argument being advanced here is that: ‘All actions not approved of by God become non-actions or actions which do not occur.’ If this is the case, then is it legitimate in any sense to speak of an action as having occurred when in actuality it did not occur? (Maurice W. Lusk, 1982).

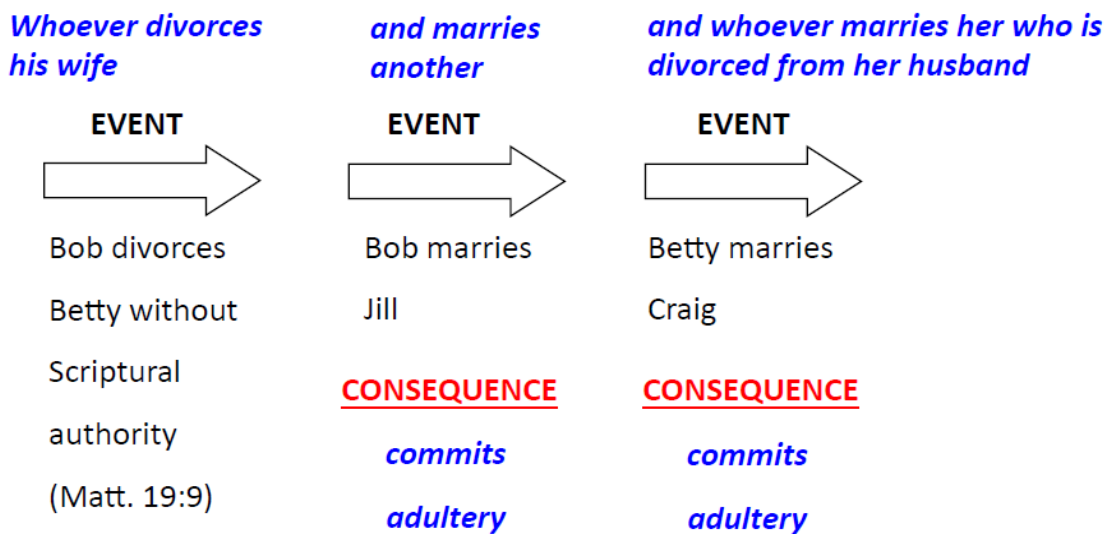
If an unscriptural divorce is not real, then there would be no need for Jesus to discuss subsequent remarriage in Matthew 19:9. The very fact that Jesus addresses the consequences of an unlawful divorce proves that the divorce itself is real. God beholds such divorces, not with approval but as evil. An unscriptural divorce, though unauthorized, is still a real divorce. The people involved are separated, papers were signed, and covenants were broken. The fact that the divorce was sinful does not make it imaginary any more than the fact that a young child was murdered makes it imaginary

since someone sinned by committing such a heinous atrocity. Proverbs 15:3 tells us that God beholds the evil as well as the good, and unlawful divorces – though they are sinful – are always seen by God.

Sinful activities are very real because Proverbs 15:3 proves that ***“the eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good.”*** The rule is that God sees the evil and the good exactly as they are, and unscriptural divorces are no exception to that rule. Man can separate, even without authority from God; of course, man sins when he does this, but that does not mean that sinful action is not real and recognized by God as actually happening. Mental divorce advocates will tell you the exact opposite though. Who will you believe – man or God's word?

Luke 16:18 is as Easy to Understand as Mark 16:16

Looking again at Luke 16:18 in its entirety, Jesus said, ***“Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced from her husband commits adultery.”*** Going back to the example of Bob and Betty, this verse envisions Bob divorcing Betty unscripturally and then later remarrying. Jesus says it is adultery if Betty remarries another man after Bob divorces her, and this is true even after Bob has remarried and committed adultery against Betty. Let’s look at the sequence of this verse just so this truth is clear:



So, yes, Betty may have acquired scriptural grounds for divorce (evidence of fornication), but the verse says nothing about her being able to mentally "divorce" Bob after Bob is granted a divorce against her. In fact, Jesus plainly said that people like Betty absolutely cannot remarry without committing adultery! Speaking of the plain and simple message of this verse, J.T. Smith stated:

Luke 16:18 clears up any position that one wants to take when the first wife is not put away for fornication as per Matthew 5:32; 19:9 ... What else needs to be said? If a man puts away his wife and he remarries, he commits adultery along with the woman he marries. If a woman who is put away remarries she commits adultery with the man whom she marries. What could be simpler or plainer? It seems to me that this is like Mark 16:16. “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.” That is so simple that you have to have “expert help” to misunderstand it. So it is with Luke 16:18 (Smith, 2004).

I agree with Mr. Smith's comparison to Mark 16:16. Sadly, it does not matter how simply God's word may read. People – even members of the Lord's body – still find ways to set aside the plain meaning of scripture. Instead of allowing Luke 16:18 to say exactly what it says, people make Jesus say things He never actually said. Jesus did not describe a woman who could later undo being put away by mentally "divorcing" her former husband who divorced her. Instead, the Lord described a woman who was divorced by her husband and declared that if someone married her then adultery would take place. The doctrine of mental divorce exists for the exact same reason countless denominations which deny the necessity of baptism exist – it is not because the Bible is unclear on the matter, but because its plain teaching stands in direct opposition to the conclusions made by people unwilling to accept the consequences for following the truth.

It cannot be overstated just how tragic and heartbreaking it is when an innocent person faces the possibility of being unjustly put away by her spouse. Few experiences in life compare to the pain of watching a marriage unravel through no fault of one's own. Betty may have remained faithful, honored her vows to Bob, sacrificed daily for the marriage, and desperately fought to preserve what God joined together only to have those efforts rejected. As such, she may be forced to endure betrayal, loneliness, humiliation, financial hardship, fractured family relationships, and years of emotional anguish, all while watching the guilty spouse move on with life as though the marriage never mattered. Such circumstances are profoundly unfair, and any compassionate Christian should grieve for those who endure such a terrible situation. Yet, no amount of sympathy can alter what the Lord has said. An unjustly put away person has no right to remarry unless the former spouse dies (Romans 7:2-3). In that sense, there is a real "waiting game" that Betty must play – not waiting for Bob to commit adultery, not waiting for an opportunity to mentally divorce him, but waiting for the only event scripture identifies as dissolving the marriage bond apart from a scriptural divorce: the death of her former spouse.

The Real Waiting Game

If Betty is put away by Bob (even unscripturally), she must wait for Bob to die before she is ever eligible to marry another man (Romans 7:2-3). She is ineligible to remarry as long as Bob is still living due to the fact that they are still "**bound**" to each another (1 Corinthians 7:39). It is detestable what Bob inflicted upon Betty, but God's requirements for Betty are the same regardless. Windell Wiser explained:

Some argue that the "put away person" (i.e., the divorced person) can sit around and wait until their companion marries again, thus committing adultery, (Mt. 19:9), and then "mentally put them away for fornication" and then marry again without committing adultery . . . If your companion divorces you . . . you may contest the divorce, plead with your companion not to divorce you, and do everything you can to stop it, but if your companion is granted a divorce you are a "put away person" and "whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery." (Mt. 19:9) . . . The fact is that Jesus did NOT give permission for the "put away person" to remarry (Wiser, 1990).

Man can and, sadly, often does act contrary to the will of God. Of course, to act contrary to the will of God is to commit sin (1 John 5:17; 3:4), but even though an action is contrary to God's law, that does not negate its occurrence, nor does acknowledgment of the sin's reality indicate a lack of respect for God's law, regardless of what proponents of mental divorce try to argue.

Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:6 Should Settle the Argument

If we couple Luke 16:18 with Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:6, it could not be more obvious that it is possible to be unjustly put away, meaning an unscriptural divorce is still a real divorce although unauthorized by God. Contrary to what mental divorce advocates claim, although God does not authorize unscriptural divorces, He absolutely and unequivocally does recognize when such divorces occur. In Matthew 5:32, Jesus plainly said:

"BUT I SAY TO YOU THAT WHOEVER DIVORCES HIS WIFE FOR ANY REASON EXCEPT SEXUAL IMMORALITY CAUSES HER TO COMMIT ADULTERY; AND WHOEVER MARRIES A WOMAN WHO IS DIVORCED COMMITS ADULTERY" (**MATTHEW 5:32**).

The Lord recognizes when people put away their spouse even unscripturally – He says an unjustly put away person "**is**" divorced. That obviously means the divorce is real and legitimate although unscriptural and unauthorized. Mental divorce advocates, on the other hand, say such a person "is not" divorced, which is quite literally the exact opposite of what the Lord taught!

To support their false argument that unscripturally put away people are not actually put away (divorced), mental divorce advocates contend that man cannot separate because only God does that. However, Matthew 19:6 implies the opposite. Jesus commanded:

"WHAT GOD HAS JOINED TOGETHER, LET NOT MAN SEPARATE" (**MATTHEW 19:6**).

Why would Jesus tell man not to do something if we were, as mental divorce advocates say, incapable of doing so? Such a teaching would be pointless, would it not? If man cannot separate, there would be no need for Jesus to warn man not to do it. Of course, Jesus never taught that it is impossible for man to separate what God has joined together. In fact, Matthew 19:6 clearly shows the exact opposite!

In Matthew 19:6, Jesus did not tell man he is incapable of separating what God has joined together. Rather, He direct warns man not to do so, showing that sin occurs whenever man does unjustly separate. So, not only is man capable of separating unjustly, God recognizes (although still unauthorizes) when man does unlawfully separate/put asunder. If not, Jesus wasted His breath saying "**let not man separate**" if it is impossible for man to do so.

It really is possible for a husband to take unlawful action against his wife and divorce her in direct violation of God's will. If not, Jesus wasted His breath on another occasion when He stated, "**whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery**" (Matthew 19:9b, KJV). There would be no need to warn put away people about remarrying if there is no such thing as put away people!

In Luke 16:18, Matthew 19:9, and Mark 10:11-12, Jesus describes what a person **can** do but **should not** do. A divine prohibition against something (in this case, an unauthorized divorce) does not make it impossible for man to do that thing. Consider the following passages (ASV) which contain restrictive commands that use the phrase "**let not:**"

- **Matthew 6:3** — *“But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth.”*
- **Romans 6:12** — *“Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey the lusts thereof.”*
- **Ephesians 4:26** — *“Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath.”*
- **Romans 14:3** — *“Let not him that eateth set at nought him that eateth not; and let not him that eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him.”*
- **Romans 14:16** — *“Let not then your good be evil spoken of.”*
- **1 Timothy 5:16** — *“If any woman that believeth hath widows, let her relieve them, and let not the church be burdened; that it may relieve them that are widows indeed.”*
- **James 1:7** — *“For let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord.”*

Do any of the above verses imply that such things cannot happen? Of course not. Our left hand can know when we do a good deed, but we sin when we do so for self-glory. We can let sin reign in our bodies, but that means we are slaves to Satan. We can let the sun go down on our wrath, but we sin if we do. Christians can despise one another over differences in judgment, but we sin if we do. Good can be spoken of as evil, but it is sinful to do so. The church can be burdened, but we sin if we cause the church to be burdened by neglecting our individual responsibilities. A double-minded man can think he will receive something from the Lord, but he will be disappointed. **“Let not”** serves as a prohibition against something, not an indication of it being impossible.

Now, I ask my brethren who support the doctrine of mental divorce to apply that clear principle of truth to Matthew 19:6: **“Wherefore they are no more two, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.”** The verse does not mean man cannot separate what God joined. It means man must not do it. If man does put asunder what God has joined together without scriptural authority, he sins (Matthew 5:32, 19:9). Jesus is not saying it’s impossible for man to sinfully separate; He’s saying it’s forbidden. There is a world of difference between those two things. The mental divorce position only works if we change the meaning of the text by taking a clear prohibition and turning it into an impossibility – something the phrase **“let not”** never means. That’s not rightly dividing the scriptures (2 Timothy 2:15). That’s twisting the scriptures to our own destruction (2 Peter 3:16).

Conclusion

Jesus said it is a sin when someone unscripturally separates what God has joined together. He never said it was impossible to do so. If a doctrine requires us to distort simple and clear biblical language, the problem is not with the text. The problem lies with the doctrine.

MARRIAGE AND THE MARRIAGE BOND ARE NOT EQUIVALENT

Have you ever heard someone explain the reason why an unscripturally divorced person is ineligible for remarriage is because that person “is still married to his first husband/wife?” I have heard brethren say that my entire life. Although the premise of this statement is rooted in truth, such thinking conflates the marriage bond with the marriage itself.

Herodias – “Philip’s Wife”

I have come to think that most Christians conflate marriage with the marriage bond due to what is said regarding the sinful marriage between Herod and Herodias. In Mark 6:17-18, we read:

"FOR HEROD HIMSELF HAD SENT AND LAID HOLD OF JOHN, AND BOUND HIM IN PRISON FOR THE SAKE OF HERODIAS, HIS BROTHER PHILIP'S WIFE; FOR HE HAD MARRIED HER. BECAUSE JOHN HAD SAID TO HEROD, 'IT IS NOT LAWFUL FOR YOU TO HAVE YOUR BROTHER'S WIFE'
(MARK 6:17-18).

It is stated in this text that Herodias was, in a sense, still “*Philip’s wife*” despite the fact that she married Herod. On the surface, the idea that Herodias was still “*Philip’s wife*” would appear to support the key tenant of the mental divorce doctrine which we refuted in the previous section, that being that God supposedly does not recognize sinful divorces, marriages, and remarriages as real divorces, marriages, and remarriages, respectively. However, such a conclusion is only necessary if one reads Mark 6:17-18 in total isolation. If one read Mark 6:17-18 without considering other passages on the subject, it would, indeed, appear that Philip and Herodias were actually still married “in the eyes of God” even though Herodias had married another man. However, when Mark 6:17-18 is not read in isolation but is paired together with Romans 7:2-3, we can see that the reason unauthorized marriages are such is because people are still bound to their original spouses and not still married.

Defining the Marriage Bond

The Bible defines marriage as a unique relationship between one man and one woman, with only one permitted reason for termination (Matthew 19:4-9), but the marriage bond differs from the marriage itself. In Romans 7:2-3, we learn:

"FOR THE WOMAN WHO HAS A HUSBAND IS BOUND BY THE LAW TO HER HUSBAND AS LONG AS HE LIVES. BUT IF THE HUSBAND DIES, SHE IS RELEASED FROM THE LAW OF HER HUSBAND. SO THEN IF, WHILE HER HUSBAND LIVES, SHE MARRIES ANOTHER MAN, SHE WILL BE CALLED AN ADULTERESS; BUT IF HER HUSBAND DIES, SHE IS FREE FROM THAT LAW, SO THAT SHE IS NO ADULTERESS, THOUGH SHE HAS MARRIED ANOTHER MAN" (ROMANS 7:2-3).

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 7:39, partially repeats this teaching by saying, "***A wife is bound by law as long as her husband lives; but if her husband dies, she is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.***" We see from these two passages that husbands and wives are "***bound***" to each other for life; God's general rule is that the marriage bond is for life. Divorce for the cause of fornication (Matthew 19:9) and death are the exceptions to this general rule. God terminates the marriage bond when a person divorces his spouse for fornication. Likewise, God terminates the marriage bond in the event that a spouse dies. So, the marriage bond is not the marriage itself, but is part of what makes a scriptural marriage what it is. No other human relationship has a bond that unites two people together like the marriage bond. Indeed, marriage is distinct from all other human relationships due to this bond.

In Romans 7:3, we can see how the marriage bond continues even after an unscriptural divorce. Divorce does not automatically dissolve the marriage bond (that only occurs when a divorce occurs for the cause of fornication, according to Matthew 5:32, 19:9). A person can divorce his spouse but still be bound to that person since he had no scriptural authority to pursue a divorce. Let's read the verse again so this is clear: "***So then if, while her husband lives, she marries another man, she will be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from that law, so that she is no adulteress, though she has married another man***" (Romans 7:3). The woman in this passage is spoken of as being "***married***" to one man (the second husband) while still being "***bound***" to another man (the first husband). Therefore, Romans 7:2-3 conclusively proves that marriage and the marriage bond are not equivalent but separate and distinct from each other.

Romans 7:3 proves that marriage and the marriage bond are distinct and not equivalent when it gives the case of a woman who is bound to her first husband while also being married but not bound to a second husband. God recognizes the second marriage as a marriage ("***she marries another man***"), but He does not bind them together because she is still bound to her original husband, which is why a marriage to another man while the original husband is still alive makes her an "***adulteress.***"

Going back to Mark 6:17-18, we can see then why Herodias was described as still being "***Philip's wife***" even though she was married to Herod. It is not that Herodias was still the literal wife of Philip. Rather, she was the wife of Philip in the sense that they were still bound to each other. Romans 7:2-3 proves this beyond any shadow of doubt. Again, the passage says, "***For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives . . . So then if, while her husband lives, she marries another man, she will be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from that law, so that she is no adulteress, though she has married another man.***" Therefore, the marriage and the bond are two different things. Divorce does not necessarily loosen the marriage bond. Only divorce for fornication does that, and only for the innocent party. The reason it is sinful for an unscripturally divorced person to remarry is because the person is still bound to the original spouse. In that sense, it is true that Herodias is still "***Philip's wife.***" It is a false conclusion to argue that Herodias was still the literal wife of Philip because that would contradict what Romans 7:2-3 plainly teaches.

Unscripturally Divorced Couples are Bound, Not Married

Despite what Romans 7:2-3 teaches, mental divorce advocates contend that, after the wrongful divorce of an unwilling/innocent mate who is not guilty of fornication, the couple is actually still married "in the eyes of God." This argument is often repeated because brethren conflate marriage

with the marriage bond. For example, one proponent of mental divorce explained his position in the following way:

And so, in conclusion from this, we learn that an unscriptural divorce releases neither party from marriage. When you have an unscriptural divorce, as men count it, it's not so with God. That bond is still in tact (Halbrook, Divorce and Remarriage, 1990).

You see how Mr. Halbrook conflated the marriage bond with the marriage itself? As we have proven, it is absolutely true that a couple who unscripturally divorces is still bound, but they are not at all still married. The assertion that a couple is still married after an unscriptural divorce is not only disproven by Romans 7:2-3, but 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 provides further evidence to support the distinction made in Romans 7:2-3.

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, ***“Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife.”*** When a person wrongfully divorces an unwilling mate (that is exactly what occurs in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11), God calls the divorced person ***“unmarried.”*** The person was once married but, after the unscriptural divorce, has become unmarried due to civil law authorizing the deserting spouse’s actions. Let’s examine the specific language in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 further to determine why a person divorced/deserted by her spouse is ineligible for remarriage:

- *Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried [because she is still married?] or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife.*
- *Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried [because she is still bound?] or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife.*

A basic understanding of the English language allows us to understand why remarriage is a sin in this situation – the couple are still bound but have become ***“unmarried,”*** showing a clear distinction between marriage and the marriage bond, thus proving unscripturally divorced couples are not actually still married “in the eyes of God.” They are still bound, but they are not still married.

Man Can End a Marriage, But Only God Can End the Marriage Bond

Mr. Halbrook was correct in concluding, *“When you have an unscriptural divorce, as men count it, it's not so with God. That bond is still in tact.”* Man does not possess the ability to terminate the marriage bond. Only God can end this bond. Man is capable, however, of ending a marriage.

The following verses (KJV) discuss the terminations of marriages. Please consider what is being put away – both the marriage and the marriage bond, or just the marriage itself:

- **Matthew 5:31-32** – ...whosoever shall put away his wife ... whosoever shall put away his wife...
- **Matthew 19:9** – ...whosoever shall put away his wife ...
- **Mark 10:11-12** – ...whosoever shall put away his wife ... if a woman shall put away her husband...

- **Luke 16:18** – *whosoever putteth away his wife...*
- **1 Corinthians 7:10-11, 13** – *...let not the wife depart from her husband ... let not the husband put away his wife ... if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him.*

In these verses, the Bible says very clearly that a person can “**depart**,” “**put away**” (divorce), and/or “**leave**” the spouse to whom He is still bound and, thus, cause the two to become “**unmarried**” (1 Corinthians 7:10-11) and not unbound, showing man’s ability to terminate a marriage while being unable to terminate the marriage bond due to God’s role in performing the latter act. Thus, marrying, separating, and divorcing are things that “**man**” can do (Matthew 19:6), which is exactly why Jesus warned man against doing so without authority.

Binding and loosing are things God does (Romans 7:2-3). God binds (obligates) a couple when they become scripturally married. God looses that couple when one of the parties dies, and He also looses the innocent party for remarriage when a person divorces a spouse for fornication. However, when a divorce occurs for reasons other than fornication, although man terminates that marriage, God does not loose the two parties from the marriage bond due to them having no scriptural authority to divorce.

Conclusion

The reason people involved in unauthorized divorces are ineligible for remarriage is not because they are still married but because they are still bound. The marriage and the marriage bond are not interchangeable terms; they are two distinct terms with distinct meanings.

THE SEQUENCE OF MATTHEW 19:9

Proponents of mental divorce advocating for "divorces" for fornication after the finalization of a legal divorce attempt to justify their doctrine by asserting that Jesus emphasized the **cause** for the divorce and did not emphasize any particular **procedure** or **sequence**. Is this true?

A Clear Sequence of Events

It is certainly true that Jesus did not address some specific details regarding the procedure for putting a spouse away. However, this does not mean Jesus emphasized no procedure or sequence. In fact, Matthew 19:9 lays out a very clear sequence of events:

"AND I SAY TO YOU, WHOEVER DIVORCES HIS WIFE, EXCEPT FOR SEXUAL IMMORALITY, AND MARRIES ANOTHER, COMMITS ADULTERY; AND WHOEVER MARRIES HER WHO IS DIVORCED COMMITS ADULTERY" (MATTHEW 19:9).

This verse reveals a clear sequence of events that allows a divorced person to be eligible for remarriage. Additionally, this clear sequence of events also reveals who is not eligible for remarriage after a divorce. Let's consider this clear sequence that Jesus lays out:

1. **Bob divorces his wife Betty:** "... *whoever divorces his wife ...*"

NOTE: Bob has no scriptural authority to divorce Betty.

2. **Bob marries another woman named Jill:** "... *and marries another ...*"

NOTE: Bob has now committed adultery by entering into this second marriage with Jill since he had no authority to divorce Betty. This action obviously follows the first action since Bob could not marry Jill while still being married to Betty.

3. **Betty marries another man named Craig:** "... *and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery ...*"

NOTE: Betty has now committed adultery by entering into this second marriage with Craig. This action also obviously follows the first action because the reason Craig commits adultery is because he married Betty, who was put away by Bob.

Now, please reread Matthew 19:9 in its entirety and verify for yourself that I have not misrepresented this sequence of events that the Lord presented:

"AND I SAY TO YOU, WHOEVER DIVORCES HIS WIFE, EXCEPT FOR SEXUAL IMMORALITY, AND MARRIES ANOTHER, COMMITS ADULTERY; AND WHOEVER MARRIES HER WHO IS DIVORCED COMMITS ADULTERY" (MATTHEW 19:9).

Attaching names back to the verse, it would then read as: “*And I say to you, if Bob divorces Betty, except for sexual immorality, and marries Jill, they commit adultery; and if Craig marries Betty, they commit adultery.*” See the sequence of events occurring in this verse?

Mental divorce advocates take issue with those of us who oppose their doctrine because they see us as imposing a sequence on the verse unnecessarily. Yet, it is impossible to read this verse without recognizing that the Lord’s statement is a sequential one. Plus, the hypocrisy in this argument is obvious when you realize these folks admit Betty never has a right to divorce Bob legally or mentally until **AFTER** (indicating a sequence) Bob commits fornication. For example, one proponent of mental divorce put it this way:

Matt. 19:9 . . . explains which divorces and remarriages God will accept as valid under the terms of his law and which He will not accept. If a person sinfully and wrongfully rejects or puts away his mate, his action is a farce so far as changing the obligations he has to that mate under God's law. In terms of God's law, the man is still bound to his mate so long as he lives. If he has unlawful sexual relations with another (whether before or after he wrongfully puts away his true mate), his true mate has scriptural grounds to reject or put him away. That might involve countersuing in the courts if he has a suit for divorce pending. But if he has already been granted a divorce by the courts of man, the laws of man make no provision for her to act. So far as the courts of man are concerned, legal issues such as property rights have already been settled and there is nothing else to be said in the realm of human law. But if he commits adultery (before or after his action in the courts of man), there is something else to be said by divine law-by the moral and spiritual law of the court of God. She now may put away, reject, or divorce him as a moral and spiritual act (Halbrook, Notes and Thoughts for Further Study, 1986).

Notice the language brother Halbrook used – he said that a scriptural remarriage is dependent upon (indicating a sequence) a person divorcing a spouse for fornication: “*If he commits adultery . . . she now may put away, reject, or divorce him.*” So, really, proponents of mental divorce recognize there is a sequence of events that must be followed in order for a person to be eligible for remarriage; they just would rather subvert or outright ignore the **specific sequence** of events the Lord outlined! Additionally, those who promote a second “divorce” for post-civil divorce fornication conflate the significant difference between cause and consequence, or cause and effect.

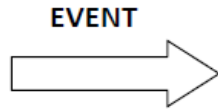
Fornication is a Cause for Divorce; Adultery is a Consequence of Unscriptural Remarriage

Our brethren propping up the false doctrine of mental divorce fail to realize that Jesus did not say **adultery** is the reason (cause) a person can divorce his spouse; He stated **fornication** is the reason a person can divorce his spouse. Jesus said adultery happens **AFTER** an unscriptural divorce and remarriage, not prior to or between these two events. Again, let’s read Matthew 19:9 once more and see how Jesus outlined the sequence of events:

“AND I SAY TO YOU, WHOEVER DIVORCES HIS WIFE, EXCEPT FOR SEXUAL IMMORALITY, AND MARRIES ANOTHER, COMMITS ADULTERY; AND WHOEVER MARRIES HER WHO IS DIVORCED COMMITS ADULTERY” (**MATTHEW 19:9**).

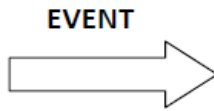
In the hypothetical case of Bob unscripturally divorcing Betty, that means:

*Whoever divorces
his wife, except
for sexual
immorality*



Bob divorces
Betty without
Scriptural
authority

*and marries
another*



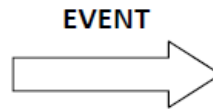
Bob marries
Jill

CONSEQUENCE

commits

adultery

*and whoever marries
her who is divorced*



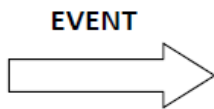
Betty marries
Craig

CONSEQUENCE

commits

adultery

In contrast, let's say Bob scripturally divorces Betty for sexually cheating. How does that affect the sequence Jesus established?



Betty sexually
cheats on Bob

CAUSE



Bob divorces
Betty for
sexually
cheating

EVENT



Bob marries
Jill

EVENT



Betty marries
Craig

CONSEQUENCE

commits

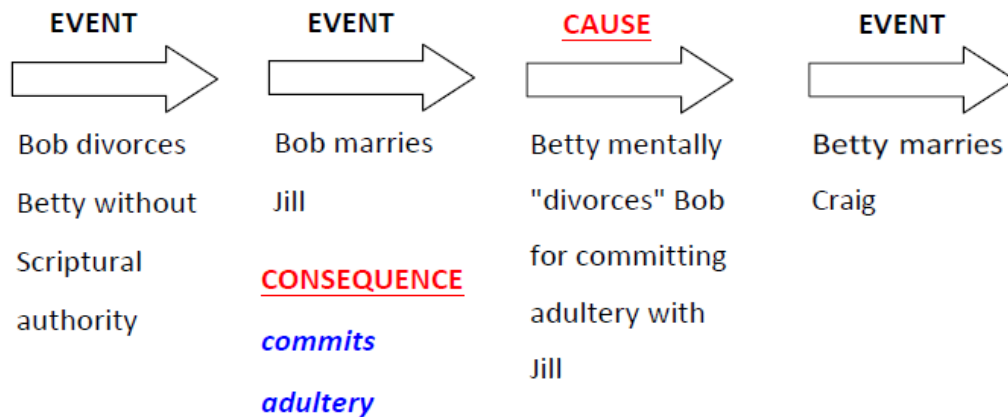
adultery

See how the cause comes before the consequence and not after? That is because fornication must be the cause for divorce and not adultery that occurs after a divorce is finalized. Paul Earnhart explained:

Any man who casts out his faithful wife has acted without love and must share in the guilt of her adultery (her remarriage is assumed). The only exception is divorce for fornication which would preclude her husband making her what she had already become (Earnhart, The Treachery of Divorce, 1998).

Yet, mental divorce advocates use the **CONSEQUENCE** of an unscriptural divorce (adultery) to assert that Betty has a **CAUSE** for divorce, completely ignoring the fact that "cause" and "consequence" are not synonymous terms. In so doing, they subvert the basic principle that a consequence cannot occur before a cause!

Notice how proponents of mental divorce abuse the basic principle that a consequence cannot occur before a cause:



See how mental divorce advocates put the consequence before the cause? A consequence cannot occur before a cause, but that is exactly what proponents of mental divorces are doing when they claim people can mentally "divorce" their spouses for committing adultery when they unscripturally marry another person. Don't take my word for it though; let a few men who hold this doctrine speak for themselves:

"What about a woman who is put away (divorced) by a man simply because the man no longer wanted to be married? Fornication is not involved and the woman repeatedly tried to prevent the divorce, but to no avail. After a couple of years the man marries another woman. Is the 'put away' woman then free to marry?" She certainly is, if she puts away her husband for fornication. She would have to do this before God in purpose of heart since the divorce has already taken place, legally speaking. She could not go through the process of having a legal document charging her husband with "adultery," but God would know (Warnock W. , 1985).

But if he commits adultery (before or after his action in the courts of man), there is something else to be said by divine law – by the moral and spiritual law of the court of God. She now may put away, reject, or divorce him as a moral and spiritual act (Halbrook, Notes and Thoughts for Further Study, 1986).

The parallel account of Matthew 19:9 is Luke 16:18, which shows the exact same sequence that proponents of mental divorce subvert and reject:

“WHOEVER DIVORCES HIS WIFE AND MARRIES ANOTHER COMMITS ADULTERY; AND WHOEVER MARRIES HER WHO IS DIVORCED FROM HER HUSBAND COMMITS ADULTERY” (LUKE 16:18).

Here, when Betty remarries even after the fornication/adultery of Bob, she nonetheless becomes guilty of adultery because Bob put her away. This is the same sequence of events revealed in Matthew 19:9, and neither passage ever teaches that Betty is free to marry another man once Bob remarries, despite what mental divorce advocates want the verses to say.

Conclusion

Simply put, fornication must be the reason at the time of the legal divorce to scripturally justify another marriage. Matthew 19:9 shows conclusively that if Betty wants to be eligible for remarriage, she must divorce Bob for fornication **PRIOR** to him entering a second marriage with Jill (i.e. prior to Bob and Betty’s legal divorce becoming final). David Lipscomb summed it up perfectly when he stated:

Unless the separation took place on account of the lewdness of the companion, it cannot be ground for remarriage (Lipscomb & Sewell, 1921/1969).

Betty must avoid trying to circumvent the Lord's sequence of events by using Bob's adultery with Jill as a cause for divorce because Jesus authorized people to put away an unfaithful spouse for the cause of fornication and not for the consequence of post-civil divorce adultery.

THE "RACE TO THE COURTHOUSE"

Many Christians reject the clear New Testament teachings on divorce and remarriage and, thus, cling to the false doctrine of mental divorce for various reasons. One such reason is due to what has been termed the "race to the courthouse" argument.

"Race to the Courthouse" Defined

What do we mean by "race to the courthouse?" In their San Diego Divorce Attorney Blog, Bickford Blado & Botros explain:

"Race to the courthouse" is an informal name used to describe the rule in some jurisdictions that the first conveyance instrument, mortgage, lien or judgment to be filed with the appropriate recorder's office, will have priority and prevail over documents filed subsequently, irrespective of the date of execution of the documents at issue (Botros, 2016).

Chan P. Townsley (Attorney at Law) wrote:

Is divorce a race to the courthouse? Sadly, the answer to this question is yes, at least a little bit . . . The first party to file for divorce generally is able to set the initial terms of the original Temporary Order . . . Every divorce involves two parties. The "first party to file" is the person in the marriage whose divorce papers are first accepted and filed with the court. Once one of you has "filed" initial papers for divorce, the court will not accept initial papers from the other spouse (Townsley, 2020).

Let's put Mr. Townsley's words into practice by considering the example of Betty and Bob:

Bob is unhappy in his marriage with Betty, so he files for divorce due to incompatibility against Betty's wishes. Once Bob files for divorce, legally speaking, he becomes the plaintiff and Betty becomes the defendant. In other words, Bob is trying to put away Betty, potentially leaving her like the woman described in Luke 16:18 if the divorce proceeds through the legal process and is finalized.

Many mental divorce advocates contend that if divorce is a "race to the courthouse," then a sinful spouse could deprive an innocent person of the right to remarry simply by filing for divorce first. Therefore, to avoid "turning divorce into a race to the courthouse," they argue that an innocent spouse retains the ability to mentally "put away" the guilty party even after being civilly divorced. Although there is some merit to the idea that whoever files for divorce is at a great advantage of being awarded the final divorce, that does not change what the Bible says. Luke 16:18 still reads the same:

"WHOEVER DIVORCES HIS WIFE AND MARRIES ANOTHER COMMITS ADULTERY; AND WHOEVER MARRIES HER WHO IS DIVORCED FROM HER HUSBAND COMMITS ADULTERY" (LUKE 16:18).

The truth is still the truth. If a person is put away by their spouse, Jesus said that person has no right to remarry.

It Sadly Can Be a Race to the Courthouse

Those of us who accept the truth of God regardless of how horrible the circumstances Betty finds herself in due to Bob's terrible sins are accused by mental divorce advocates of punishing Betty and rewarding Bob for being the first to file – thus, the "race to the courthouse" accusation. Just so I am not guilty of misrepresenting proponents of this position, consider the following quotes taken from gospel preachers discussing the matter of a person being put away unscripturally:

In my opinion the whole crux of this controversy is over getting to the courthouse, at least in the United States. The innocent party must file or counter-sue for a divorce or he/she would be the put away and then not permitted to marry, as some reason (Warnock W. E., 2005).

Divine law takes precedent over human laws, customs, and circumstances . . . 'racing to the courthouse,' 'fast talking' lawyers, corrupt judges . . . and accommodating preachers cannot change God's law (Halbrook, Study of Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage, 1996).

When we get into areas of opinions as who files for divorce in the civil courts, who gets the divorce decree in civil courts, what does the paperwork and divorce decree say, and invent such phrases as 'mental marriage,' 'mental divorce,' 'waiting game,' 'second putting away,' 'the innocent, put away person cannot remarry,' etc., we solve no marriage problems, we help no one in their troubled marriages, we bind where Jesus did not bind, and make no scriptural contribution to the cause of truth and salvation of souls (Cavender, 2004).

Although it is unfortunately true in the United States that whoever files for divorce first is put in the "driver's seat" in absolving the relationship, an innocent party **always** (at the time of writing) has the ability to counter sue/file the initial divorce complaint. A. Traub, a divorce attorney in the state of Illinois, explained:

A divorce, as a matter of law, is essentially a legal action used to dissolve a marital contract between two parties, and, as such, in every divorce, there is technically a plaintiff and a defendant. These terms, however, are far less important in a divorce than in other areas of the law . . . The non-filing spouse is the respondent and is given the opportunity to file an answer to the petition including motions of his or her own. For the remainder of the proceedings, each party maintains equal status as a party to the case, with the ability to file motions, request considerations, and present evidence (The Race to the Courthouse: Does Filing First Matter in Divorce?).

Unfortunately, rather than believe people who have direct first-hand knowledge of the law such as this divorce attorney, proponents of mental divorce would rather cling to their false doctrine.

No-Fault Divorces and Wicked Governments

Regarding the subject of no-fault divorces, CNN published an online article titled *What Is No-Fault Divorce, And Why Do Some Conservatives Want To Get Rid Of It?* explaining:

No-fault divorce is, as it sounds, a divorce that can be obtained without anyone having to allege or prove that one party's behavior is to blame. A majority of states also allow fault divorce, where one party can claim reasons like adultery, abandonment, long-term incarceration or cruelty." The writer further explains, "In the simplest terms, no-fault divorce provides an easier path to ending a marriage... No-fault divorce was first legalized in California in 1969 by then-Governor Ronald Reagan, who would eventually become the first US president who had been divorced (Former President Donald Trump was the second.) By 2010, every state had legalized a no-fault divorce option. Before this option, an at-fault divorce was the only recourse for a broken union (Willingham, 2023).

In the United States, since 2010, all 50 states provide married people the opportunity to freely divorce and remarry in direct violation of what passages like Matthew 5:32, 19:9, etc. teach. Of course, the idea that the United States government allows people to do things contrary to the word of God is nothing new. Every government in the history of the earth has established laws encouraging people to violate God's law (including some of God's own divinely aided kingdoms [see the Old Testament]). By allowing no-fault divorces, the United States government has, in many ways, turned divorce into a "race to the courthouse," but so be it! Does that change what the Bible says? No! Every citizen of every government has lived under rulers who support sin, and we are no different today.

Civil Law Serves as Man's Evil "Hands"

Even though divorce has in some ways become a "race to the courthouse" in certain aspects, we are still obligated to obey/accept and not disregard the civil laws and legal procedures for dissolving marriages because civil procedures have been used by God to determine beginnings and endings of marriages ever since the Law of Moses (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). Jesus referred to the same intricacies of civil law's role described in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 for establishing the ends of marriages in Matthew 5:31. Therefore, when unauthorized divorces are mentioned in passages such as Matthew 5:32; 19:3,9; Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18; and 1 Corinthians 7:10-11,15, we must acknowledge that the person received an unauthorized divorce by means of human agency/government (Matthew 5:31, 19:7; Mark 10:4). So, when a government says two people are divorced, that means they really are divorced, regardless if that divorce was scripturally authorized or not.

If you do not believe God uses human governments to establish the beginnings and endings of marriages (even unscriptural ones), consider the following Bible illustration: Peter charged the Jews as crucifying and slaying Christ "***with wicked hands***" (Acts 2:36). The scriptures clearly show the murder of Christ was carried out via the "hands" of government officials and not necessarily each person present to hear Peter's sermon on Pentecost. Therefore, the government can serve as the "hands" in doing man's evil deeds.

Pertaining to divorce, governments, sadly, are guilty everyday of acting as the “hands” of evil men by aiding people who wickedly put asunder what God has joined together. Albert Barnes concluded:

Legislatures have no right to say that men may put away their wives for any other cause [besides fornication]; and where they do, and where there is marriage afterward, by the law of God such marriages are adulterous (Barnes, 1974).

To put summarize what Mr. Barnes said, it is sinful when governmental agencies support and promote unscriptural divorces, but that does not change the truth of the matter: any marriage/remarriage by either party after an unscriptural divorce is an adulterous marriage. Period. That means if Bob “wins” the “race to the courthouse” and ultimately is awarded a divorce against Betty without scriptural authority, and if Betty marries another man while Bob is still living, she commits adultery just like Bob would if he married another woman.

Legal Protections for the Defendant Can Prevent a Person from Being Put Away

Although the person who files for divorce first does have an advantage, it is not as if it is a guarantee that the one who “wins” the “race to the courthouse” is in total control of the outcome. In America, it is, as one lawyer described to me, “*nearly a legal impossibility*” (Unnamed Lawyer, email conversation, February 14, 2023) for Betty to become the person doing the putting away if Bob files first. That being said, although it is extremely difficult for Betty to become the person doing the putting away since Bob filed first, it is not totally impossible – it is “*nearly*” impossible. Is Bob much more likely to be awarded the divorce? Yes. In that sense, divorce is a “race to the courthouse.” However, is Bob guaranteed to be awarded the divorce since he filed first? No.

Although the United States legal system supports biblically unauthorized divorces, provisions are still made to ensure innocent people are legally protected. For example, Bickford Blado & Botros stated:

It makes no difference who files for divorce. The law does not favor the first to file in any way. A party's rights are not affected by filing first, nor are their interest in property or support impacted in anyway (Botros, 2016).

Similarly, Burke & Domercq (Certified Family Law Specialists) declared:

The law gives the Responding party an advantage by allowing the Respondent [defendant] to immediately commence formal discovery . . . This evidence can be detrimental to the Petitioner's [plaintiff's] case (Burke, 2019).

In other words, although Bob may file for divorce first, Betty can still obtain evidence that hurts Bob's case, especially if Bob files a no-fault divorce. In fact, in many states, if Betty obtains clear evidence of Bob committing fault (such as sexually cheating), that fault can ultimately override Bob's no-fault divorce petition.

If Betty wants to avoid becoming a put away person, it is imperative that Betty (if reconciliation is impossible [1 Corinthians 7:11]) seeks to obtain evidence that Bob sexually cheated in order to combat Bob's no-fault divorce filing. As one lawyer explained to me when describing the

need for clear and substantial proof of sexual immorality, Betty's options are very limited once Bob files for divorce against her. This lawyer stated:

I honestly do not know of any circumstance where [Betty], individually, would be granted a divorce against [Bob] absent the Court being convinced [Bob sexually cheated], and ... being able to prove that adultery has occurred. Outside of that, the only way to do that would be by ... consent, which I guess would be possible through a settlement or mediation (Unnamed Lawyer, email conversation, Feb. 14, 2023).

Essentially, this lawyer said divorce in America is a "race to the courthouse," and since Betty "lost" that race, it could lead to her becoming a put away woman even if she does not obtain evidence of Bob committing fornication. Since Bob initiated the divorce by filing first, the only possible way to reverse the roles and Betty become the person doing the putting away is by either:

- Agreeing to a settlement before trial wherein Bob would allow Betty to divorce her,
or
- Betty obtaining concrete evidence of Bob sexually cheating, then going to trial and presenting her evidence with the hope that the court/judge would accept the evidence as substantial proof showing fornication occurred, thus throwing out Bob's no-fault divorce petition and Betty being awarded a fault-based divorce.

There is no disputing that Betty is in an incredibly difficult situation once Bob files for divorce., Although she faces an uphill battle in avoiding becoming a put away person, all hope is not lost for Betty.

It Matters Who is Granted the Divorce, Not Who Initiates It

As we have already explained, in many states in America, even if a spouse files for a no-fault divorce (such as Bob did when he filed on the grounds of incompatibility) the innocent party can file a counterclaim for divorce on the grounds of fornication. If Bob files for divorce over incompatibility (a no-fault divorce), but Betty provides ample evidence of fornication (a fault divorce), then many states will grant Betty a divorce against Bob, making her the person doing the putting away. That means Betty would become the plaintiff and Bob would become the defendant, or the person who will be put away.

In many states, if Betty has direct/concrete evidence proving that Bob is guilty of sexually cheating, and if the court accepts it as sufficient evidence, then Bob's divorce for incompatibility will be overturned and Betty will be granted a divorce against Bob due to her having proof of fault against him. Is that a potentially excruciating process? Absolutely. However, this shows that initiating a divorce does not automatically mean a person will be granted ("win") that divorce. **And, scripturally speaking, it ultimately does not matter who initiates the civil proceedings for divorce anyway because, after all, Jesus said it only matters in the end who is granted the divorce.** Remember the words of Christ:

"WHOEVER DIVORCES HIS WIFE AND MARRIES ANOTHER COMMITS ADULTERY; AND WHOEVER MARRIES HER WHO IS DIVORCED FROM HER HUSBAND COMMITS ADULTERY" (LUKE 16:18).

Of course, a looming question is what if Betty does not have proof of Bob sexually cheating? What if she is unable to prove fault against him? Or what if Bob files for divorce and Betty does not discover Bob's adultery until years later after the divorce is final?

I know this sounds cold, but regardless of how much we dislike the way our government seemingly rewards people who file for divorce first even though they have no scriptural right to divorce, the truth is still the truth. Jesus not only said in Luke 16:18 that divorce for the cause of fornication is the only scriptural grounds for divorce, but He also plainly said that it matters who divorces whom; it matters who is granted the divorce. In legal terms, that means it matters who is the plaintiff and who is the defendant.

If Bob files for divorce without scriptural authority and Betty is never able to uncover evidence of Bob sexually cheating before the divorce is finalized or if her evidence is not enough to satisfy the court, leaving her unable to be granted a legal divorce (as the plaintiff) against Bob, then Betty will be a put away woman with no right to remarry until Bob dies (Romans 7:2-3). No amount of emotional appeals will change this truth. I know that sounds harsh, but God's word does not change just because the government makes it more difficult for people to do right by the Lord. Connie Adams astutely stated:

We can quibble about 'who gets to the courthouse first' and the like, but the Lord still said, "Whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery." It is not binding where Jesus did not bind to say that one who has been divorced is not free to marry for that is precisely what Jesus said (Adams, 2004).

Divorce may have become a "race to the courthouse" in America, but the clear implications of the law of Christ did not change when our legal system began supporting unscriptural divorces.

Marriage and Remarriage are Liberties, Not Commands

The New Testament teaches that we are always obligated to follow the laws of the land. Romans 13:1 tells us:

"LET EVERY SOUL BE SUBJECT TO THE GOVERNING AUTHORITIES. FOR THERE IS NO AUTHORITY EXCEPT FROM GOD, AND THE AUTHORITIES THAT EXIST ARE APPOINTED BY GOD" (ROMANS 13:1).

Although opinions may vary on what all is implied by Romans 13:1, I have never met a Christian who does not accept the general implications of this verse – every soul on earth has a responsibility to obey the laws instituted by our governmental leaders as long as obedience to the laws of the land does not prevent us from being obedient to God (Acts 5:29). 1 Peter 2:13-14 teaches the same thing:

"THEREFORE SUBMIT YOURSELVES TO EVERY ORDINANCE OF MAN FOR THE LORD'S SAKE, WHETHER TO THE KING AS SUPREME, OR TO GOVERNORS, AS TO THOSE WHO ARE SENT BY HIM FOR THE PUNISHMENT OF EVILDOERS AND FOR THE PRAISE OF THOSE WHO DO GOOD"
(1 PETER 2:13-14).

Even though divorce can wind up being a "race to the courthouse," neither of these passages grant a person the right to circumvent the laws of land to accomplish whatever goal he is seeking. In the case of divorce and remarriage, no one has the right to disregard civil procedures for getting married or divorced even if the government supports unscriptural marriages and divorces. We know that to be true because the right to marry/remarry is a "**liberty**" (1 Corinthians 7:39-40), not a law. If marrying and remarrying were God-given commands, a person could appeal to Acts 5:29 to reject a civil government's decision to prevent a marriage from occurring. However, marriage is not a divine mandate; it is a liberty granted by God to those who are scripturally eligible. Therefore, if civil authorities establish procedures governing marriage and divorce, Christians are obligated to respect those procedures so long as doing so does not require them to violate God's law. The fact that a person may be disadvantaged by the outcome of a civil divorce does not authorize him to ignore the legal reality of that divorce and later claim a second, mental divorce. Such reasoning would permit individuals to bypass lawful governmental processes whenever they disliked the result, a principle that cannot be justified from scripture.

One of the foundational points upon which proponents of mental divorce establish their false doctrine is through the idea that since the government supports unscriptural divorces, Christians are not required to accept the results of such divorces. For example, Bobby Graham stated the following:

Jesus presented the will of God in his teaching on marriage. He never referred to the operation of civil law as such in his teaching, but the operation of divine law, in regard to marriage, putting away, fornication, or adultery. Additional error is taught when the legal intricacies of civil law are imposed on the teaching of Jesus. While people should abide by civil law in this field if divine law permits, the procedures and operations of civil law do not determine what marriage is, what putting away is, what adultery is, or when any one of these has taken place (Graham, 1992).

Brother Graham asserted that "*people should abide by civil law*" in the realm of divorce and marriage but only "*if divine law permits*," implying that if civil law allows Bob to unscripturally divorce Betty, Betty does not have to accept the legal outcome of the divorce because Bob used civil law to accomplish something that went against divine law. In other words, Betty can supposedly just ignore what civil law did in supporting Bob's sin, thus allowing her to mentally put Bob away if she discovers evidence of him committing adultery. Tim Haile made the same assertion when he claimed:

Legal action does not determine marital rights. One may be legally divorced and still possess the God-given right to remarry . . . A put away person has no right to remarry, but before forbidding one to marry, let us examine their circumstances and determine whether or not justice has been denied, and a divine liberty has been ignored . . . With regard to marriage and divorce procedure, we should follow civil rules and social customs so long as they accommodate us in doing what the Bible allows (Rom. 13:1-7; Acts 5:29). However, when civil law fails to facilitate in such matters, we must default to whatever procedures and mechanisms may best serve us (Haile, Legally Divorced, But Free to Remarry, 2001).

The key issue with Mr. Graham's and Mr. Haile's conclusions is that the **ONLY** occasions upon which a person is not obligated to abide by civil law is when a government forces that person to commit sin (Acts 5:29), not when the government forces a person to deal with the repercussions of another person's sins, nor when these "*procedures and mechanisms*" do not "*best serve us*."

Neither Romans 13:1; 1 Peter 2:13-14; nor Acts 5:29 grant a person the right to disregard civil procedures for divorce simply because the government supports unscriptural marriages and divorces. It is no more authorized for me to stop paying my taxes to a sinful government than it is for me to reject established procedures for divorce because the government authorizes unscriptural divorces. Consider an illustration: I own property in a small town that became "wet" a few years ago, meaning local businesses can now sell alcohol. Since drinking alcohol violates the word of God, could I refuse to pay my property taxes as God commands (Romans 13:7) since I know the town government is using my tax money to support businesses offering a product that encourages people to sin? Of course not! Just because the government uses my tax money for sinful purposes does not mean I have gained the liberty of no longer being required to follow government-ordained laws. This exact same principle is at play when it comes to divorce.

Even though the laws of the land may permit a person to unscripturally divorce his spouse, that does not give Christians the right to circumvent governmental policies regarding divorce and remarriage to avoid becoming a put away person or disregard the consequences of such by "mentally" divorcing a spouse. A person has no right to deny the responsibility of civil government in the matter of divorce because Acts 5:29 ("***We must obey God rather than man***") only applies when the government forces us to sin. A person being put away unscripturally is not being forced to sin; they are being sinned against, of which they must patiently endure (Matthew 19:12; 1 Peter 2:19-20). Passages like Romans 13:1 and 1 Peter 2:13-14 require every person to submit to the ordinances of civil authorities, even if obedience makes our lives and service to God more difficult by having to accept the consequences of another person's sins against us.

Civil law does not force Betty to sin by accepting the consequences of Bob unscripturally divorcing her, which means she has **ZERO** right to disregard the role of civil law in dissolving a marriage. Instead of the government forcing Betty to sin, they are forcing her to accept the daily consequences of Bob's sin due to him unjustly putting her away. There is an enormous difference between the two. For example, during the COVID-19 Pandemic when the United States government enforced shelter-in-place restrictions on citizens preventing them from leaving their home even to attend the church services, Christians had every right (and responsibility) to disregard civil law in order to comply with divine law by attending the worship services to partake of the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7). If we obeyed civil law and forsook the assemblies, then we transgressed God's law by submitting to civil law. However, there is no parallel whatsoever to be made between this example and denying the outcome of a legal unscriptural divorce.

In the case of Bob and Betty, even though civil law is supporting Bob's unscriptural divorce against Betty, the government is in no way forcing Betty to sin like it would be if the government required Betty not to attend church services. Therefore, Betty must not only follow civil procedures for scripturally authorized marriages and divorces, but she also must deal with the consequences if Bob sins against her by using the government to perpetrate an unscriptural divorce. It is a horrible situation, no doubt about it, but such is always the case when innocent people are forced to deal with the consequences of someone else's sins.

Furthermore, brother Graham also insisted that civil law does not determine when marriages/divorces take place. His exact words were: *"The procedures and operations of civil law do not determine what marriage is, what putting away is, what adultery is, or when any one of these has taken place."* Privately, brother Graham and I debated this issue in 2023 (he rejected a request to publicly debate the subject) and he argued that God, at no point in history, ever gave civil law the right/ability to begin or terminate marriages, which is another key tenant many hold in supporting the false doctrine of mental divorce. For example, Tim Haile wrote:

To most people, the very mention of the words "marriage" and "divorce" conjure images of a courthouse, with its lawyers, judges, documents and procedures. In fact, the words "divorce" and "courthouse" are inseparable in the minds of many . . . Many people in our society automatically think of "civil court procedures" when they think of marriage and divorce. What has caused them to think this way? Have they been so instructed in God's word? Are there biblical statements directly linking the marriage bond to civil court procedures? What about "divorce?" Are there passages that specify civil law procedures as the only means by which a person may sunder his marriage or repudiate a mate? Every honest student of the scriptures knows the answer - it is "no"! In the absence of any Scripture, to what, then, do we attribute this linkage? 1 Corinthians 8:7 provides the answer. Men have become accustomed to think of marriage and divorce as legal actions. They have now grown so familiar with the practice that they are uncomfortable with any suggestion that the two are not inherently connected . . . Let us not attribute to civil governments more authority than divinely bestowed. Let us not allow human courts to define divine institutions, or become the arbiters of the dispensing of divine liberties. They have been given no such authority (Haile, Accustomed to "Divorce" Procedure, 2003).

So, we must ask – is it true that civil law does not determine when marriages/divorces take place? Is it true that the civil procedures which take place during a divorce is just a man-made custom and nothing more, as brother Haile implied?

God Gave Governments the Right to Terminate Marriages Under the Law of Moses

In 2007, brother Andy Sochor made the following assertion in defense of the “mental divorce” doctrine:

Like marriage, civil government is an institution ordained by God. The authorities are in place to carry out certain responsibilities. But one would search in vain to find any verse in Romans 13 or elsewhere that gives civil authority any role in establishing marriages and divorces. Civil governments may choose to recognize or record marriages and divorces. This is what the government does in our country. Since the governing authorities choose to do this, Christians should follow whatever it is they deem necessary to recognize and record marriages and divorces per the instructions in Romans 13. But what about one who would put away his spouse? Can he put away his spouse by filing for divorce in the court of law? Certainly. This can be an expedient way for one to put away his mate. But is this the only way? For this to be the only way, we would have to see one of two things in Scripture. Either Jesus had to specify a civil procedure as the way for one to put away his spouse or the New Testament has to teach that the civil authorities play a role in establishing marriages and divorces. Jesus specified no procedure, civil or otherwise. And civil authorities have been given no role by God in establishing marriages and divorces (Sochor, Understanding the Putting Away Controversy).

Brother Sochor is absolutely correct in stating that civil government is in place to "carry out responsibilities" for God. Romans 13:1-2 tells us, "**Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.**" The issue, however, is that Mr. Sochor, just like brothers Graham and Haile, denies the responsibilities God granted civil governments regarding marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

Admittedly, it appears there was no ceremonial or legal requirement to get married before the Law of Moses, such as in the days of Isaac. It is recorded, "**Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent; and he took Rebekah and she became his wife, and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death**" (Genesis 24:67). Since there appears to have been no legal requirement for marriage, evidently and consequently there also would have been no legal requirement at that time to divorce (if such even existed yet or if God permitted it). Incidentally, this may also still be the case in the most remote and "uncivilized" places in the world today. During the time of Moses, on the other hand, divorce did involve a legal process requiring a person to write a "**certificate of divorce**" to put away a spouse (Deuteronomy 24:1-4), proving civil laws and procedures have been used by God to determine beginnings and endings of marriages ever since the Law of Moses, thus disproving both Mr. Graham's, Mr. Haile's, and Mr. Sochor's assertions.

The certificate of divorce mentioned in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 was, by all accounts a legal document. Regarding Deuteronomy 24 and this certificate of divorce, Jameison-Faussett-Brown Commentary states:

It appears that the practice of divorces was at this early period very prevalent amongst the Israelites, who had in all probability become familiar with it in Egypt. The usage, being too deep-rooted to be soon or easily abolished, was tolerated by Moses (Mt 19:8). But it was accompanied under the law with two conditions, which were calculated greatly to prevent the evils incident to the permitted system; namely: (1) The act of divorcement was to be certified on a written document, the preparation of which, with legal formality, would afford time for reflection and repentance; and (2) In the event of the divorced wife being married to another husband, she could not, on the termination of that second marriage, be restored to her first husband, however desirous he might be to receive her [Jameison-Faussett-Brown, 1871] [jfb.x.v.xxiv].

Similarly, Albert Barnes, in describing Jesus repeating the procedure of a man giving his wife a certificate of divorce in Matthew 5:31-32, explains:

To give her a writing; to sit down deliberately to look at the matter, and probably, also to bring the case before some scribe or learned man, to write a divorce in the legal form (Barnes, 1974).

Regarding the process for divorce under the Law of Moses, the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia states:

No man could unceremoniously and capriciously dismiss his wife without the semblance of a trial. In case one became dissatisfied with his wife, (1) he had to write her a bill of divorce ... drawn up by constituted legal authority and in due legal form" (International Standard Bible Encyclopedia) [Vol. 2, 864].

The Pulpit Commentary provides similar information on this certificate of divorce. Commenting on Deuteronomy 21:1-4, the Pulpit Commentary states:

The prohibition of a return of the wife to her first husband, as well as the necessity of a formal bill of divorcement being given to the woman before she could be sent away, could not fail to be checks on the licence of divorce, as doubtless they were intended to be . . . Moses restrains divorce thus far that he requires it to take place . . . by means of a legal document (The Pulpit Commentary, 1962) [Deuteronomy].

Additionally, when examining Mark 10 and Matthew 19, the Pulpit Commentary states the following about the legal nature of the certificate of divorce:

The Law of Moses put some restraint upon the freedom with which men had till then put away their wives; for thenceforth, a divorce could not take place until some legal steps had been taken, and a regular instrument had been drawn up; and this delay might often be the means of preventing a divorce which might otherwise have been effected in a moment of passion. Thus this legislation was adapted to the imperfect moral condition of the people, who were as yet quite unprepared for a higher moral code (The Pulpit Commentary, 1962) [Mark & Luke].

A writing of divorcement. The man who desired to divorce his wife could not effect this separation by mere word of mouth or by violent ejection; he must have a written document formally prepared and witnessed, necessitating certain delay and publicity . . . The bill of divorcement had to be drawn and witnesses procured, and afforded time to obviate the effects of sudden impulses of passion (The Pulpit Commentary, 1962) [Matthew].

Furthermore, Strong, in his Exhaustive Concordance, explains that the Hebrew word “sepher” (#5612) translated “bill” or “certificate” is from the word “cephar,” which he defines as: “properly, writing (the art or a document); by implication, a book -- bill, book, evidence.” Brown-Driver-Briggs specifically define the example of the “certificate of divorce” in Deuteronomy 24:1 as a “legal document.” Similarly, the NET translators render the phrase in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 as a “**divorce document**” instead of certificate of divorce; in Matthew 5:31, the NET translation of “**legal document**” is used to represent the “*divorce document*” mentioned in Deuteronomy 24:1. So, contrary to what many mental divorce advocates will tell you, God granted governments the power to begin/end marriages (even unscripturally) thousands of years ago. As two gospel preachers explained:

The cephers was an official writing, of public interest, concern and notice. It is not to be confused with writing a personal note on a sheet of paper, as some have suggested, that a man could scribble a note to his wife, “I am dismissing you” (or words to that effect), and that this would qualify as a “bill of divorcement.” How silly some can become when wanting to justify an unscriptural procedure! (Frost, The Marriage Covenant and Ratification, 2003).

The best of the more recent translations of the Bible has “divorces” instead of “put away” in passages like Matthew 19:9. (See the New King James Version, New American Standard Bible, and the New International Version.) The scholars who made these translations are absolutely correct in giving this rendering. “Put away” refers not only to a mental determination to end a marriage, but also to the actual legal and physical termination of the marriage relationship - what we call divorce . . . In the context of Matthew 19, the Pharisees had asked Jesus why Moses

"commanded to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?" Jesus' answer was that, "Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to PUT AWAY your wives..." In Deuteronomy 24:1-2, we find that Moses had indeed allowed a man to write his wife "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." Jesus said that Moses allowed them to put away their wives, but notice that the text in Deuteronomy does not say "put away." It refers to a bill of divorcement, a sending out of the house or an end to co-habitation, and the freedom to legally remarry. This is what our Lord calls "put away." This is His definition! (Klein, What Does "Put Away" Mean?, 1989).

As a reminder, brother Sochor stated that for divorce via a court of law to be the only means by which a divorce may occur *"we would have to see one of two things in Scripture. Either Jesus had to specify a civil procedure as the way for one to put away his spouse or the New Testament has to teach that the civil authorities play a role in establishing marriages and divorces."* As we have already shown, Deuteronomy 24:1-4 described a legal action that was required to dissolve a marriage under the Law of Moses, and Jesus repeated this exact same legal process in His **"gospel"** (Matthew 4:23), i.e. New Testament, sermon in Matthew 5:31. That means Jesus did acknowledge civil government's role in establishing the end of a marriage; that also means Jesus did, in fact, address the legal aspect of divorce. While giving his New Testament law in Matthew 5:32, He did not say, "Thou must go to the courthouse to file a divorce," but Jesus's reference to the certificate of divorce in the previous verse provides clear evidence of a general truth, which is God gave legal governments authority to begin/end marriages.

Jesus's language in Matthew 5:31 undeniably proves that – to flip Andy's words – *"civil authorities play a role in establishing marriages and divorces."* Since Jesus referred to government playing a role in beginning/ending a marriage, that means we must follow whatever procedure our particular government requires to obtain a divorce. By simply acknowledging the certificate of divorce required by the Law of Moses, Jesus reiterated the truth that God granted governments the power to begin/end marriages thousands of years ago. As such, we are required (it is not just an *"expediency"* like brother Sochor claims; it is an obligation) to follow the established procedures of legal divorces (Romans 13:1-2; 1 Peter 2:13-14) and accept the outcome of those divorces, even if it means we are negatively affected by wicked governments and wicked spouses (Matthew 19:11-12).

The Definition of Putting Away

A misconception among Christians is that "put away," or "divorce," simply refers to an action of the mind. It is supposed that "put away" means something like "to mentally determine that a person's spouse will no longer be his/her spouse." However, that is neither the "textbook definition," nor is it how the Bible defines the term "put away" (KJV, ASV, etc.), or "divorce" (NKJV, NASB, ESV, ISV, HCSB, NIV, RSV, NRSV, etc.).

Although brethren like Bobby Graham, Tim Haile, and Andy Sochor would argue the opposite, when we consider the English definition of the word "divorce," we learn that divorce necessarily involves some sort of official/legal procedure to dissolve a marriage. When discussing Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, brother Haile asserted:

Jesus clearly stated the reason that would allow for divorce and remarriage, however, He did not specify any particular civil law or cultural tradition to define the procedure for that divorce (Haile, What Constitutes Biblical "Putting Away?", 2001).

Although Jesus did not specifically define the procedure for divorce in a legal sense, the very word “divorce” demands that there be some sort of legal procedure involved in dissolving the relationship.

Below are various definitions of the word “divorce” in the context of ceasing a marriage between two people.

- **Oxford Languages Dictionary** – *the legal dissolution of a marriage by a court or other competent body.*
- **The Britannica Dictionary** – *the ending of a marriage by a legal process.*
- **Cambridge Dictionary** – *an official or legal process to end a marriage.*
- **Vocabulary.com** – *the legal dissolution of a marriage.*
- **Merriam-Webster** – *the action or an instance of legally dissolving . . . a marriage.*
- **American Psychological Association** – *the legal dissolution of marriage, leaving the partners free to remarry.*

Do you notice the common and obvious theme among each definition? Divorce (the dissolution of a marriage) involves some sort of official/legal procedure. Now, does that mean the same legal obligations are uniform throughout every culture and society? Of course not. If a country’s laws mandate a person who is pursuing a divorce against his wife to walk around a chair three times counterclockwise while reciting the national anthem, then that person is obligated to do just that to obtain the divorce. And if a country requires a person to fill out paperwork and submit it through the appropriate channels at the local courthouse, then that person is likewise obligated to do just that in order to obtain the divorce. Kevin Cauley explained:

The reality is that if the law permits divorce for some reason other than fornication, such a divorce is still considered by God as binding because the very character of the institution of marriage (and divorce) requires public acknowledgement and that necessitates human involvement. There is no such thing as a secret marriage and there is no such thing as a secret divorce; such actions must be taken publicly by definition of the institution as God ordained it (Cauley, Adultery, 2024).

Jesus did not define the legal/formal procedure for obtaining a divorce, but that does not mean there is no legal/formal aspect to obtaining a divorce. Again, the very definition of the word demands there be such!

The Bible, as it often does, provides its own definitions for us on this issue. For example, when Mary was "**found with child of the Holy Ghost**," the Bible states that "**Joseph her husband . . . was minded to put her away privily**" (Matthew 1:18-19, KJV). If all that is involved in putting someone away is determining in one's mind to put that person away, then Joseph already put Mary away in this text. But, to the contrary, the text makes it obvious that Joseph had not actually put Mary away

yet even though he was "*minded*" to do so. That means there is more involved in putting someone away than mental determination.

Furthermore, in the context of Matthew 19 we find additional evidence that proves there is more to putting away than just a mental decision. In Matthew 19:7, the Pharisees asked Jesus, "***Why did Moses . . . command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?***" (v.7). Jesus responded by saying, "***Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives; but from the beginning it was not so***" (v.8). Jesus accurately explained that Moses allowed the Jews to "*put away*" their wives (Deuteronomy 24:1-4), but notice that Deuteronomy 24:1-2 does not actually use the term "put away." In Deuteronomy 24:1-2, we find that Moses required a man to write his wife "***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.***" So, to "*put away*" (Jesus's term in Matthew 19:8 for the actions described in Deuteronomy 24:1-2) a spouse under the Law of Moses a person had to (1) conjure up a "*bill of divorcement*" (i.e. a legal document), and (2) end the cohabitation by sending the person out of the house. Only after a person accomplished these two things could a person be free to remarry. This is what our Lord meant when he used the term "*put away.*"

Based on the "textbook definitions," the example of Joseph and Mary, and how Jesus Himself defined putting away, it is clear that there is much more involved in a "putting away" / "divorce" than just mentally determining to do so.

Governments Supporting No-Fault Divorces Doesn't Change the Truth

Despite the Bible conclusively proving brothers Graham, Haile, Sochor, et al. wrong in concluding civil laws and procedures have nothing to do with terminating marriages, they and many other Christians ignore God's word on this matter due to the United States allowing no-fault divorces. This sad affair of the American government authorizing and promoting no-fault divorces has somehow turned into a justification for many Christians to deny the necessity of obeying the laws of the land in regards to accepting the consequences of unscriptural divorces decrees.

We have already referred to no-fault divorce in a general sense but let us define the term more specifically just so we are clear. By no-fault divorce we mean:

No-fault divorce is the dissolution of a marriage that does not require a showing of wrongdoing by either party. Laws providing for no-fault divorce allow a family court to grant a divorce in response to a petition by either party of the marriage without requiring the petitioner to provide evidence that the defendant has committed a breach of the marital contract (Wikipedia, 2024).

If mental divorce advocates would take their logic of not accepting/obeying the laws of the land in terms of unscriptural divorces and apply that thinking to all matters in which our government allows people to violate New Testament law, they would see the error in their thinking. Consider again the illustration of my hometown becoming "wet" and selling alcohol. Since drinking alcohol violates the word of God, could I refuse to pay taxes to the town because I know the town government is using my tax money to support businesses offering a product that encourages people to sin? Of course not! Just because the government allows people to sin does not mean Christians gain the liberty to stop following government-ordained laws. This exact same principle is at play when it comes to divorce. Two brethren explained it perfectly when they stated:

When the law is structured in such a way so as to permit (and even favor) divorces for some reason other than fornication, the Christian has no recourse but to submit to the law. Such may take away a Christian's right, but it does not cause a Christian to violate a command of God, because God has never commanded Christians to marry. When a command of God comes in conflict with the law of the land, we must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29). However, when it is a matter of one's right, the Christian is under obligation to sacrifice his right in order to be submissive to the law (Romans 13:5, Romans 15:1-3) (Cauley, Adultery, 2024).

The only area in which one is not to obey the law is when demand is made of the Christian to disobey God (Acts 5:29). To reject civil law in areas not to our liking, or that are perceived to be unfair, is to reject God. Brethren need to realize that it is not a light thing to cavalierly exclude civil law from any regulatory control of marriages and divorces. And we need to be careful that we do not equate our sense of "fairness" with God's will. Obey the law, not just to avoid punishment, but do so with a good conscience, knowing that we have acted with respect to what God has ordained (Frost, The Marriage Covenant and Ratification, 2003).

Another brother made a similar point when he described the similarities between the society in Jesus's day and our society today:

The Law included both the writing and causes for the writing. Our civil courts do the same today. It is up to the individual to divorce the mate for the proper cause . . . There must be the cause -- then the proper divorce proceedings. Anything short of this is unacceptable in a society where there are two kingdoms present and trying to interact with one another. God realized this inevitable interaction when Paul penned the words of Romans 13 . . . Filing for divorce, filling out the paperwork, and going through court proceedings in no way oversteps the bounds that God established . . . If it is wrong to recognize the need of interacting with government rules in a scripturally unlawful (though legal) divorce -- then how is it that it is proper in a divorce recognized as scripturally lawful? You can't have one and not the other. One must claim the necessity of following civil law on this, or following no civil law. One cannot simply accept the parts he likes, and uphold these as right - then reject the parts (a divorce not for fornication) he doesn't approve. It is a take all or none situation (Seavers, Early 2000s).

Even though the laws of the land may dictate that a person can unjustly divorce his spouse, that does not give Christians the right to circumvent governmental policies regarding divorce and remarriage to avoid becoming a put away person or disregard the consequences of such. As we have stated multiple times, passages like Romans 13:1 and 1 Peter 2:13-14 require every person to submit to the ordinances of civil authorities, even if that makes our lives and service to God more difficult by having to accept the consequences of another person's sins against us.

The "Race to the Courthouse" is the Same as "Dying on the Way to the Baptistry"

One of the most revealing ways to evaluate the "race to the courthouse" argument made by brethren who support mental divorce is by comparing it to another argument that faithful Christians have been asked for generations: "What about the person who dies on the way to the baptistry?"

Those who deny the necessity of baptism for salvation often present the following scenario as “proof” that baptism is not required to be saved: A person hears the gospel, believes in Christ, repents of his sins, and is on his way to be baptized when he is suddenly killed in an automobile accident. Will this person be saved? The problem with this argument is that it attempts to overturn clear biblical teaching by appealing to a difficult and emotional circumstance. Regardless of how tragic the situation may be, Jesus still said, **“He who believes and is baptized will be saved”** (Mark 16:16). The existence of a difficult hypothetical does not give us the authority to change the fact that God says sins are forgiven in baptism.

The “race to the courthouse” argument posed by advocates of mental divorce suffers from the very same flaw as the “dying on the way to the baptistry” argument. Mental divorce advocates point to the tragic circumstance of an innocent spouse who is beaten to the courthouse by a guilty spouse and then argue that Jesus’s teaching must be reinterpreted to allow a subsequent “mental divorce.” Yet, the hardship of the circumstance does not alter the facts any more than the automobile accident changes what the Bible teaches about baptism. Incidentally, I’ve actually started hearing some brethren (one being a local gospel preacher) in recent years softening their stance on a person who believes but dies before being baptized by basically saying, “I’ll let God handle that situation.” Let’s be very clear – I’ll let God handle that situation too, but I know **EXACTLY** how He will handle it because of what the New Testament teaches on how to be saved! A person dying on the way to the baptistry does not change what Jesus says in Mark 16:16, nor does a person being put away unfairly change what Jesus says in Matthew 19:9.

Just as we cannot change the fact that God says sins are forgiven in baptism, we also cannot change two fundamental truths concerning divorce and remarriage. First, as we have already proven, divorce by its very nature requires some sort of formal/legal component. Both by its definition and through its application in scripture, divorce is a formal action accomplished through a recognized process, not merely a private thought occurring in one’s mind. A person may dislike the outcome of a civil proceeding, but that does not grant him the right to invent a second, invisible “divorce” that exists only in his mind. Second, Jesus plainly taught that a put-away person has no right to remarry. Notice that Jesus did not create an exception for the person who was put away, nor did He say that the put away spouse could reverse the situation through a mental act. He simply stated that the one who is divorced from his or her spouse has no right to enter another marriage (Luke 16:18) while the former spouse is still living (Romans 7:2-3).

It has never been wise or scripturally sound to make appeals to difficult circumstances in an order to “establish” truth or authority (Matthew 22:23-33). The truth and how establish authority does not change based upon circumstances. Certainly, an innocent spouse who “loses” the “race to the courthouse” finds himself in a heartbreaking situation. Just as, certainly, the person who dies on the way to the baptistry presents a heartbreaking situation. However, neither tragedy gives man the authority to rewrite God’s laws. If we reject the “dying on the way to the baptistry” argument because we understand that difficult circumstances do not overturn clear biblical teaching, then consistency demands that we reject the “race to the courthouse” argument posed by mental divorce advocates for the very same reason.

The truth remains the truth, even when its application is painful (John 6:60; Matthew 19:16-22; etc.). Hard cases have never and will never change divine law.

Conclusion

No amount of arguing over how ungodly governments perpetrate all sorts of injustices upon innocent people changes the truth of the matter: When a person is legally put away by a spouse who follows the civil procedures for divorce, that means that the divorce is a real (although unauthorized by God) divorce (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). Just because Bob involves the government in carrying out his sin against Betty by filing for and ultimately receiving a divorce without scriptural cause, it does not make his wicked action any less real. Bob's divorce is real and Betty is a put away woman with no right to marry until Bob dies (Romans 7:2-3).

MUST THE LEGAL DOCUMENTATION LIST INFIDELITY AS THE CAUSE?

An important question arises after establishing the necessity of following civil/legal divorce procedures for obtaining a divorce: In order to obtain a scriptural divorce, must the legal paperwork list fornication as the cause, or reason, for the termination of the marriage?

What Jesus Did and Did Not Specify

In the United States, although most divorces are filed as no-fault divorces, the option still exists in most states to pursue a divorce for fault-based grounds, such as fornication (legally speaking, adultery). For example, in the state of Alabama, a person has the right to claim any of the following faults:

- 1) *Your spouse was physically and incurably incapacitated from entering into marriage at the time the marriage was performed.*
- 2) *Your spouse committed adultery.*
- 3) *Your spouse abandoned you for at least one year prior to filing.*
- 4) *Your spouse has been imprisoned for the previous two years before filing in a sentence that is at least seven years.*
- 5) *Your spouse committed a crime against nature either before or during the marriage.*
- 6) *Your spouse became addicted to drugs or alcohol during the marriage.*
- 7) *Your spouse has been confined to a mental health institution for at least five consecutive years and is deemed incurably insane by a mental health professional.*
- 8) *Your wife was pregnant at the time of the marriage without your knowledge or agency.*
- 9) *Your spouse committed actual violence against you (domestic violence).*
- 10) *As a wife, you lived separately and apart from your husband in Alabama, for at least two years, without his support.*

(Grounds for Divorce, 2024)

Considering Jesus stated in Matthew 5:31-32 that the only scriptural cause for divorce is fornication (sexually cheating), the sole fault-based ground for divorce that a person could pursue in an Alabama and not violate what Jesus states is reason (2) *Your spouse committed adultery*. Now, to be clear, I am not suggesting a person must legally file a divorce on the grounds of adultery; I am simply saying that, of the ten causes listed here, reason (2) *Your spouse committed adultery* is the only one that fits what Jesus allows.

I make the caveat that I am not suggesting a person's divorce paperwork must say adultery/fornication because Jesus really did not say nor necessarily suggest that in order to divorce for fornication Betty must have that cause (reason) written on – to use Bible language – her certificate of divorce. He simply stated fornication must be the **reason** for the divorce, and He left it at that.

In Matthew 5:31-32, Jesus addressed the details for why a scriptural divorce may occur but not the details of what must be included in the legal filings. His exact words were as follows:

"FURTHERMORE IT HAS BEEN SAID, 'WHOEVER DIVORCES HIS WIFE, LET HIM GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE.' BUT I SAY TO YOU THAT WHOEVER DIVORCES HIS WIFE FOR ANY REASON EXCEPT SEXUAL IMMORALITY CAUSES HER TO COMMIT ADULTERY; AND WHOEVER MARRIES A WOMAN WHO IS DIVORCED COMMITS ADULTERY" (MATTHEW 5:31-32).

Consider what David Lipscomb said while answering questions regarding various civil procedures involved with divorce cases in the United States:

The scriptures forbid the marriage of one separated from a husband or wife, save when separated for the cause of adultery . . . Suits in court are more generally based on the reasons and causes the lawyers think proper and available than on the complaints of the client . . . The failure to allege the cause in the civil suit ought not to set aside this evidence. But there is so much looseness in the churches on the sanctity of the marriage relation, so little regard for Scripture teaching, it is well to guard another point. The violation of the marriage vow not only must exist, but it must be the cause and ground of separation . . . Unless the separation took place on account of the lewdness of the companion, it cannot be ground for remarriage . . . The intention has everything to do with obedience to the command of God. It must not be an incidental happening to obey God when we go and do as we please, but a clear and distinct purpose to be governed by the [divine] law, to justify it (Lipscomb & Sewell, 1921/1969; Sochor, Understanding the Putting Away Controversy).

In the United States, although there are many states that still allow fault-based divorces such as divorce on the grounds of adultery, it is extremely difficult for a person to be granted a divorce for such a cause due to the hurdles that are present in providing evidence to the court. Of course, this does not change the truth if Jesus actually specified that the legal documentation must list fornication as the cause for divorce. However, neither Matthew 5:31-32 nor any other New Testament passage discussing matters of divorce ever state that the legal documentation must say such. Therefore, due to the Lord not specifying what must be written on the legal divorce documentation, if Betty knows for a fact that Bob sexually cheated on her and she desires to file for divorce, I believe the no-fault based ground of "incompatibility," due its broad definition, can be scripturally used as the legal ground for divorce if Betty views her and Bob's incompatibility as being caused by Bob's infidelity.

Incompatibility and its Possible Implications

If Betty knows for a fact that Bob sexually cheated but her evidence is only circumstantial, a court will not grant Betty a divorce for fornication/adultery. However, all hope is not lost for Betty. She is still legally capable of filing for divorce for incompatibility (a no-fault divorce not requiring any evidence of wrongdoing):

Most divorces in Alabama are filed based on grounds of no fault. Many people call this "irreconcilable differences," though the state does not use those terms. If you wish to file for divorce without alleging your spouse is at fault, there are technically three options under Alabama law. You may allege in the divorce paperwork that:

- i. You and your spouse suffer from an incompatibility of temperament and can no longer live together.*
- ii. There has been an irretrievable breakdown of the marriage such that further attempts at reconciliation are impractical, futile, or not in your family's best interests.*
- iii. You or your spouse have voluntarily abandoned the marriage.*

(Grounds for Divorce, 2024)

If Betty knows for a fact that Bob sexually cheated, not only is Betty legally capable of filing for divorce for incompatibility, but I also believe she is scripturally authorized to do so given the broad definition of incompatibility. Consider various definitions of "incompatibility" and determine for yourself if you think Bob's infidelity can lead to Betty feeling she is no longer compatible, thus, unable to remain married to him:

- **US Legal Definitions** – *not able to live in harmonious or agreeable combination. When there is conflict in the pattern of behavior and reaction it is said to be incompatibility of temperament. This is due to the different manner of thinking and behaving of a human being. This is a ground for divorce in most states, when a married couple no longer have desire to live together due to incompatibility of temperament.*
- **Oxford Languages Dictionary** – *the condition of two things being so different in nature as to be incapable of coexisting; inability of two people to live together harmoniously.*
- **The Britannica Dictionary** – *not compatible: such as not able to exist together without trouble or conflict : not going together well.*
- **Oxford Learner's Dictionary** – *the fact of people or things not being able to live or exist together without problems.*
- **American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology** – *the state in which two or more people are unable to interact harmoniously with each other.*
- **Merriam-Webster** – *not compatible: such as incapable of association or harmonious coexistence.*

If Betty feels she is unable to live together harmoniously or coexist with Bob due to his infidelity, I see no issue with Betty pursuing the legal ground of incompatibility as the cause for divorce. Pat Donahue explained:

You can find "who divorced who" on USA divorce papers – plaintiff and defendant. But the real reason is not always on the papers. The reason is in somebody's heart/mind . . . My wife and I could be incompatible because she is sleeping with another man . . . If the real reason he divorced her was "for fornication" and he is the plaintiff, then I believe he has done what Jesus required

in Matt 19:9 in order to be eligible for remarriage. As to divorcing for incompatibility, Jesus really didn't say or suggest necessarily that in order to divorce for fornication a person must feel "incapable of coexisting" with their spouse or feel like the marriage is irreparable. However, I do believe filing under that very broad category suffices when the "specific" reason is fornication (Donahue, Email Conversation, 2024).

Now, understandably, someone may ask, "Wait a minute. You're against the act of 'mentally' putting away but you're okay with the real reason for a divorce being a 'mental' matter with God knowing the real reason?" To that question I say – **you are absolutely correct**. The reason I fight against the false doctrine of mental divorce is because the scriptures show that divorce is not just a mental act; people are also required to follow whatever legal procedures exist in order to obtain a divorce. As such, a "mental divorce" is not a real divorce at all.

As we have already proven, it is impossible for Betty to divorce Bob once Bob legally divorces her, even unscripturally because (1) divorce necessarily requires legal/formal procedures, and (2) since Betty is "**unmarried**" with no right to remarry after Bob receives a legal divorce against her (1 Corinthians 7:10-11), she cannot divorce someone to whom she is not legally married. The idea that God knows the real reason behind a legal divorce which does not have fornication listed as the cause on the paperwork stands in total contrast to mental divorce because, again, a "mental divorce" is not a real divorce. Furthermore, whereas divorce involves both a mental and a legal/formal act, forming a reason to pursue a divorce is solely a mental act. Consider three definitions of the word "reason" that prove this point, all provided by the Oxford Languages Dictionary:

- *"a cause, explanation, or justification for an action or event."*
- *"the power of the mind to think, understand, and form judgments by a process of logic."*
- *"think, understand, and form judgments by a process of logic."*

No part of these three definitions speak to anything other than matters of the mind. Therefore, if Betty has sufficient evidence to satisfy her conscience in scripturally pursuing a divorce against Bob but finds it impossible to receive a legal divorce on the grounds of fornication/adultery, I see nothing unscriptural with her listing incompatibility as the cause for divorce as long she is the plaintiff in the case (the person doing the putting away) and Bob's fornication is the motivation for the divorce. If Betty does follow the legal procedures as required for putting Bob away, she has various other options at her disposal that she can use to make it known under oath the core reason for her and Bob's incompatibility.

Legal Provisions for Clarifying the Real Cause for a Divorce

NOTE: The example described in this section occurred to a real-life Christian in 21st century America. Names have been replaced to protect those involved.

While many men fighting to defend the mental divorce doctrine spend a lot of time disregarding the government's role and the various civil procedures involved in dissolving marriages, they seemingly know very little about something of which they are so passionate.

In most states, if Bob files a divorce against Betty for forgetting to do the laundry, Betty can contest the divorce. The divorce will then go through what is known as the discovery process where

interrogatories and depositions can take place. The American Bar Association describes the events included in this process as follows:

The formal process of exchanging information between the parties about the witnesses and evidence they will present at trial. Discovery enables the parties to know before the trial begins what evidence may be presented . . . One of the most common methods of discovery is to take depositions. A deposition is an out-of-court statement given under oath by any person involved in the case. It is to be used at trial or in preparation for trial. It may be in the form of a written transcript, a videotape, or both. In most states, either of the parties may take the deposition of the other party, or of any other witness. Both sides have the right to be present during oral depositions . . . Usually depositions consist of an oral examination, followed by cross-examination by the opposing side. In addition to taking depositions, either party may submit written questions, called interrogatories , to the other party and require that they be answered in writing under oath. If one party chooses to use an interrogatory, written questions are sent to the lawyer representing the other side, and that party has a period of time in which to answer (How Courts Work | Steps in a Trial | Discovery, 2021).

Thanks to this discovery process, when Eddie Williams went through his divorce in the early 2020s, he was able to avoid being put away by his wife Lisa Williams, who filed for divorce against him without scriptural cause. Eddie avoided being put away by reaching a settlement where he was made the plaintiff in his divorce even though Lisa filed for divorce first against his wishes and without scriptural authority.

During the discovery process of his divorce, Eddie hired a private investigator and was able to uncover evidence of Lisa sexually cheating through said investigations, as well as his own personal investigations of Lisa's social media activity, private messages, etc. When Eddie's lawyer received this evidence, he suggested having Lisa answer interrogatories related to what – in her eyes – caused the breakdown of the marriage and state if she ever sexually cheated during the course of their marriage. Lisa ultimately denied ever sexually cheating and, in turn, her lawyer sent interrogatories asking Eddie similar questions. When Eddie answered these questions (as a reminder, these questions are answered under oath), he provided roughly ten-and-a-half pages of information related to the breakdown of the marriage. In the last paragraph of his interrogatory response, Eddie clearly stated that he refused *“to remain married to someone who values their spouse so little that they would cheat sexually against them not just once, but . . . on numerous occasions and with numerous partners.”* After providing this statement, Eddie amended his initial divorce counterclaim of incompatibility to pursue a divorce on the legal grounds of adultery. Due to the information Eddie provided in the interrogatory response, Lisa and her lawyer were able to see with their own eyes the evidence that would be presented in court and on the public record to prove she committed fornication/adultery.

After the discovery process was completed, as Eddie and Lisa got closer to the trial date, Eddie's lawyer made preparations to, under oath, depose Lisa and the men with whom she was alleged to have committed fornication. Before the deposition was ever conducted, Eddie and Lisa were able to negotiate a settlement to avoid going to trial wherein:

- Lisa received a financial settlement to drop her original divorce complaint. In other words, she withdrew her divorce filing so it was as if she never filed for divorce.
- Eddie filed for and was granted a divorce on the grounds of incompatibility.

It was an incredibly difficult process for Eddie, but without the legal protections that our civil government provides via the discovery process, Eddie would not have been able to use the evidence of Lisa's infidelity as leverage to convince her to drop her divorce complaint and avoid becoming a put away man. Furthermore, even though Eddie divorced his wife on the grounds of incompatibility, he will forever be able to point to his interrogatory response to show that the reason for the incompatibility was due to Lisa's infidelity. As a reminder, in the last paragraph of that interrogatory response, Eddie clearly stated that he refused "*to remain married to someone who values their spouse so little that they would cheat sexually against them not just once, but . . . on numerous occasions and with numerous partners.*" In addition to this interrogatory response, Eddie also wrote a statement explaining why he sought to dissolve the marriage with Lisa and had it legally notarized a few days prior to the divorce being finalized so he could have an official document stating the core reason for his divorce that would accompany the other documentation associated with the legal paperwork. The closing paragraph of that notarized statement reads as follows:

I want it to be forever known that although the legal reason for the divorce between [Lisa] and I is due to "incompatibility of temperament," the real reason I divorced my wife is because she sexually cheated with [Joe] and [Rob]. I would never have agreed to the settlement where I (as the plaintiff) divorced my wife (as the defendant) if not for the clear and excessive amount of evidence proving her infidelity while we were still husband and wife.

I use Eddie's example to illustrate how, although the United States government supports unscriptural divorces, there are provisions in place that God's people can use to protect themselves, potentially preserve their right to remarriage, make clear the real reason for divorce, all while remaining in subjection to the word of God.

Conclusion

Even when a person receives a divorce on the grounds of incompatibility, there are ways to make it clear to the court and the public record what caused the incompatibility. That said, although I do not believe that in a scriptural divorce the cause (fornication) must be written or stipulated on the court documents, I still encourage every person who may face the terrible circumstances of enduring proceedings to make every effort to have fornication (legally speaking, adultery) as the grounds for divorce. Betty, for instance, rather than immediately conceding to the idea of divorcing for incompatibility, should fight to get fornication/adultery listed on the legal paperwork to avoid the appearance of impropriety (1 Thessalonians 5:22). Consider some reasons Betty should make the effort to have fornication/adultery listed as the cause for divorce on the legal paperwork:

- We know what "incompatibility" means in 99% of divorce cases – an unscriptural divorce has taken place. Betty should want to avoid there ever being any questions about the scriptural legitimacy of her divorce (1 Thessalonians 5:22; 2 Corinthians 6:3).
- Since most divorces on the grounds of incompatibility occur for unscriptural reasons, Betty should be concerned about how others might perceive her (2 Corinthians 8:20-21).
- Betty may be refused membership at a congregation that she wishes to join because they may have doubt as to the real reason for her divorce (Acts 9:26).
- Betty may desire to remarry after she divorces Bob. A faithful Christian looking to date/marry might not be gung-ho about getting into a relationship with Betty if she does not have fornication/adultery stipulated on the legal paperwork (1 Timothy 5:22)

Is it required that infidelity be listed as the reason on the divorce papers? No, I do not believe Jesus makes this requirement. While I believe Betty is scripturally authorized to divorce Bob on the grounds of incompatibility if she has solid evidence of his infidelity, I still recommend she try to get fornication/adultery listed on the legal divorce filing to avoid any potential problems that could pop up later.

ACCOMMODATIVE LANGUAGE

Did you know accommodative language is a means for establishing Bible authority? I did not realize this was the case until I spoke with a proponent of mental divorce. For instance, when discussing whether a man who was legally put away by his wife has a right to remarry, one gospel preacher told me:

If the woman then marries another man or has sexual relations with another, does she commit adultery, which is fornication? Answer: Yes. Matthew 5:32; 19:9. Because divine law was paramount in these matters, establishing who was rightfully the spouse of another, accommodative language was needed to describe the areas where divine law was not heeded. This always happens when civil laws contravene divine laws (Unnamed Gospel Preacher, email conversation, December 24, 2023).

Of course, you likely will never hear one single gospel preacher ever preach a sermon on Bible authority and include accommodative language as a means for authority like they would commands, approved examples, necessary inferences, etc. Take for example the above quoted preacher. I have known this preacher nearly my entire life. I would consider him to be an excellent teacher when it comes to preaching on Bible authority, as well as a number of other subjects. That said, I have never – not one time – heard him discuss how the implementation of accommodative language in the Bible "always happens when civil laws contravene divine law." In fact, even after making such a bold assertion, this brother did not provide one single verse to back up his claim. Yet, somehow, when it comes to establishing authority for who is eligible for remarriage, this preacher and countless others who would never bring up accommodative language during a sermon on Bible authority will argue that passages like Matthew 19:9; Luke 16:18; Mark 10:11-12; and 1 Corinthians 7:10-15 all must be examined through the lens of accommodative language. Why is that?

What is Accommodative Language?

First, let's establish what we mean by accommodative language. Richard Nordquist, professor emeritus of rhetoric and English at Georgia Southern University, defined accommodative language in this way:

In linguistics, accommodation is the process by which participants in a conversation adjust their accent, diction [specific choice of words], or other aspects of language according to the speech style of the other participant... Accommodation most often takes the form of convergence, when a speaker chooses a language variety that seems to fit the style of the other speaker (Nordquist, 2020).

We accommodate our language in various ways today. For example, we often adjust the way we speak depending on our social setting and audience. Take, for instance, a doctor diagnosing a sick patient. The way the doctor discusses the illness will vary greatly if he is deliberating on the case with a fellow doctor versus explaining the side effects of the sickness with the patient. The doctor will accommodate his speech so the patient can easily understand the necessary information.

God speaks to us through His revealed word in ways that are understandable (John 8:32; Ephesians 3:4), regardless of the language we speak. To do so, required accommodation. For instance, Jesus accommodated His speech on certain occasions so that everyone who heard him could understand. Irven Lee explained:

Simplicity generally characterized our Lord as He talked. We are told in Mark 12:37 that the common people heard him gladly. They would not have heard him gladly if they could not have understood him. It is beyond our comprehension that One who was with God in the creation and who possessed knowledge as far above ours as the heavens are above the earth could come in the flesh and so speak that the common people could hear Him gladly. They were the ones that were the easiest for him to reach. He did not reach the high and mighty, and certainly he made no effort to speak only to the high and mighty. He made a special effort to speak to the poor, to those who had had less opportunity in the field of education, and to those who were little in their own sight (Lee, 1976).

Not only did Jesus Himself speak in such a way that the “common” person could understand, but the entire Bible is divinely designed and preserved so that all generations can obtain the necessary knowledge required to be saved (Isaiah 40:8; Matthew 24:35). That is why we can trust soundly translated versions of the original Hebrew and Greek Old and New Testaments, respectively. Thus, we can say that the Bible – regardless of time, culture, language, or any other possible hindrances – will never be rendered as impossible for man to understand and obey. So, what's the issue?

Accommodative Language and Mental Divorce

Proponents of mental divorce assert that Jesus did not actually mean what He said in Matthew 19:9; Luke 16:18; Mark 10:11-12; etc. when he called marriages "marriages" and divorces "divorces." Sounds odd, doesn't it? That's because it is. One brother who opposed the position explained the mental divorce/accommodative language viewpoint as follows:

As the Bible speaks of “marriages” not approved of God, the word is used “accommodatively” (as men view the relationship) and not “actually.” So with divorce. There are “marriages, accommodatively speaking,” and there are “marriages actually,” and there are “divorces, accommodatively speaking,” and there are “divorces actually” (Frost, Mental Marriages and Mental Divorces).

Confusing, right? Let's look at Matthew 19:9 and try to make sense of the convoluted mess that proponents of mental divorce have made. Here is what Matthew 19:9 says:

"AND I SAY TO YOU, WHOEVER DIVORCES HIS WIFE, EXCEPT FOR SEXUAL IMMORALITY, AND MARRIES ANOTHER, COMMITS ADULTERY; AND WHOEVER MARRIES HER WHO IS DIVORCED COMMITS ADULTERY" **(MATTHEW 19:9)**.

Now, here is how mental divorce advocates read the verse:

"AND I SAY UNTO YOU, WHOEVER DIVORCES (REAL DIVORCE) FOR THE CAUSE OF FORNICATION MAY MARRY (REAL MARRIAGE) ANOTHER. WHOEVER DIVORCES (NOT ACTUALLY DIVORCED BECAUSE IT IS UNAUTHORIZED), WITHOUT FORNICATION AS THE CAUSE AND MARRIES ANOTHER (NOT ACTUALLY MARRIED BECAUSE IT IS UNAUTHORIZED) COMMITS ADULTERY (BECAUSE THE DIVORCE WAS NOT RECOGNIZED AS REAL SINCE IT IS UNAUTHORIZED); AND WHOEVER MARRIES HER (NOT ACTUALLY MARRIED BECAUSE IT IS UNAUTHORIZED) WHO IS DIVORCED (NOT ACTUALLY DIVORCED BECAUSE IT IS UNAUTHORIZED) COMMITS ADULTERY (BECAUSE SHE IS NOT ACTUALLY DIVORCED SINCE THE DIVORCE IS UNAUTHORIZED). IF SHE WHO IS DIVORCED (NOT ACTUALLY DIVORCED BECAUSE IT IS UNAUTHORIZED) DID NOT CONSENT TO THE DIVORCE (NOT A REAL DIVORCE BECAUSE IT IS UNAUTHORIZED) SHE MAY MENTALLY DIVORCE (REAL DIVORCE) SO THAT HE WHO MARRIES HER (REAL MARRIAGE) DOES NOT COMMIT ADULTERY" **(MENTAL DIVORCE ACCOMMODATIVE LANGUAGE VERSION OF MATTHEW 19:9)**.

If the problems with this "interpretation" of Matthew 19:9 are not abundantly obvious, consider how Gene Frost described the issues with the mental divorce approach to this verse:

First, the use of the word "divorce," though used just the once, is given two definitions: (1) actual, literal divorce, and (2) no divorce, only accommodatively so-called. They have Jesus speaking of one who "divorces" when He means one who does not divorce. In this latter case, Jesus is guilty of deception . . . Jesus did not inform the hearers that He was shifting between both literally and accommodatively, that He meant both. They asked about actual, literal divorce, and if Jesus equivocated, and used the same word in two senses, He deceived the audience . . . To claim that Jesus gave two differing senses to this one and the same instance of the word "divorce" involves Jesus in a fallacy of syntax. There is a rule of literary interpretation that a word can have but one fixed meaning in the connection in which it occurs. Yet, the "mental divorce" proponents have Jesus in violation of this canon, using the same word with two meanings! Jesus is not guilty. The fallacy is in the argument of the "mental divorce" theorist and not in what Jesus said . . . It is a general rule that all words and sentences should be taken literally, unless for sound reasons they cannot be. One does not have the right to assign a figurative usage to a word simply to accommodate his theology (Frost, Accommodative Divorce, 2002).

The greatest issue with the mental divorce approach is the simple fact that if Jesus called something a "marriage" or "divorce" and did not actually mean said marriages or divorces were real, then that would consequently force us to question literally the entire Bible because how would we ever know when a particular instruction, restriction, legislation, or command was meant literally or only accommodatively? Gene Frost further explained:

The [mental divorce] theorist has great difficulty with what is said and presumes to tell us what the writer means: when he means what he says and when he does not mean what he says and is speaking accommodatively. Give a false teacher this prerogative – to tell when the Lord means what He says and when He doesn't – and he can prove anything (Frost, The Case For "Mental Divorce").

I agree wholeheartedly with brother Frost. Take, for example, one of the most simply constructed passages in the Bible – Mark 16:16. When Jesus said, “**He who believes and is baptized will be saved,**” maybe Jesus was using the term “**saved**” accommodatively. Maybe water baptism does not literally save. That is how most denominational people view Mark 16:16. They look at passages like Mark 16:16 and 1 Peter 3:21, which both plainly state that water baptism literally “**saves,**” yet deny the simple fact that baptism saves. The exact same thing occurs when brethren deny the simplicity of language found in passages like Matthew 19:9; Luke 16:18; Mark 10:11-12; etc. They deny the fact that Jesus spoke plainly and literally when He said things like a put away person “**is divorced**” (Matthew 5:32). Maurice Lusk provided wise advice:

It is far better to take the language of a given text as meaning what it says (i. e. married means married, divorced means divorced), than to play this game of semantical gymnastics wherein words do not mean what they mean (Maurice W. Lusk, 1982).

If we make the unnecessary inference that Jesus was speaking accommodatively rather than literally in these passages, I will suggest to you that we must completely alter the way we read the entire Bible, and, in so doing, we turn God into an author of confusion – shame on us for that (1 Corinthians 14:33)!

“Husband” and “Wife” are Used Accommodatively in Scripture

To be clear, as we have already mentioned, it is absolutely true that accommodative language does exist in the Bible. Jesus spoke accommodatively in the sense that He spoke in such a way that even the “common” person could understand Him. Likewise, there is even evidence of inspired writers using accommodative language when discussing marriage. For instance, we can confidently say that the terms “husband” and “wife” are used accommodatively at various points in the New Testament, but not in a way that supports the false doctrine of mental divorce.

Consider Matthew 22:24-30; Romans 7:3; and 1 Corinthians 7:39, where each passage clearly teaches that, upon the death of a spouse, the marriage and the bond attached to that marriage dissolves. Yet, in each case, the Bible uses the terms “**husband**” and “**wife**” in reference to both the partner who died and the spouse who is alive and remains. Since the Bible clearly teaches that death severs the marriage and the bond (Romans 7:2-3; 1 Corinthians 7:39), we know the terms “**wife**” and “**husband**” in these passages are used accommodatively. In other words, even though the Bible refers to these people as “**husband**” and “**wife,**” they are not actually husband and wife anymore since one of them died. The terms are used accommodatively.

Another circumstance in which “husband” and “wife” are used in an accommodative sense is where a spouse is “**bound**” to one husband while being “**married to another**” husband (Romans 7:3). Such is the case in Mark 6:17-18, where we learn that even after Herod married Herodias, she was still Philip’s “**wife.**” Herodias was not literally Philip’s wife but, rather, she was Philip’s wife in the sense that she was still bound to him, which is why the marriage to Herod was unlawful.

Similarly, in John 4:15-18, Jesus asked a woman to call her “**husband,**” but they both agreed the man she lived with was not really her husband. Therefore, the terms “**husband**” and “**wife**” are used in an accommodative sense to indicate a person is married to one whom God has not bound them together (Matthew 19:6).

Zero Evidence of "Marriage" and "Divorce" Ever Being Used Accommodatively

These verses using the terms "husband" and "wife" accommodatively supposedly serve as "proof texts" for proponents of mental divorce. They believe such passages support their erroneous assertion that the terms "marriage" and "divorce" in passages like Matthew 19:9, etc. are used in the same accommodative way. However, the issue with that conclusion is that we have zero evidence of the terms "marriage" and "divorce" ever being used accommodatively in scripture to indicate a marriage/divorce not being a real marriage/divorce. It is merely an inference for people to claim "marriage" and "divorce" are used accommodatively in passages like Matthew 19:9; Luke 16:18; Mark 10:11-12; and 1 Corinthians 7:10-15, and we should never make inferences which are not necessary inferences when trying to establish Bible authority.

Let's consider a few reasons why we know the inference that "marriage" and "divorce" are used accommodatively in these passages is, in fact, an unnecessary inference.

Firstly, as we have already explained, the reason a remarriage is unlawful is not because the original couple is still married, but because they are still bound (Romans 7:2-3; 1 Corinthians 7:39a). Being still bound (not married) is why a remarriage results in adultery.

Secondly, in Luke 16:18, Jesus said, ***"Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced from her husband commits adultery."*** It appears that the woman in this verse is innocent of wrongdoing and has been unscripturally put away. Yet, Jesus still said that if someone marries this innocent woman, adultery has occurred. It is not adultery because God views the original couple as still being married because Jesus plainly stated this woman ***"is divorced"*** (Luke 16:18; see also Matthew 5:32). The original marriage bond (and not the original marriage itself) is the reason why people who divorce for unauthorized reasons have no right to marry another person.

Finally, in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, we have Paul describing something very similar to what Jesus did in Matthew 19:9 and Luke 16:18, and note the distinction Paul makes about a couple whose divorce is approved by civil law without being authorized by God: ***"Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife."*** Did you notice Paul said when an unscriptural separation/divorce occurs that those involved must ***"remain unmarried"*** or ***"be reconciled?"*** How could it be any more obvious that Paul recognizes unscriptural divorces to be real? In spite of Paul's simplicity and plainness of speech, proponents of mental divorce insert their accommodative language argument into this passage to say these people are not actually unmarried even though Paul says they are ***"unmarried!"*** Mental divorce advocates say ***"unmarried"*** is used accommodatively. But why do proponents of mental divorce arbitrarily decide the word ***"unmarried"*** is used accommodatively in this text and not ***"husband"*** or ***"wife?"*** No mental divorce advocate I have found can provide an answer because they truly have made an arbitrary choice with no scriptural support for that decision. Brethren are teaching what they THINK is "implied" in defiance of what is actually and literally stated in the text. Paul (the Holy Spirit) used the word ***"unmarried"*** intentionally. This couple was once married, but God now sees them as being ***"unmarried,"*** showing that He recognizes what civil law approved (the termination of a marriage) although He did not authorize it to take place. That means the divorce is real although unauthorized.

“Marry” Really Means Marry and “Divorce” Really Means Divorce

To marry is for a person to be united with another person, even if these two people do not have authority from God to unite, and to divorce is to dissolve a marriage, even if they do not have authority from God to dissolve it. Both marrying and divorcing are one-time acts that begin and end a relationship, respectively. In examining the original Greek, L.A. Stauffer noted:

Put away . . . an aorist subjunctive verb . . . describes a decisive, one time action. Apoluse, the verb for put away means . . . "to loose," "to release," or "to set free" and refers to what is called "divorce" in modern parlance. Marry another describes what happens legally and . . . is also an aorist verb and denotes an action completed or finalized. Marry is a one time act of a man joining himself to another woman (Stauffer, 1999).

See why when a divorce occurs, even unscripturally, it is impossible for there to be a second divorce later? Divorce, like marry, is a one-time action. If we all would read Matthew 19:9; Matthew 5:32; Luke 16:18; Mark 10:11-12; and 1 Corinthians 7:10-15 with the simple recognition of that fact, then we all would walk away understanding Jesus's laws on marriage, divorce, and remarriage exactly how He conveyed it.

Although Paul Butler taught false doctrine on various aspects of marriage, divorce, and remarriage, he was correct when he stated:

When there is a divorce there is no longer a marriage, neither in God's eyes nor in man's eyes – THERE IS A SIN IN GOD'S EYES FOR WHICH SOMEONE MUST REPENT . . . But unless there is a reconciliation of those two persons, the marriage is over. They are no longer married to the other person (Butler, 1986).

Jesus taught exactly what Mr. Butler described above – **where there is a divorce, there is no longer a marriage**. Those who appreciate the truth will accept Jesus's statement in Matthew 19:9 and the other texts as they are written without any need to redefine the Lord's terms. A.C. Grider concluded:

God tells us in Matt. 19:9 that, "Whosoever shall put away his wife except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery; and whoso marrieth her that is put away doth commit adultery. Thus the Lord has spoken on the subject and everybody can UNDERSTAND what he has said! Everybody can do what the Lord said do, and can refrain from doing what the Lord said for him not to do. Thus, everybody can avoid adultery! (Grider, 1988).

The New Testament is always consistent in defining divorce as being real, even when unauthorized. When we examine the original Greek, this fact is made abundantly evident.

“Chorizo,” “Apoluo,” and “Aphiemi” Disprove the Accommodative Language Theory

One of the core issues contributing to the existence of the mental divorce doctrine is a lack of acceptance of what the word “divorce,” or “put away” (KJV), means in the Bible. Let’s examine the original Greek terms used in the New Testament to define divorce since man has chosen to redefine it. In doing so, we will demonstrate how nothing in the Greek indicates that “divorce” is ever used accommodatively in scripture.

When reading through the New Testament passages discussing marriage, divorce, and remarriage, the words “divorce,” “put away,” “separate,” “depart,” etc. are all used interchangeably to indicate a significant change in marital status. These English words are translated from various Greek words, namely “chorizo,” “apoluo,” and “aphiemi.” These terms, just like many words in our language today, can carry different meanings depending upon the context in which they are used. However, when it comes to the matter of ending a relationship, the definition of these words is always consistent throughout the New Testament.

First, there is the Greek word “chorizo” (Strong’s #5563). The word “chorizo” appears 13 times across 12 verses in the New Testament. Strong defines “chorizo” as, “to place room between, i.e. part; reflexively, to go away: -- depart, put asunder, separate.” Thayer defines it as, “1) to **separate**, divide, part, **put asunder**, to separate one’s self from, to depart; 1a) to **leave a husband or wife**; 1a) **of divorce**; 1b) to **depart**, go away.”

With “chorizo,” every instance of the word in the New Testament indicates something as actually occurring. It is indisputable that Matthew 19:6; Mark 10:9; and 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, 15 all confirm the possibility for a person to unlawfully and really (actually) “chorizo” his spouse. These passages are consistent in stating that two people who were once “**married**” and “**one flesh**” are now “**separated**” and “**unmarried**,” clearly showing that accommodative language is not being used. Jesus and Paul, respectively, are instead speaking in “real” terms. The consistency in meaning with how “chorizo” (put asunder/separate/depart/divorce) is employed in the Bible also requires readers to necessarily infer that neither the consent of the one being departed from is needed for the departure to be real, nor does a lack of divine approval for such an action make it any less real (Matthew 19:6; see also Malachi 2:14-16). In fact, there are no Greek authorities who propose that innocence and/or unwillingness of the one being “chorizo”-ed negates the effect or reality of “chorizo.”

Secondly, there is the Greek word “apoluo” (Strong’s #630). The word “apoluo” appears 70 times across 63 verses in the New Testament. Strong defines “apoluo” as, “to free fully, i.e. (literally) relieve, release, dismiss (reflexively, depart), or (figuratively) let die, pardon or (specially) **divorce**: -- (let) **depart**, **dismiss**, **divorce**, forgive, let go, loose, **put (send) away**, release, set at liberty.” Thayer defines it as, “1) to set free; 2) to let go, dismiss, (to detain no longer); 2a) a petitioner to whom liberty to depart is given by a decisive answer; 2b) to bid depart, send away; 3) to let go free, release; 3a) a captive, i.e. to loose his bonds and bid him depart, to give him liberty to depart; 3b) to acquit one accused of a crime and set him at liberty; 3c) indulgently to grant a prisoner leave to depart; 3d) to release a debtor, i.e. not to press one’s claim against him, to remit his debt; 4) **used of divorce, to dismiss from the house, to repudiate**. The wife of a Greek or Roman may divorce her husband; 5) to send one’s self away, to depart.”

Although “apoluo” carries numerous meanings outside the context of marriage/divorce, it is indisputable that Matthew 1:19; 5:31-32; 19:3, 7-9; Mark 10:2-4, 11-12; and Luke 16:18 all confirm that whoever was together before an “apoluo” occurred would not still be together after the “apoluo” took place. In other words, the term “apoluo” reveals that a real separation has taken place. This fact is evident in places in scripture even when the term “apoluo” is not used to discuss the end of a relationship. For instance, although Barabbas’s release “apoluo” civilly lawful, it, no doubt, was unjust in the sight of God (Romans 13:1-7). Nevertheless, Barabbas was released (“apoluo”) in place of Jesus (Matthew 27:26). Incidentally, due to Barabbas’s unjust “apoluo”, the innocent Savior suffered a fate that went against His own will (Matthew 26:39)! Ultimately, just like with “chorizo,” the consistent scriptural use of the term “apoluo” (divorce/put away) necessarily implies neither the consent of the one being put away, nor divine approval for such an action (Matthew 5:32). Likewise, as with “chorizo,” there are no Greek authorities who propose that innocence and/or unwillingness of the one being “apoluo” -ed negates the effect or reality of “apoluo.”

Lastly, there is the Greek word “aphiemi” (Strong's #863). “Aphiemi” is unique in that although the word appears 147 times in the New Testament, the only instance in which it is used to discuss marriage/divorce is in 1 Corinthians 7:11-13. Strong defines “aphiemi” as, “(to send; an intensive form of eimi, to go); to send forth, in various applications (as follow): -- cry, forgive, forsake, lay aside, leave, let (alone, be, go, have), omit, **put (send) away**, remit, suffer, yield up.” Thayer defines it as, “1) to send away; 1a) to bid going away or depart; 1a1) **of a husband divorcing his wife**; 1b) to send forth, yield up, to expire; 1c) to let go, let alone, let be; 1c1) to disregard; 1c2) to leave, not to discuss now, (a topic); 1c2a) of teachers, writers and speakers; 1c3) to omit, neglect; 1d) to let go, give up a debt, forgive, to remit; 1e) to give up, keep no longer; 2) to permit, allow, not to hinder, to give up a thing to a person; 3) to leave, go way from one; 3a) in order to go to another place; 3b) to depart from any one; 3c) to depart from one and leave him to himself so that all mutual claims are abandoned; 3d) **to desert wrongfully**; 3e) to go away leaving something behind; 3f) to leave one by not taking him as a companion; 3g) to leave on dying, leave behind one; 3h) to leave so that what is left may remain, leave remaining; 3i) abandon, leave destitute.”

Contextually, 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 makes it very clear what “aphiemi” means in terms of marriage/divorce: “**Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart [“chorizo”] from her husband. But even if she does depart [“chorizo”], let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce [“aphiemi”] his wife.**” These verses reveal that “aphiemi” (“**divorce**”) runs parallel with *chorizo* (“**depart**”) in the sense that when a “chorizo” occurs, the innocence and/or unwillingness of the one being “chorizo”-ed does not negate the effect or reality of “chorizo.” Therefore, to remain contextually consistent, we must also conclude that when an “aphiemi” occurs causing a marriage to be terminated, that marriage really and actually is terminated. A sinful “aphiemi” is just as real as a sinful “chorizo” or “apoluo.”

What does this all mean? By recognizing the scriptural harmony in meaning, description, and application of “chorizo,” “apoluo,” and “aphiemi,” we can see how when a “divorce,” “putting away,” “separation,” “departure,” etc. occurs, these events are real even if an innocent person is harmed or sinned against in the process. Proponents of mental divorce deny the scriptural harmony in meaning, description, and application of “chorizo,” “apoluo,” and “aphiemi” by denying the possibility (reality) of unscriptural terminations of marriages.

Ezra 9-10 Proves Unscriptural Marriages are Real Marriages

Ezra 9-10 provides another example demonstrating that unauthorized marriages are still recognized by God as real marriages. The Israelites violated God's command to not intermarry with the pagan nations of the land (Deuteronomy 7:1-4). Yet, despite the Israelites being in unscriptural marriages, Ezra, using language by direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit, referred to these unlawful unions as just that – "***marriages***" (Ezra 9:14). When the Israelites confessed their sin, they said, "***We have taken pagan wives from the peoples of the land***" (Ezra 10:2), and then proposed, "***Let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives***" (Ezra 10:3). Observe, dear reader, that Ezra **DID NOT** correct the Israelites' language to tell them these women were not really their wives since the marriages were unauthorized by God. To the contrary, Ezra affirmed, "***You have transgressed, and have taken pagan wives***" (Ezra 10:10), then instructed the Israelites to separate themselves "***from the peoples of the land, and from the pagan wives***" (Ezra 10:11). Thus, the marriages were both sinful and real.

By using the same terminology as the Israelites, Ezra implicitly affirmed that these women truly were the "***wives***" of the Israelite men who married them, despite the fact that the marriages were sinful and needed to be terminated. The unlawfulness of the marriages did not negate their existence. Ezra's treatment of these unauthorized marriages conclusively proves that God can recognize a marriage as real while simultaneously condemning it as sinful and in need of termination. The unlawfulness of the marriages between the Israelites and pagans did not prevent them from being recognized as real marriages, nor did God's disapproval of those unions mean that the marriages never existed.

Conclusion

Proponents of mental divorce can barely even explain why they believe as they do on this matter due to all of the complexities and arbitrary rules/stipulations they have imposed within their false doctrine. Dear reader, contrast that with the **simplicity of language and plainness of speech** that the Lord employed in Matthew 19:9. Examining this verse, Warren King astutely stated:

One would seem hard-pressed to find any loopholes in such plain language, but multitudes attempt it. Their efforts range from the absurd to the plausible . . . This is not to say that all such are dishonest. It is simply to say there are two types of seekers in the world: those who are seeking truth, and those who are seeking an excuse. At all costs, we must be numbered among the truth-seekers (King, 1994).

Likewise, Irven Lee concluded:

The law of marriage is simple and easy to understand. It would be a false effort on my part if I tried to make it seem complicated because it is not complicated. The Lord stated it so that the average man, the common people, could understand it . . . Jesus said, "Whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery" . . . Is this teaching so deep and complicated that only the intellectual genius can understand it or is it simple enough that the common man may understand it? (Lee, 1976).

I assure you, the Lord was not trying to trick people; it really is as simple as it appears:

"AND I SAY TO YOU, WHOEVER DIVORCES HIS WIFE, EXCEPT FOR SEXUAL IMMORALITY, AND MARRIES ANOTHER, COMMITS ADULTERY; AND WHOEVER MARRIES HER WHO IS DIVORCED COMMITS ADULTERY" (**MATTHEW 19:9**).

How could the Lord have made it any clearer?

THE DISCIPLES' RESPONSE TO MATTHEW 19:9

"AND I SAY TO YOU, WHOEVER DIVORCES HIS WIFE, EXCEPT FOR SEXUAL IMMORALITY, AND MARRIES ANOTHER, COMMITS ADULTERY; AND WHOEVER MARRIES HER WHO IS DIVORCED COMMITS ADULTERY" (MATTHEW 19:9).

How Did They Respond?

The response of the Lord's disciples after teaching what He did in Matthew 19:9 speaks volumes. Upon hearing this teaching, the Lord's disciples did not respond by saying "What do you mean?" or "I don't understand." Rather, they responded by saying:

"IF SUCH IS THE CASE . . . IT IS BETTER NOT TO MARRY" (MATTHEW 19:10).

This response is significant because it demonstrates that the disciples understood Jesus perfectly. They recognized that marriage was not merely a temporary arrangement that could be dissolved and replaced whenever difficulties arose. They understood that marriage was a lifelong covenant and that the right to remarry was severely restricted. They realized that entering into marriage carried tremendous responsibility and potentially carried lifelong consequences.

Notice that the disciples viewed Jesus's teaching as so demanding that they questioned whether marriage was even desirable under such conditions. Their response only makes sense if they understood Jesus to be teaching that some people would find themselves unable to lawfully remarry despite desperately wanting companionship. If the put away person retained an unrestricted right to remarry after a legal divorce was finalized, the disciples' reaction would seem greatly exaggerated. Why would they conclude that "*it is better not to marry*" if every divorced person could simply marry someone else?

The disciples understood that Jesus was teaching something difficult to accept. They realized that some people would be required to remain "*unmarried*" (1 Corinthians 7:10-11) rather than enter an unlawful relationship. Rather than correcting the disciples for misunderstanding Him, Jesus confirmed the seriousness of His teaching in the succeeding verses (Matthew 19:11-12).

The progression of the conversation in Matthew 19 is significant. Jesus taught the restrictions of Matthew 19:9. The disciples immediately recognized the severe implications of those restrictions, then responded that perhaps it would be better not to marry at all. Jesus affirmed their understanding by explaining that some people would, indeed, have to live lives of celibacy for the sake of remaining faithful to God's kingdom. Far from softening His teaching, Jesus reinforced it. Thus, the disciples' response serves as powerful evidence that Jesus's words were neither ambiguous nor difficult to understand. The difficulty was not in comprehending what Jesus taught; the difficulty was in accepting the consequences of what He taught. Sadly, that remains the case today.

The Necessary Implication

Jesus's teaching in Matthew 19:9, as well as the disciples' response in v.10 necessarily demands readers infer that a person who is put away, even unscripturally, is ineligible for remarriage. If what Jesus taught does not demand a person who is put away to be ineligible for remarriage, then the disciples' response in v.10 does not make sense. Likewise, Jesus's follow-up in Matthew 19:11-12 does not make sense either if people are free to remarry even after the finalization of a legal divorce. Jesus stated:

"ALL CANNOT ACCEPT THIS SAYING, BUT ONLY THOSE TO WHOM IT HAS BEEN GIVEN: FOR THERE ARE EUNUCHS WHO WERE BORN THUS FROM THEIR MOTHER'S WOMB, AND THERE ARE EUNUCHS WHO WERE MADE EUNUCHS BY MEN, AND THERE ARE EUNUCHS WHO HAVE MADE THEMSELVES EUNUCHS FOR THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN'S SAKE. HE WHO IS ABLE TO ACCEPT IT, LET HIM ACCEPT IT" (MATTHEW 19:11-12).

Three brethren explained the implications of these verses better than I ever could:

Not all the 'eunuchs' in Matthew 19:12 that made themselves 'eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake' were put away fornicators. Some were simply the unfortunate victims of an ungodly spouse and unjust rulers (cf. Mt. 5:32; 1 Cor. 7:10-11, 15), yet the Master stated, 'He that is able to receive it, let him receive it' (Belknap, My Personal Convictions, 2006).

Jesus said there are some people who will stay celibate for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Singles may choose never to marry, perhaps even for reasons Paul states in 1 Corinthians 7:32-35. Or unscripturally divorced people may submit to Christ's law on remarriage and stay celibate because they are under Christ's rule and want to please him above all things. They will control their sexual desires for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. They will accept the consequences of their (or their ex-spouse's) sin of unlawful divorce, and not try to find a way out of Christ's plainly taught law. Will spiritually-minded brethren sympathize with them? Certainly. Will they help them? Definitely. Will they compromise Christ's law for them? Absolutely not. Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage is clear. He intended it to be so . . . The ones who are able to accept it, let them accept it. And if we want ourselves and our children to go to heaven, let us contend earnestly for it (Crolius, 1992).

Friends, does the kingdom of heaven mean more to us than anything else? Jesus said it must (Matt. 6:33). If it does, we will be willing to do whatever necessary to enter it, even if it means making ourselves eunuchs (i.e., choosing to remain single and celibate in order to remain true to his teachings about divorce and remarriage.) Christianity is not a religion of convenience. Sometimes sacrifices like these have to happen in order to be faithful (Mitchell, 2024).

It is a simple fact that there are many people who, due to the sins of their ex-husbands/ex-wives, have been forced to make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. Unfortunately, there are far more people who refuse to accept this simple teaching rather than accept it!

A Comparison

During a debate on March 22, 2024 in London, Kentucky, Pat Donahue (North Huntsville, AL church of Christ), and Derek Baker (Laurel Chapel, KY Christian Church) discussed the question of if adulterous marriages need to be terminated. During that debate, Mr. Baker made the following remark while denying the necessity of adulterous marriages needing to be terminated:

What my opponent is proposing is celibacy for life. If an innocent party is put away for a reason other than fornication, my friend is saying that the innocent party is condemned to a life of suffering and celibacy. That is ascetism and the doctrine of penance touted by the Catholics (Baker, 2024).

Did you know that a large portion of brethren supporting mental divorce use the exact same reasoning that Mr. Baker used in justifying adultery?

Advocates of mental divorce are sadly not much different than Mr. Baker, who refused to accept the fact that all adulterous marriages must be terminated because he could not fathom how we could teach something which would lead to “*the innocent party*” being “*condemned to a life of suffering and celibacy*.” For example, here is how brother Marshall Patton, a proponent of mental divorce, described his issues with our acceptance of what the Lord taught; take special note of the language brother Patton used and how similar it is to the language Derek Baker used in justifying adulterous marriages:

Let us see if I can clarify [their] position . . . A husband who has been scripturally married to his wife comes home one day with his secretary by his side and with whom he has committed fornication and announces to his wife that he is through with her; that he thereby puts her away, and that he is going to marry his secretary. Because he was the first to say, “I put you away,” his innocent wife is doomed thereafter to celibacy. Even if she, because of his fornication, rushes to the court and filed for divorce, it would be to no avail so far as her having a right to remarry is concerned . . . She became a put away person who can never remarry . . . I take sharp issue with this position (Patton, 1987).

Although brother Patton did not accurately represent what all is required to obtain a divorce (as we have already proven, there is more to dissolving a marriage than one simply saying “I put you away”), did you notice how brother Patton’s emotional appeal is nearly identical to Mr. Baker’s?

Just like Derek Baker, brother Patton refused to accept the truth because he could not fathom how someone could teach a doctrine leading to an “*innocent wife*” being “*doomed . . . to celibacy*.” The irony is that brother Patton would have rightly condemned the “*suffering and celibacy*” justification Mr. Baker used to set aside the truth regarding adulterous marriages needing to be terminated, but somehow the justification of being “*doomed . . . to celibacy*” is sufficient for propping up mental divorce. Friends, that is inconsistent and hypocritical.

Incidentally, we who stand for the truth on both adulterous marriages and mental divorce are not the ones making demands for celibacy. Rather, the Lord is the one who made this demand, of which was made very clear in Matthew 19:11-12. Let’s read the passage once more and see how Jesus undeniably demanded lives of celibacy despite the fact that such a consequence would be brought about by the sins of others:

"ALL CANNOT ACCEPT THIS SAYING, BUT ONLY THOSE TO WHOM IT HAS BEEN GIVEN: FOR THERE ARE EUNUCHS WHO WERE BORN THUS FROM THEIR MOTHER'S WOMB, AND THERE ARE EUNUCHS WHO WERE MADE EUNUCHS BY MEN, AND THERE ARE EUNUCHS WHO HAVE MADE THEMSELVES EUNUCHS FOR THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN'S SAKE. HE WHO IS ABLE TO ACCEPT IT, LET HIM ACCEPT IT" (MATTHEW 19:11-12).

Celibacy is a stumbling block (1 Corinthians 7:2-5) sinfully imposed by the sinning party who unscripturally puts away his spouse (Matthew 5:32), and the unrepentant one who imposes this stumbling block will ultimately have to answer to his Judge (Matthew 18:6-7). Yet, this truth does not change the fact that celibacy is required for the person who has been unscripturally put away. Heaven is only for those who are willing to accept God's word, even to the point of celibacy, if so required.

The Consequence is Inflicted by the Sinner, not God or Truth-Seekers

This point is important because those who reject the truth on this subject often direct their frustration toward God's law or those who uphold it rather than toward the person who actually caused the suffering. Yet, the source of the problem is not the teaching of Christ, but the sinful actions of the spouse who violated God's law in the first place.

Man inflicts suffering on his spouse when he wrongfully separates what God has joined together. Those of us who deny the authority of mental divorce are accused of unnecessarily and unscripturally imposing celibacy on people, such as what is condemned in 1 Timothy 4:1-3, but we are not the ones imposing celibacy; it is the wrongfully divorcing partner inflicting this punishment. I wholeheartedly agree that we should never underestimate the suffering of people who have been unscripturally put away, but since when does the Bible support the idea that faithful servants of God won't suffer for obeying God?

Jesus suffered. The apostles suffered. The first century church suffered. God's prophets in the Old Testament suffered. God's people today living in war-torn countries suffer. Christians living in countries controlled by Muslim, communist, fascist, etc. governments suffer. Christians whose children are unfaithful suffer. And a person whose spouse unscripturally put them away suffers. What is the common thread in each of these examples? Innocent people suffering due to the sinfulness of others.

In fact, suffering because of the sins of others is one of the most consistent themes found throughout the word of God. Abel suffered because of Cain's wickedness (Genesis 4:8). Joseph suffered because of the envy and hatred of his brothers (Genesis 37:18-28). Naboth suffered because of the greed and corruption of Ahab and Jezebel (1 Kings 21:1-16). The prophets suffered because of the rebellion of Israel (2 Chronicles 36:15-16; Matthew 23:29-37). The apostles suffered because ungodly men opposed the truth (Acts 5:40-41; 2 Corinthians 11:23-28). Christ Himself suffered because of the sins of mankind even though He committed no sin (Isaiah 53:4-6; 1 Peter 2:21-24). The Bible repeatedly demonstrates that righteous people are often forced to bear painful consequences brought about by the sinful actions of others. While such circumstances are undeniably tragic, they are neither unique nor evidence that God's law is unfair or that we are interpreting it incorrectly since our "interpretation" causes others to suffer for the sins of others. Rather, these examples remind us that sin has victims and evil actions often leave devastation in their wake.

A person who has been unjustly put away is yet another example of an innocent person suffering because someone else chose to rebel against God. As difficult as that reality may be, the existence of suffering does not authorize us to alter the Lord's teaching in an attempt to remove the consequences that another person's sin has created. Instead, the Bible repeatedly calls upon God's people to remain faithful even when obedience requires enduring hardship that was imposed upon them by the sins of others (Matthew 5:10-12; 1 Peter 2:19-20, 3:14-17).

Emotions Do Not Change the Truth

When we examine the word of God, we would all do well to realize that our feelings and emotions will never change what Jesus taught. Connie Adams explained:

Jesus said, 'And whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery' (Matt. 5:32). The same thing is stated in Matthew 19:9. When we have exhausted all the emotional arguments about fairness, and the intricacies of what constitutes 'putting away,' these passages will still say what they have always said (Adams, 2004).

Unfortunately, many proponents of mental divorce would rather rely on emotional appeals than adhere to the simple words Jesus spoke on this matter and just accept the promise of 1 Peter 3:13-17 when we suffer for the cause of Christ:

"AND WHO IS HE WHO WILL HARM YOU IF YOU BECOME FOLLOWERS OF WHAT IS GOOD? BUT EVEN IF YOU SHOULD SUFFER FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS' SAKE, YOU ARE BLESSED. AND DO NOT BE AFRAID OF THEIR THREATS, NOR BE TROUBLED.' BUT SANCTIFY THE LORD GOD IN YOUR HEARTS, AND ALWAYS BE READY TO GIVE A DEFENSE TO EVERYONE WHO ASKS YOU A REASON FOR THE HOPE THAT IS IN YOU, WITH MEEKNESS AND FEAR; HAVING A GOOD CONSCIENCE, THAT WHEN THEY DEFAME YOU AS EVILDOERS, THOSE WHO REVILE YOUR GOOD CONDUCT IN CHRIST MAY BE ASHAMED. FOR IT IS BETTER, IF IT IS THE WILL OF GOD, TO SUFFER FOR DOING GOOD THAN FOR DOING EVIL" (1 PETER 3:13-17).

Ungodly people continue to perpetrate all sorts of injustices upon faithful followers of God, thereby making their lives and service to Him more difficult. However, it pleases the Father when we patiently accept mistreatment for remaining obedient to Him. It never pleases God when we choose to do evil so that we can experience what we perceive to be good (Romans 3:8). Jeff Belknap asserted:

We recognize that children in abusive homes and wives with selfish and cruel husbands are to be in submission, though treated unfairly (Ephesians 6:1; I Peter 3:1-6). The plight of a person who must become a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven's sake is no different (Matthew 19:12). Yet God has no more "sanctioned" the mistreatment of the child or wife than he has authorized an unscriptural divorce. Nevertheless, the dire consequences are often inescapable for the innocent parties involved. God has only promised that the tears we shed upon this earth will be wiped away in heaven if we remain faithful to His word throughout our trials (Matthew 16:24-26) (Belknap, Mental Divorce Revamped and Revisited [Part 1], 2006).

Similarly, Carrol Sutton stated:

The only person in a marriage who has a right to marry another is the person who divorces his (or her) companion for this cause of fornication. We must not allow our likes, dislikes, preferences or our feelings to cause us to set aside the plain teaching of the word of God! (Sutton, For He Had Married Her, 1996).

Ultimately, when human emotion dictates our understanding of God's will rather than inspired revelation, we are heading down the exact same road as our denominational friends. Let that sink in for just a moment.

As my grandad would say, emotional appeals “don't do a lick of good” in trying to establish truth or authority. If an innocent person who was unscripturally put away marries another man while her first husband is still alive, she is an adulterer (Luke 16:18; Romans 7:2-3), and no adulterer will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). That's not me saying that; God said that. These eternal truths will never change, regardless of how much our emotions are affected by people's horrible circumstances.

To further illustrate the point, during the debate in London, Kentucky between Pat Donahue (North Huntsville, AL church of Christ), and Derek Baker (Laurel Chapel, KY Christian Church), Mr. Baker made the following statement when asked if a polygamous marriage needed to be terminated when that person obeys the gospel:

Polygamy still exists in our world today. I went to Africa and I had a gentleman who was an evangelist there in Kenya. He said, 'What do I do . . . I have a man who was just converted and he has ten wives. What do I do? Do I tell him he has to get rid of nine of them?' . . . If I tell this man that he has to get rid of nine of his wives, in a culture where that is nearly a death sentence, then there is now nine people that are enemies of Jesus Christ; nine people who will hate Jesus. 'Because of Jesus, I lost my marriage.' Nine groups of kids that were born to those women who, 'because of Jesus, I lost my dad.' Christianity is destroyed through that teaching (Baker, 2024).

See how strong emotional appeals cause people to set aside the most basic of Bible truths, like polygamy being unauthorized by the New Testament (see 1 Corinthians 7:2)? Likewise, see how people place the blame of a person's sins on the gospel, thus our Lord, rather than the person who commits sins with far-reaching consequences? The exact same thing is happening when people do not accept that an unjustly put away person has no right to remarry another person while the original spouse is still alive. It's not God's fault that this person is “punished;” it's not the gospel's fault; it's not Jesus's fault; it's not the suffering person's fault; and it's not the fault of anyone standing for the truth on the subject; the fault lies solely upon the sinning spouse who unscripturally obtained the divorce. A man who breaks covenant with his wife and places unfair consequences upon her by unjustly putting her away will certainly receive his fair and just reward in eternity if he does not repent (Romans 1:31-32; Luke 13:3), but that eternal consequence he faces does not negate the consequences he perpetrated upon his wife when he unlawfully put her away.

The Lord's Precepts are Fair, Not Easy

Obedying the Lord is not always easy, but whether we want to believe and accept the truth or not, the Psalmist is right:

"THE LORD'S PRECEPTS ARE FAIR" (PSALM 19:8, NET).

There is a big difference in fairness and easiness, and the Lord never promised that following Him would be easy. In fact, He said the exact opposite.

Jesus said, "***If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me***" (Luke 9:23; see also Luke 14:26-28). Commenting on Matthew 19:11-12, Billy Randolph explained:

Jesus did not misunderstand the applications of his own teaching – He got it. He said there are people who are going to be faithful to this teaching who are going to have to make a choice. It will be a difficult choice and it is one of their making. And that's a terrible situation ain't it? But terrible situations don't change the law. At the end of the day, He said what He said, and the truth of the matter is innocent people have always suffered for the wrongs of others . . . But don't blame God because of the consequences of evil deeds on somebody else's part. Don't let the wrongness of another's actions make us throw that onto God's lap (Randolph, 2018).

A put away person has the obligation to become a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven's sake. No matter how difficult that may be, that is the sacrifice Jesus commands. Paul Earnhart concluded:

The issue of divorce (and remarriage) touches the lives of men and women intimately and often painfully. Yet those who come to the kingdom must not expect that any part of their lives will escape the influence of the King; nor should they desire it since His commands are not arbitrary (1 John 5:3) but are always for our good (Deuteronomy 6:24). However agonizing this teaching may be to us, there is no place for the true disciple to hide from its implications (Earnhart, The Treachery of Divorce, 1998).

The cross that our Lord carried was indicative of self-sacrifice and self-denial. The Lord's cross brought about suffering in order to bring glory to the Father. Considering what our Lord sacrificed for us on His cross, we ought to never think that anything God expects of us when carrying our own crosses "just doesn't seem fair."

Conclusion

The subject of divorce and remarriage is a very emotional and difficult issue, but, Warren King explained it well when he made the following observation:

Indeed, divorce and remarriage is an emotional and difficult issue. But death is also emotional. The second coming of Jesus is emotional. The judgment is emotional. Eternity is emotional. Heaven and hell are emotional. We must make a choice, but we will endure the very real consequences of that choice forever (King, 1994).

When a Christian respects and obeys the civil authorities as God commands, such respect and obedience may, in fact, lead to him suffering for living a life in keeping with the Father's will. Such is the case when a wicked person succeeds in achieving a legal yet unscriptural divorce against an innocent spouse. However, Christ has left us the perfect example of righteousness showing us how to endure undeserved suffering. Peter said:

"FOR THIS IS COMMENDABLE, IF BECAUSE OF CONSCIENCE TOWARD GOD ONE ENDURES GRIEF, SUFFERING WRONGFULLY. FOR WHAT CREDIT IS IT IF, WHEN YOU ARE BEATEN FOR YOUR FAULTS, YOU TAKE IT PATIENTLY? BUT WHEN YOU DO GOOD AND SUFFER, IF YOU TAKE IT PATIENTLY, THIS IS COMMENDABLE BEFORE GOD. FOR TO THIS YOU WERE CALLED, BECAUSE CHRIST ALSO SUFFERED FOR US, LEAVING US AN EXAMPLE, THAT YOU SHOULD FOLLOW HIS STEPS: 'WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH;' WHO, WHEN HE WAS REVILED, DID NOT REVILE IN RETURN; WHEN HE SUFFERED, HE DID NOT THREATEN, BUT COMMITTED HIMSELF TO HIM WHO JUDGES RIGHTEOUSLY" (1 PETER 2:19-21).

Unscriptural divorces require unjustly put away people to be committed to God by becoming eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. In such circumstances, celibacy is the only lawful manner of life, hence Jesus's statement, "**He who is able to accept it, let him accept it**" (Matthew 19:12). Many of our brothers and sisters have been forced to make this difficult choice. This manner of life may be a necessary part of taking up one's cross in sacrificial service for the Lord, but when the kingdom of heaven and the salvation of one's soul lies in the balance, the choice should be easy.

God's expectations for the person who suffers as result of being unjustly put away is no different than His expectations for people suffering any other form of persecution for righteousness' sake – choose God's will and desires above our own will and desires.

"AND HE SAID, 'ABBA, FATHER, ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE FOR YOU. TAKE THIS CUP AWAY FROM ME; NEVERTHELESS, NOT WHAT I WILL, BUT WHAT YOU WILL'" (MARK 14:36).

WHY ALL THE FUSS?

Mental Divorce Results in Adultery

Why dedicate so much time and effort to exposing the many errors with the false doctrine of mental divorce? Firstly, I think many Christians have managed to forget that "**adulterers . . . will not inherit the kingdom of God**" (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). A marriage that occurs after a mental "divorce" is an adulterous marriage. Obviously, then, this subject is far too important to sweep over and simply arrive at a conclusion of "we agree to disagree." **Souls are at stake!**

This is a Fellowship Issue

Why all the fuss about mental divorce? The New Testament is abundantly clear about not having fellowship with those who practice such error. 1 Corinthians 5:6-11 leaves no room for interpretation:

"YOUR GLORYING IS NOT GOOD. DO YOU NOT KNOW THAT A LITTLE LEAVEN LEAVENS THE WHOLE LUMP? THEREFORE PURGE OUT THE OLD LEAVEN, THAT YOU MAY BE A NEW LUMP, SINCE YOU TRULY ARE UNLEAVENED. FOR INDEED CHRIST, OUR PASSOVER, WAS SACRIFICED FOR US. THEREFORE LET US KEEP THE FEAST, NOT WITH OLD LEAVEN, NOR WITH THE LEAVEN OF MALICE AND WICKEDNESS, BUT WITH THE UNLEAVENED BREAD OF SINCERITY AND TRUTH. I WROTE TO YOU IN MY EPISTLE NOT TO KEEP COMPANY WITH SEXUALLY IMMORAL PEOPLE. YET I CERTAINLY DID NOT MEAN WITH THE SEXUALLY IMMORAL PEOPLE OF THIS WORLD, OR WITH THE COVETOUS, OR EXTORTIONERS, OR IDOLATERS, SINCE THEN YOU WOULD NEED TO GO OUT OF THE WORLD. BUT NOW I HAVE WRITTEN TO YOU NOT TO KEEP COMPANY WITH ANYONE NAMED A BROTHER, WHO IS SEXUALLY IMMORAL, OR COVETOUS, OR AN IDOLATER, OR A REVILER, OR A DRUNKARD, OR AN EXTORTIONER—NOT EVEN TO EAT WITH SUCH A PERSON" (1 CORINTHIANS 5:6-11).

False doctrine is revealed in the gospel to be leaven (Matthew 16:6-12; Mark 8:18). Are we purging out the old leaven among us who do not "**keep the feast . . . with sincerity and truth?**" God's book says we must! A person who mentally "divorces" a spouse and remarries is sexually immoral – they are an adulterer. Disfellowship from such a person is required. Will we tolerate and accept the fatal leaven of sin and error, or will we "**keep the feast**" with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth?

Those who disagree that this issue requires lines of fellowship be drawn will ask, "What about Romans 14?" While voicing support for mental divorce, Andy Sochor made the following assertion:

Obviously, no sin is committed by remaining unmarried; but can one put away his/her mate for fornication after being put away? When Jesus said, "Whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and married another woman commits adultery" (Matthew 19:9), He taught this by implication: One may put away his/her mate for fornication and remarry. This is exactly what one does when he puts away his mate for fornication after being previously put away. Jesus allows this, so no sin is committed. Therefore, the matter does belong in Romans 14. Some in

such a situation would not be comfortable doing this (putting away his/her mate for fornication after being put away for just any cause). Many feel as though a certain procedure must be used in order to put away a mate. Many also believe there is a certain sequence in which events must happen in order to do this. These ones, if they ever find themselves in this circumstance, should not violate their conscience. However, they must not judge others who believes they can remarry in such a case. This is what Romans 14 is all about. The New Testament specifies the cause for putting away, but not procedure or timing. Let us unite on what Jesus taught – that one may put away his/her mate for fornication and remarry – and not divide over our opinions (Sochor, Fellowship Questions and MDR).

As already stated, those who support mental divorce are supporting people living in adulterous relationships. We who deny the scriptural authority of this doctrine are being asked to just “go along to get along” and maintain fellowship with adulterers and those supporting adultery! The unity of the church of is at stake. Either I and the brethren who think as I do are binding unnecessarily and, thus, restricting marriage without authority, which 1 Timothy 4:3 condemns, or brethren advocating for mental divorce are loosing unnecessarily and, thus, promoting/accepting adulterous marriages. Therefore, the proposed “unity in diversity” on this issue is unscriptural regardless of how often Romans 14 is cited.

Romans 14 has been horribly abused and perverted to support fellowship of doctrinal errors such as mental divorce. Examining Romans 14, Jesse Jenkins explained:

The problem Romans 14 was written to correct was a problem . . . over matters that were not of the faith, but matters of liberty . . . It is a mistake to go to Romans 14 to try to prove a practice right. Whether a practice is right or wrong must be proved by what God has said elsewhere. Once a practice is proved to be right, then we can properly use Romans 14 to determine how we treat each other when we want to handle those liberties differently. But to use Romans 14 to determine how we treat each other when we differ over the Holy Spirit’s revelation is a misuse of the passage. And to use Romans 14 to determine how to treat one who is in sin is a misapplication of the chapter (Jenkins, 2000).

Romans 14 has everything to do with matters of the conscience and those weak in the faith while having absolutely nothing to do with doctrinal compromise. In fact, to apply Romans 14 to moral and doctrinal things is to say that we can receive any person who is off on any number of doctrinal points so long as the person in error:

- Is fully convinced in his own mind that nothing is wrong with what he is doing (v.5).
- Considers what he is doing to be clean [proper] (v.14).
- Has faith to self before God (v.22).
- Does it unto the Lord (v.6).
- Gives thanks to God (v.6).

That means Romans 14 would require us to seek fellowship with anyone who is off on any number of points but is sincere in what they believe and practice. That may sound to you like something that our denominational friends teach. That’s because it’s exactly what our denominational friends teach!

Brethren who pervert Romans 14 ought to read the succeeding chapters in Paul's inspired letter to Rome. If they read Romans 16 with honest hearts, they would see that if a person teaches error, then that man is to be "**marked**" and "**avoided**" (Romans 16:17). We are not to judge when it comes to matters of indifference to God (Romans 14:16), but, when it comes to divine law, we must judge and discipline brethren who walk disorderly (2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14).

Error must always be challenged, refuted, and exposed for the darkness that it is (Ephesians 5:3-11). Any misunderstanding or misuse of Romans 14 that allows error to go unchallenged, unrefuted, and unexposed is false. Do not be deceived, dear reader. This is not just a matter of "differences in application," as many have claimed. **No, this is a matter of salvation.** One "application" leads to souls being saved by the blood of Christ, while the other "application" leads to souls being condemned for practicing and/or supporting adulterous marriages! We have to distinguish the colossal difference in how to handle matters of personal faith (Romans 14) versus matters of THE faith (Jude 3). Jeff Belknap summed it up perfectly by concluding:

It is easier to DISMISS AN ISSUE'S IMPORTANCE by claiming that it belongs in Romans 14 than to HONESTLY EXAMINE IT WITH THE LIGHT of truth (II Thess. 5:21; I Jn. 4:1, 5-6) . . . It is easier to remain SILENT than to CONTEND for the faith (Isa. 56:10; I Tim. 6:12; Jude 3) (Belknap, It is Easier..., 2006).

It may be easier to hide behind Romans 14, but don't forget where taking the easy road will lead us in eternity:

"ENTER BY THE NARROW GATE; FOR WIDE IS THE GATE AND BROAD IS THE WAY THAT LEADS TO DESTRUCTION, AND THERE ARE MANY WHO GO IN BY IT. BECAUSE NARROW IS THE GATE AND DIFFICULT IS THE WAY WHICH LEADS TO LIFE, AND THERE ARE FEW WHO FIND IT"
(MATTHEW 7:13-14).

Let's be sure we are all walking the road that leads upward to heaven and not the road that leads downward to eternal destruction!

Mental Divorce is Another Gospel

Why all the fuss about mental divorce? Mental divorce proponents are preaching another gospel contrary to the word of God. In Galatians 1:8-9, Paul wrote:

"BUT THOUGH WE, OR AN ANGEL FROM HEAVEN, PREACH ANY OTHER GOSPEL UNTO YOU THAN THAT WHICH WE HAVE PREACHED UNTO YOU, LET HIM BE ACCURSED. AS WE SAID BEFORE, SO SAY I NOW AGAIN, IF ANY MAN PREACH ANY OTHER GOSPEL UNTO YOU THAN THAT YE HAVE RECEIVED, LET HIM BE ACCURSED" (GALATIANS 1:8-9, KJV).

There is only one gospel, and people – including Christians – teaching another gospel must be corrected (Jude 3-4), even if that means we lose friends in the process (Galatians 4:16; 2 Timothy 4:16-18, 3-5). Unfortunately, many Christians who do not accept this false doctrine are unwilling to take proper stands for the truth and defend the gospel. Jeff Belknap explained:

In recent years, when one of the most well-known preachers in the brotherhood went off-course regarding his MDR “position,” the number of “sound men” who rallied to his defense . . . was astounding. This experience illustrated how corrupt men can become when the object of their affection is not the Almighty (Jn. 12:43). When one of Jesus’ most beloved disciples, Peter, spoke contrary to the will of God, Jesus said, “Get behind me, Satan” (Mt. 16:23; Mk. 8:33). However, when one of our loved ones depart, digress and deviate from the Divine will today, our attitude seems to be, “Stay beside me, friend” (Belknap, Accursed or Acquitted?, 2006).

Whose side are we on? The side of Jesus and His gospel, or the side of Satan and his accursed false teachers?

The Gospel and Our Souls Must Be Defended

Why all the fuss about mental divorce? Why not just be silent and avoid “turning this into a bigger issue than it is?” Because every Christian is appointed to defend the gospel:

"BELOVED, WHILE I WAS VERY DILIGENT TO WRITE TO YOU CONCERNING OUR COMMON SALVATION, I FOUND IT NECESSARY TO WRITE TO YOU EXHORTING YOU TO CONTEND EARNESTLY FOR THE FAITH WHICH WAS ONCE FOR ALL DELIVERED TO THE SAINTS" (**JUDE 3**).

"BUT SANCTIFY THE LORD GOD IN YOUR HEARTS, AND ALWAYS BE READY TO GIVE A DEFENSE TO EVERYONE WHO ASKS YOU A REASON FOR THE HOPE THAT IS IN YOU, WITH MEEKNESS AND FEAR" (**1 PETER 3:15**).

It's too bad that many brethren advocating for mental divorce have closed their minds and ears, refused to defend (Philippians 1:17) or debate their teaching, and refuse to accept correction, much like those whom Stephen rebuked in Acts 7 and much like what Paul described in 2 Timothy 4:3-4:

"NOW WHEN THEY HEARD THESE THINGS THEY WERE ENRAGED, AND THEY GRIND THEIR TEETH AT HIM . . . THEY CRIED OUT WITH A LOUD VOICE AND STOPPED THEIR EARS . . ." (**ACTS 7:54-57**).

"FOR THE TIME WILL COME WHEN THEY WILL NOT ENDURE SOUND DOCTRINE, BUT ACCORDING TO THEIR OWN DESIRES, BECAUSE THEY HAVE ITCHING EARS, THEY WILL HEAP UP FOR THEMSELVES TEACHERS; AND THEY WILL TURN THEIR EARS AWAY FROM THE TRUTH, AND BE TURNED ASIDE TO FABLES" (**2 TIMOTHY 4:3-4**).

All it takes is teaching false doctrine on one subject to cause a soul to be lost for eternity. Likewise, all it takes is teaching false doctrine on one subject to become a false teacher. All doctrinal error – even just the slightest little bit (1 Corinthians 5:6; Galatians 5:9) – can cause a person’s soul to be corrupted (1 Corinthians 15:33; 2 Timothy 2:16-18). A.C. Grider poignantly stated:

Everybody can avoid adultery! But not everybody avoids adultery. Why? Because there are false teachers among us (Grider, 1988).

Do not be deceived or convinced otherwise – there certainly are false teachers among us.

We Won't Have God

Why all the fuss about mental divorce? Neither false teachers nor those who follow such teachers have God:

"WHOEVER TRANSGRESSES AND DOES NOT ABIDE IN THE DOCTRINE OF CHRIST DOES NOT HAVE GOD. HE WHO ABIDES IN THE DOCTRINE OF CHRIST HAS BOTH THE FATHER AND THE SON. IF ANYONE COMES TO YOU AND DOES NOT BRING THIS DOCTRINE, DO NOT RECEIVE HIM INTO YOUR HOUSE NOR GREET HIM; FOR HE WHO GREETS HIM SHARES IN HIS EVIL DEEDS"

(2 JOHN 9-11).

One who preaches false doctrine on any subject, including divorce and remarriage, has no fellowship with God. If I preach or defend a false teacher on any subject, including divorce and remarriage, I have lost out on being in fellowship with God until I repent. I may claim fellowship with my brethren, but I cannot have fellowship with God while abiding in or supporting anything that is unharmonious with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Fellowship with God depends upon abiding in the teaching of Christ. Unfortunately, this matter is not a case of the blind leading the blind, such as what Jesus described in Matthew 15:14, but, rather, there are countless men standing in pulpits who are not blind at all but seem to actively put on blinders, relying on strong emotions and human wisdom (Colossians 2:20-23) rather than accepting the word of God, come what may.

Conclusion

We have exhausted every resource in proving how the false doctrine of mental divorce is just that – false doctrine. Having examined every facet of this subject, I have one simple plea: I beg all who are in adulterous relationships to repent by leaving those unlawful unions (Mark 6:17-18), and I plead with all who teach the doctrine of mental divorce to cease spreading this false doctrine that offers adulterers a false hope of divine approval. Repentance is required of both the one practicing adultery and the one encouraging it through false teaching (Luke 13:3; James 3:1). **Souls are at stake.** Remember, marriage is God-ordained and honorable but adulterous marriages are not:

"MARRIAGE IS HONORABLE AMONG ALL, AND THE BED UNDEFILED; BUT FORNICATORS AND ADULTERERS GOD WILL JUDGE" **(HEBREWS 13:4)**.

Therefore:

"WOE TO THOSE WHO CALL EVIL GOOD, AND GOOD EVIL; WHO PUT DARKNESS FOR LIGHT, AND LIGHT FOR DARKNESS; WHO PUT BITTER FOR SWEET, AND SWEET FOR BITTER"
(ISAIAH 5:20).

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