

29 Sept 2012
Cambridge, UK

Dear Robert.

Thank you so much for interacting with my views in this detailed and biblical way.

You identify three problems:

First you contrast Jesus with Paul. Jesus says that any woman who remarries after an invalid divorce is committing adultery - whether or not she was the guilty party. This contrasts with my interpretation that Paul allows someone who has been deserted (ie divorced against their will) to remarry.

In my [Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible](#) I point out that Jesus is speaking in a rhetorical way about adultery. Matthew recognises this when he says that remarriage and unlawful lust are both adulterous, just as anger is murderous. Matthew doesn't say that these murderers should be executed, nor that these adulterers should be punished. Matthew's context clearly shows that this adultery is not the same as judicial adultery - it is a rhetorical device to show how serious it is to divorce someone without biblical grounds, or to lust after someone you are not married to.

The second 'problem' you identify isn't a really a problem - it is just a disagreement. You say that Jesus overturned a 'loophole' created by Moses - that men can divorce women who commit adultery. I regard the whole of the Law of Moses as being equally inspired. I don't see any reason to identify some laws as inferior ideas inserted by Moses. The question is whether this law of God was only for ancient Jews and not for Christians.

When Jesus said divorce was permitted "for your hardness of heart" I understand this as meaning: "for MY hardness of heart". Jesus is speaking to me, and not just to the Pharisees. I don't think ancient Jews suffered from stubborn sinfulness any more than I do. I am just as capable of persistent adultery as any ancient Jew, and I do not see any evidence that Jesus wanted less protection for my wife than for theirs.

The third problem is based on a misunderstanding. You point out that Paul tells the woman in 1Cor.10-11 to remain unmarried and attempt reconciliation with her husband, and you complain that I make a general case out of this. I certainly do not - I regard this as a specific case.

I point out in my book that this case stands out in 1Cor.7 because all of Paul's examples in that chapter give equal weight to men and women. This is even to the point of repetition, e.g. v.2-3 "each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband; the husband should fulfil his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband." (see other examples in v.4, 12-13; 14, 15, 16, 27-28, 32-34). This is contrasted in v.10-11, where he refers to this woman without referring to an equivalent man. This woman separated from her husband (i.e. in Roman law she divorced him) and Paul points out that Jesus taught against such divorces. This has all the hallmarks of a specific case, so the Corinthians knew the individual circumstances, just like the man who was sleeping with his mother (1Cor.5.1).

You have further problems with my interpretation of Paul's statement that the one who has been deserted "is no longer enslaved" (1Cor.7.15). You think this means that they can give up trying to be reconciled to the spouse who has already divorced them against their will, but it doesn't imply any freedom to remarry. You reject my point that Jewish and Greek divorce certificates use the language of emancipation from slavery: "You are now free to marry any man you wish". As you point out, Paul approves of this phrase when he applies it to widows (v.39) but you think that Paul would not apply this until the former spouse had died. This assumption is, of course, a common and ancient one. I am merely pointing out that Paul could equally mean that they are free to remarry. And I argue that for a first century reader this is the more likely interpretation.

You conclude that Jesus did not allow divorce for anything, and you doubt that "Jesus would have adopted an exception for adultery as Matthew thought". However, you guess that Jesus would have regarded dangerous abuse as a criminal offence because other rabbis did so, and that he would have allowed separation in these circumstances (though other rabbis would have allowed divorce from the abuser).

Both you and I agree with the general emphasis of Jesus' teaching on marriage: it should be lifelong, and that when problems arise the first response should be forgiveness and attempted reconciliation. The role of the pastor is always to try and repair the marriage.

We disagree only about Jesus' response to persistent breaking of marriage vows. I conclude from the biblical data that divorce is God's solution for this kind of hardhearted sinfulness in both the Old and New Testaments, and that these victims can remarry.

However, I concede that this interpretation is difficult to accept because it is based on ancient Jewish legal vocabulary which had been forgotten even by the second century, so that it undermines centuries of church teaching.

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