

THE DIVORCE DILEMMA:
AN EXEGESIS OF I CORINTHIANS 7:10-15

I. INTRODUCTION

Few problems have troubled our culture and churches more than the issue of divorce. The slogan: “The family that prays together, stays together” has been used to substantiate the claim that the divorce rate among Christians is much lower than people who do not go to church on a regular basis. However, recent surveys have pointed out that divorce rates among conservative Christians can be actually higher than for other faiths. Therefore, for churches which accept the authority of the Bible, there needs to be an investigation as to what the Bible says about this subject. A very important passage in this investigation is I

Corinthians 7:10-15:

¹⁰To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. ¹¹But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.

¹²To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. ¹³And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. ¹⁴For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

¹⁵But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.¹

It is clear from this passage that divorce within the church community is not a new issue. In fact divorce legislation in Scripture is found in both Old and New Testaments. It is the purpose of this paper to interpret I Corinthians 7:10-15 in order to give guidance to Christian people concerning the divorce dilemma.

¹ Quoted from NIV. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations will be from NIV.

II. THE CITY

I think it is helpful to know some historical background of the city of Corinth. Corinth was one of the most strategically located cities in the ancient world. It had access to two seas, the Aegean (about five miles to the East) and the Ionian on the West. Its eastern port was Cenchrea (Acts 18:18; Romans 16:1). Its western harbor was Lechaeum. Because of its location, Corinth was a large commercial center. All land travel from north and south, from upper and lower Greece would have to travel through this little land bridge. Corinth also received ancient lanes of sea trade from east and west. The economy of that area, when Paul wrote his letters to the church seems to have been very good at that time (II Corinthians 8:13, 14). Arthur Rupprecht has this to say about the city:

In Roman times the city was notorious as a place of wealth and indulgence. "To live as a Corinthian" meant to live in luxury and immorality. As a seaport it was a meeting place of all nationalities and it offered all of the attendant vices. The Temple of Aphrodite on Acrocorinth was unique in Greece. Its priestesses were more than a thousand (hierodouloi) "sacred slaves," who engaged in prostitution. Its wealth was derived from its commercial traffic by sea and land, its pottery and brass industries, and its importance as the capital of Achaia. At its height it probably had a population of 200,000 free men and 500,000 slaves.²

It would be hard to live a sexually pure life and follow the high moral ethics taught in the Bible in the social environment of Corinth. The immoral society of this city is no doubt alluded to in I Corinthians 6:9-20. Therefore, the study of Corinthians can be one of the most relevant studies for the church today, for several reasons: First, it was written to a church in an urban setting. It is easy to

² Arthur A. Rupprecht, The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible Volume One (Grand Rapids: The Zondervan Corporation, 1977), 961.

see from the context that it could have been written to any church in New York, Los Angeles, Tokyo, Paris, Berlin or Rio de Janeiro. Second, the questions that the church asked the apostle Paul and the problems that were being faced by the Corinthian church are like what many Christians face today. One of the major problems that they had and we deal with as well is divorce.

III. THE RECIPIENTS

Paul planted Christianity in the city of Corinth according to Acts 18:1-18. Some time later he wrote what is now called I Corinthians with the primary purpose to deal with some problems that had been brought to his attention from a Christian woman by the name of Chloe (I Corinthians 1:11), and also remind the church that they should help the poor saints living in Jerusalem (I Corinthians 16:2). The church was primarily made up of Gentiles because of the reference of many of them being converted from idolatry (I Corinthians 12:2). We also know from Acts 18:8 that the apostle Paul was able to convert some Jewish people to Christ.

Richard Oster presents this outline of the book of I Corinthians:

Introduction, etc.	1:1-9
Issue 1 Disunity and Community Fragmentation	1:10-4:20
Issue 2 Reports of Immorality	5:1-6:20
Issue 3 Sexuality/Celibacy/Marriage	7:1-40
Issue 4 Foods Offered to Idols	8:1-11:1
Issue 5 Liturgical Aberrations	11:2-34
Issue 6 Misunderstanding of Spiritual Gifts	12:1-14:40
Issue 7 Misunderstanding of Believers' resurrection	15:1-58
Issue 8 Instruction for the collection	16:1-11

In the section on sexuality, celibacy, and marriage, it is clear that he is answering some questions that the church had on certain issues (I Corinthians 7:1). There is a formula repeated in this letter, “Now about so and so or now for the matters you wrote about”. Apparently they had asked: Is it advisable for a saint to enter into marriage (I Corinthians 7:1-7)? After one becomes a Christian, should one continue to live with his or her unconverted mate? And apparently they also asked questions about virgins and if they should remain single or get married, and he also speaks to widows. Furthermore, I Corinthians 7:26 mentions a distress or a crisis that the Christians Corinthians were going through. Part of this crisis may have been connected with persecution that they might have to suffer for the Lord (Luke 21:23; I Thessalonians 3:7). However, it is very difficult to know exactly what distress Paul had in mind.

IV. THE CONTEXT

In I Corinthians 7:10-15 there are three contrasts worth listing: 1) The addresses are different. 2) The source of instruction is different. 3) The content of the instruction is different.

First of all, the apostle Paul addresses two believers joined in marriage in I Corinthians 7:10, 11.

³Richard E. Oster, Jr., The College Press NIV Commentary – I Corinthians (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1995), 22.

When the apostle said, “To the married I give this command not I, but the Lord” (I Corinthians 7:10), he is referring to the statements that Jesus personally made about marriage and divorce among believers. (Matthew 5:32; 19:9; Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18). Paul declares in no uncertain terms that married persons should not seek a divorce. Yet Paul concedes that in a fallen world, divorce and separation does occur. What then should be the course of action? In the case of a believer leaving a believer, they are to “remain unmarried or else be reconciled” (I Corinthians 7:11). The Greek word behind remain is (meneto). This word is third person singular present imperative.⁴

This means if you depart from your spouse that you are to continue to remain permanently unmarried. This emphasizes the seriousness of the marriage bond in God’s eyes. As Gordan Fee comments,

The wife who may happen to divorce her husband may not use her present unmarried condition as an excuse for remarriage to some one else.⁵

The second option mentioned by Paul is that of reconciliation to one’s partner. Paul gives no other options in this context. We would have to go back to Matthew 19:9 to hear Jesus say this:

⁹I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.

Jesus does mention an exception to remaining unmarried and that is if your spouse has been unfaithful to you. It is my conclusion that Paul must be

⁴ Harold K. Moulton, The Analytical Greek Lexicon Revised (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977), 263.

⁵Gordan D. Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 295.

speaking of situations where a Christian couple is separated for some reason other than adultery. Nonetheless, reconciliation is the bringing back together a relationship which has been severely broken. Christians have been reconciled to God, therefore, we are to be people of reconciliation (Romans 5:10, 11; II Corinthians 5:16-20). We must as God's people activate the word of God to our lives and apply biblical principles to our marriages. Spouses should make every attempt possible to forgive one another and restore the relationship.

Next, Paul addresses a believer married to a non-believer in I Corinthians 7:12-15

“To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord)” has the constant testimony of commentators and scholars that Paul is alluding to something the Lord has not already spoken about. During Jesus' earthly ministry he did point out to his apostles the incompleteness of his instruction to them in John 16:12-14:

¹²“I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. ¹³But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. ¹⁴He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.

Jesus did not discuss marriages between Christians and unbelievers, of which there must have been many in the city of Corinth. If these couples were under the same law mentioned in verses 10, 11 he would not have to go into any further detail, but that is not the case. There are some differences in how God deals with people in “mixed marriages.”

One of the basic hermeneutical principles is that one must find out to whom God is addressing in a particular context. “To the rest” (verse 12) is a contrast from verses 10, 11. He is dealing with a different group, in this case, he is talking

about a believer married to an unbeliever, and Paul is saying that Jesus did not specifically address this kind of situation during his earthly ministry. This is understandable when it is recalled that Jesus confined his teaching ministry to Palestine, and, with but rare exceptions, to Jews within Palestine. Paul is simply making a distinction between the personal teachings of Jesus and that of his own Holy Spirit guided information. Paul's answers are equally as authoritative. However, if any one doubts Paul's authority or apostleship, let him or her consider I Corinthians 7:17 and I Corinthians 14:37

¹⁷Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches.

³⁷If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command.

Paul dealt with single Christians in I Corinthians 7:8-9, Christians married to Christians in 7:10,11, and now he is dealing with relationships where one is a Christian and one is not (I Corinthians 7:12-15). I also believe that Paul is introducing new legislation for these couples. A church with a predominantly Gentile membership would no doubt have members whose spouses had not been baptized into Christ. That being the case then - Matthew 5:31, 32 and 19:9 is not legislation covering all marriages but only marriages with people within the covenant of God. A good way to illustrate the point that I am making is to harmonize what is taught in John 3:16 and Acts 2:38, by pointing out that the full truth of salvation for people today is not found just in John 3:16, but as more revelation from God came to the apostles they later revealed what is said in Acts

2:38. The full truth on every subject was not taught during Jesus' personal ministry here on earth. Paul does not minimize the force of Jesus' teachings; he is simply restricting their application. In essence Paul says that Jesus did not cover all situations having to do with divorce. I believe James D. Bales is correct when he says:

The different legislations do not contradict one another for they deal with different categories of marriages – two believers, and a mixed marriage. One does violence to the Scriptures if he tries to force Paul's teaching and Christ's teaching into one and the same law governing both categories. We are not twisting Scripture but understanding Scripture when we consider the contexts, both immediate and remote, and understanding something in the incomplete revelation (the personal ministry) in the light of the complete revelation – the total truth. (John 16:12-13).⁶

Moreover, Paul assures these couples in Corinth that their marriages are holy. It is a sanctified union. For example, he says this in I Corinthians 7:14

¹⁴For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

The will of God for mixed marriages is the same for one where both are Christians. The marriage is to be kept together and made to work. Note the apostle Peter's counsel to wives with unsaved husbands in I Peter 3:1-6. Furthermore, Paul is not talking about the unsaved spouse being saved by proxy simply by virtue of him or her being married to a believing spouse. Rather, it is simply acknowledging the spiritual influence that a believer could have on his or her home. Therefore, Paul's advice is that if the unbelieving spouse agrees to continue in the marriage they should not divorce.

⁶ James D. Bales, Not Under Bondage, (Searcy: J.D. Bales, 1979), 23.

However, Paul realistically concedes that some unbelieving spouses will desire to end the marriage (I Corinthians 7:15). In that case he says, “A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances.” Paul uses the words “oudedoulotai”. Thayer defines the word doulo as:

“To be under bondage, held by constraint of law or necessity, in some matter, I Corinthians 7:15.⁷

This is what Paul says that a deserted Christian mate is not under. Bales quoting from R.L Roberts, of Abilene Christian University says that:

“Dedoulotai is perfect passive indicative form of douloo, to enslave, and with the negative means literally ‘does not remain a slave.’⁸

The question that is frequently debated is - what is the believing spouse who has been deserted free from and no longer remains a slave to? I agree with Bales that the believer (who was deserted by an unbelieving spouse) is no longer in bondage to that marriage and is free to remarry. If this is not the case she is in greater bondage than she was in before. Consider these thoughts by Bales:

First, she is bound to but not free to live with the departed mate.
Second, she is in bondage to burn, for she cannot marry, and there is no indication that the deserter will ever be reconciled (7:9).
Third, her body is in bondage to the unbeliever who can come back and claim his due at any time (7:3-4). She cannot defraud him if he returns (7:5).
Fourth, she has extra bondage of providing for herself and her children.⁹

Larry Richards reached this conclusion concerning the word “dedoulotai”

⁷ Joseph Henry Thayer, Thayer' Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 158.

⁸ Bales, 84.

⁹ Bales, 93.

In its particular form the verb might be rendered 'is not in a continuing state of bondage.' While the import of this term here has been much argued, it is clear from the context that what Paul means is that the marriage bond no longer continues. The abandoned believer can consider himself or herself unmarried and thus free to remarry.¹⁰

However, the best way to define how words are used is not through Greek lexicons but in the context in which the words are used. What has Paul been talking about in I Corinthians 7:10-15? Marriage and problems within marriage, in one case where there are two believers, Jesus has addressed this issue and when fornication is not involved (Matthew 19:9), then the couples should remain unmarried or else be reconciled. However, when a believer who has an unbelieving spouse that deserts him or her they are not in bondage but are free. I believe that the original recipients to this letter from Paul would understand that to mean, that the believing brother or sister in Christ in the church at Corinth, would not be bound to that marriage any longer and would be free to remarry if they would like too.

Jimmy Allen in his commentary on I Corinthians adds these thoughts:

If Paul is saying the same thing in 7:12-15 that he said in 7:10-11 (i.e. that the individual was to remain unmarried or be reconciled to his mate), it seems that he needlessly repeated himself. He could have simply made the application at 7:10-11 and dropped the matter. Furthermore, if he is giving the same instruction for instance, how does one explain "yet not I, but the Lord" (7:10) and "to the rest speak I, not the Lord" (7:12)? If both sections mean the same thing, Paul was applying what the Lord personally taught in both situations and his statement, "to the rest speak I, not the Lord," becomes meaningless.¹¹

James S. Woodruff concurs with Bales:

¹⁰ H. Wayne House, Divorce and Remarriage Four Christian Views (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1990), 240.

¹¹ Jimmy Allen, Survey of I Corinthians (Searcy: Harding College 1975), 90.

It is reasonable, then, that Paul's instruction be interpreted as supplementary revelation and allowed to speak without being forced, necessarily, into the limits of the previous teaching of Christ...¹²

James Burton Coffman agrees as well:

Some question whether or not such a brother or sister might remarry, but the view here is that, if not, then the brother or sister would still be in bondage. This is another exception, distinguished from adultery mentioned by the Lord (Matthew 19:9).¹³

In my research I also found this quote from Alexander Campbell on I

Corinthians 7:15 which can be found in the Millennial Harbinger, Vol. 5 page 72:

But that which is most to the point and the cases before us is verse 15. But if the infidel party depart, let him depart, a brother or sister, in such a case, is not in bondage. The marriage covenant is broken, and the believing party is free. This permission being granted by the apostle, and in accordance with the Spirit of God in reference to such cases, it seems to me that in all cases of voluntary desertion on the side of the unbelieving party, the marriage covenant is made void, and the believing party is to the deserter as though they had never been married.¹⁴

Paul ends I Corinthians 7:15 with these words "God has called us to live in peace." He may be implying that for the believer to try to maintain a union with an unbeliever who objects would bring about the very opposite of peace. Therefore accept the decision of the heathen partner, let him or her depart.

V. THE CONTROVERSY

¹² James S. Woodruff, The Divorce Dilemma (Nashville, Christian Family Books 1977), 34.

¹³ James Burton Coffman, First & Second Corinthians (Abilene: A C U Press 1974), 104.

¹⁴ Andrew Connally & Olan Hicks, The Connally Hicks Debate (Jonesboro: National Christian Press, Inc. 1979), 334.

There are some who advocate that I Corinthians 7:10-15 is not talking about divorce but just separation. They will point out that the KJV and the ERV and the ASV translations gave the word “Chorizo” the translation of “depart” rather than “divorce” like in the NIV. Some will emphatically argue that Paul was not talking about divorce at all but just legal separation.

These same people will say that the legislation of Jesus in Matthew 19 is for all people saved or unsaved alike, that means if you are having a bible study with an unbeliever and that person was divorced for a reason other than fornication then they will require that person to remain single the rest of his or her life. However, it is very unlikely, just from a social perspective that as the apostle Paul addresses people in the City of Corinth, to address singles, and widows, and those who are married, and then leave out divorced people all together. This is very unlikely.

Here again it is helpful to look at the Greek text. It is interesting that the apostle Paul uses three different words to describe people who are single in I Corinthians 7. In verse 8 the word for widow is “chera”. The specific word that he uses for those who were never married or virgins is “parthenos”. However, what is very interesting in the Greek is that he uses another word for some one who is single, and that is “agamos”, and that word is found in verses 8, 11, 32, 34. In fact he uses the words “agamos” and “parthenos” separately in verse 34. Furthermore, “agamos” is only found in I Corinthians 7 in the Greek New Testament. It seems to me that Paul is addressing two different groups who are single in verse 34, or he is just being redundant. I am advocating that the

“agamos” that he refers to in the Greek text are people who were divorced and at the time when Paul wrote this letter were single again. Larry Richards (has written over one hundred books, including Expository Dictionary of Bible Words and Revell Essential Bible Dictionary) makes this comment:

This compound word is constructed from the Greek word for “marry” and the negative prefix “a” in verse 8. Paul tells the unmarried he thinks it is better if they remain in this state, but “if they cannot control themselves,” he suggests they should marry. Etymologically there is no way to tell whether “unmarried” includes the divorced, or only widows and those who have never married. However, in this very passage, in 7:11, Paul uses this very Greek word of a woman who is separated from her husband! It appears then that in Paul’s thinking, a divorced person as well as widows and those who have not previously married is included among the unmarried that Paul speaks to, advising marriage if this is their gift from God (see v. 7).¹⁵

Furthermore I Corinthians 7:27, 28 is a very important section because it talks about people who have been “loosed from a wife”.

Art thou bound unto a wife? Seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? Seek not a wife. But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned...¹⁶

Paul says to some one who has been loosed from a wife that if you choose to marry you have not sinned. That goes against what he says in I Corinthians 7:10, 11 but it would not go against what Paul said in I Corinthians 7:15.

CONCLUSION

¹⁵ House, 239,240.

¹⁶ King James Version

I Corinthians 7 teaches us that God's ideal for marriage is one man and one woman for a life time. Christian husbands and wives, who are seeking to please God, can have a successful, lasting marriage. Paul's emphasis on celibacy was not intended for Christians to divorce their spouses or opt for a sexless "spiritual marriage". Even if one's spouse is an unbeliever, the Christian is not to initiate a divorce. But if the unbeliever wants out of the marriage, and forces the issue and leaves, the Christian is free of his or her responsibility for the relationship, and if that man or woman remarries, I do not believe they have sinned in doing so (I Corinthians 7:27,28).

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