**The Church at Corinth**

**A Church Facing Inner Problems – #20**

**Marriage and Divorced**

**1 Corinthians 7:10-11**

***1 Corinthians 7:10*** *To the married, however, I give this command, not I but the Lord: that a wife should not be separated from her husband;* ***11*** *but if indeed she is separated, she must either remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband; and that a husband should not divorce his wife.*

**Christians Living in the Roman Society**

Married Christians should remain married. Paul prohibits breaking up marital union, which was very easy in Roman Society. Here Paul is reproducing early Christian teaching that predates Paul’s conversion. Although his formulation of the prohibition of divorce is not an exact reproduction of Jesus’ words, nevertheless what we have here in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 is the earliest form of a reminiscence of the teaching of Jesus. The prohibition of divorce stems from what Jesus has attested in the Gospels (Mark 10:2-12, especially verses 9, 11) where what was once addressed by God in the OT is now extended by Jesus to all human beings by Jesus himself, (see, Luke 16:18; Matt 5:31-32; 19:3-9, especially verse 6).

Something must have been going on in the Corinthian Christian community that has given rise to a discussion of marriage and divorce, to which Paul now reacts. The prohibition of divorce, as formulated by here, is not absolute, as it seems from literal reading itself. Paul did not discuss marriage problems, with no exceptions envisaged, as it appears also in Mark 10:9-12 and Luke 16:18. The form of the prohibition preserved in the Matthean Gospel, however, envisages an exception in 5:31-32: ***parektos logou porneias****,* “except in the matter of illicit marital union that is adultery” (see also Matt 19:6–9).

**Palestinian Society and Roman Society**

1. The prohibition of divorce, coming from Jesus, differs from the common Palestinian Jewish custom of permitting divorce (based mainly on Deut 24:1-4, where Mosaic legislation allowed a man to give his wife a “document of divorce”), of which Paul was certainly aware. For Paul, however, neither husband nor wife is to be separated or divorced from the other.

2. If a woman is divorced, she is to remain unmarried or be reconciled. Thus, Paul envisages a possibility of reconciliation that is the only reason for no further marriage for the woman after such a separation. Moreover, he adds explicitly, the husband is not to divorce his wife (verse 11). Nowhere in the text, however, is there any basis for what is called “the bondage of patriarchal marriage,” and the instruction of the Lord applies equally to the Christian woman and the Christian man; neither of them is to be divorced from the other.

3. Prohibition of divorce as expressed in verse 10, “*“not to be separated*,” is formulated at first from the woman’s position: she is not to be divorced from her husband. This formulation reflects the Palestinian Jewish view of marriage according to Mosaic law, which Paul sums up in Romans 7:2-3: “*A married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is alive. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law regarding her husband. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she gives herself to another man, while her husband is still alive. But if her husband dies, she is free of that law and does not become an adulteress if she gives herself to another man.*” The bond of marriage is viable for life. This is not something light that can be looked at like other human affairs.

4. Sadly, marriage in the history of OT was expressed in terms alien to the Gospel and to the New Creation in Christ. A wife was the property of her husband like his chattel or any other possession of the husband. Sarah, who was taken from Abraham by Abimelech, king of Gerar, was described as ***wehî be ulat baal***, “*for she is a man’s wife*,” (RSV), but literarily “*for she is lorded over [or owned] by a master/owner*” (Gen 20:3; cf. Deut 22:22). The “married man” was ***baal issah****,* “master/owner of a woman” (Exod 21:3, 22; cf. 2 Sam 11:26; Prov 12:4; Deut 21:13). For this reason many OT passages assert the husband’s rights and authority over the wife (see Exod 20:17b; 21:22; Deut 5:21; 22:22; Num 30:6-8,10-14; Sir 25:26 (A good reading on marriage in the OT is by R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, Vole 1 , 126).

5. In Palestinian Judaism the wife could not divorce her husband, whereas he could divorce her (Deut 24:1–4; cf. Jer 3:1). The “writ of divorce,” a ***sepher kerîtût***(Jer 3:8; Isa 50:1 [LXX: ***biblion apostasiou***]), written by the husband, was given to the woman, often with a clause explicitly permitting her to marry to another man. Thus divorce was tolerated in ancient Palestinian Judaism (Deut 24:1-4), even though prophets spoke against it (Mal 2:14, 16; Prov 2:17).

6. Jewish women could not divorce their husbands (Peter Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law,* 109 n.78). But some women in ancient Judea were what Jeremiah called a “*faithless wife*” (Jer 3:20), who even tried to divorce their husbands. Josephus tells of the most famous case, that of Salome, the sister of Herod the Great, who had quarreled with her husband Costobarus and “immediately sent him a document, dissolving the marriage.” Josephus, however, adds immediately that that was not according to Jewish laws: “For a man among us it is possible to do this, but not even a divorced woman may marry again on her own.” As is recorded in *m. Yebamoth* 14:1: “A woman is put away with her consent or without it, but a husband can put away his wife only with his own consent” (Mishnah, edited by H. Danby, p 240). We must be careful when we quote later rabbinic regulations, because it is far from clear that such regulations were applied before the fall of Jerusalem 70 A.D. Later sources such as the sixth-century *Babylonian* Talmud and the still later *Midrash Rabbah* of uncertain date are not a good witness of the early Jewish practice.

7. In the Roman world divorce was a common practice and was permitted either by common agreement of the spouses, or at the instigation of either the husband or the wife (See Seneca, *De beneficiis* 3.16.2; A R W Harrison, *The Law of Athens, 1998,* 39–44). Greek writers who mention divorce are: Diodorus Siculus (*Hist.* 12.18.1), who notes the woman’s right to divorce her husband, Plutarch (*Pericles* 24.5 §165d), and Herodotus, (*Hist.* 6.63). A Roman writer is Cicero (*Philipp.* 2.28.69; *De Orat.* 3.40; *Pro Cluen.* 5.14).

**Does Paul Offer One and Only Option?**

To answer this question in a historical context we should note that Paul formulated his words to a church that has had sexual problems mentioned in verse 1 of this chapter 7, “*it is good for a man not to touch a woman*.”

First: No divorce is attributed to “the Lord.” It now bears the authority of the risen Christ, the Head of the church.

Second: Paul certainly was dealing with the “freedom to divorce” in the Roman Society, so prohibition is more of an indirect discourse rather than an absolute teaching on No Divorce. The pronouncement in the Gospels, Mark, Matthew and Luke has the dominical saying in direct discourse: “*What God has joined together, let no human being put asunder*,” and “*Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery.*” This took marriage to its beginning in Genesis and to creation before the fall. But here Paul facing a particular and accepted practice shifted to the teaching of the time for “reconciliation,” and that is why Paul does not quote the dominical saying, but paraphrases it in his own words. Paul ignores even divorce for “adultery” that was permitted by Christ in the Gospels.

Third, verse 1 Corinthians 7:11 (RSV) translates the Greek words in parentheses: “*but if she does [separate], let her remain single or else be reconciled to her husband.*” This reflects the view of some interpreters. The denial of divorce and a possible subsequent marriage with another person does not appear in verse 11. Since other forms of Jesus’ prohibition of divorce in the NT, however, refer at times to a subsequent marriage (Mark 10:11a; Matt 19:9b; Luke 16:18), it is clear that Paul referred to “a specific incident at Corinth,” which is envisaged in Paul’s statements in verses 3-5 above, i.e., a case of Corinthian spouses quarreling over intercourse and abstention from it, and quarreling so intensely that the ascetic husband had already decided to divorce his wife because of it. Paul’s answer would be to counsel against such divorce and recommend reconciliation. Paul considered Jesus’ prohibition of divorce, not as an absolute precept applied to all kind of problems, but as a significant directive whose relevance to a particular situation had to be evaluated by the pastor (verses 3-4), in the spirit of Christian love, which “*does not seek its own interests*” (13:5).

More important is the question that if married life becomes impossible, should a second chance given to the broken and the wounded unacceptable or alien to the redeeming love of Christ the Good Shepherd?

**The Altar of Our Pride**

**Letter from Philemon**

Brother George,

Jesus the king of peace rules in peace even in all our problems.

While we see the fire of pain, the water of comfort is also near all of us. But we need to learn how to re-focus on the water while the flames are blazing round us or in us.

I am sad to hear that our dear brother (----) had been divorced and that the church is not giving him permission to re-marry.

His priest is a real Jew for he follows Moses. The words of our Lord Jesus Christ the Beloved of the Father don’t need a comment from me. But is this the only commandment that we break? What about the “adultery of the heart” which condemns all humans. Does this mean that any person who lusts and commits that sin in his heart must “divorce” his wife?

What a catastrophe that has landed on our laps!!! Jesus is now re placed by his commandments and those who have failed are told that they are rejected by the One who took the good thief Paradise. What is more grievous: the denial of Jesus, or divorce? By what measure do we measure any sin? And if a second marriage leads to new life, is this contrary to or different from the restoration of Peter who denied the Savior? If we are told to forgive 7 times 70, and if someone breaks all the commandments and wants to remain in communion with the Beloved, should we send him away or accept him and help him to be healed?

When we care about the commandments more than we care about persons, not only our faith in Christ is in vain but our love is naught and we are seeking sacrifice, not mercy, and the sacrifice is our broken brother or wounded sister. We sacrifice them on the altar of our pride.

Christ have mercy on us

Philemon

Jan 1959

**Text Study**

**VERSE 7:10 –** *To the married, however, I give this command*.

“I instruct, give orders, command,” as also in 1 Corinthians 11:17; 1 Thessalonians 4:11.

**VERSE 7:10 (cont.) –** *not I but the Lord*.

Paul knowingly cites Jesus’ prohibition of divorce and passes it on in indirect discourse to married believers, as coming from the risen Christ. Cf. 14:37, “*a commandment of the Lord.*”

**VERSE 7:10 (cont.) –** *“That a wife should not be separated from her husband.*

Or “not be divorced.”

As formulated, the prohibition of divorce is stated with no specification that points to a problem in the church. The RSV, NRSV, ESV, NAB, however, translate “*should not separate.*” This is not a good translation. It would mean that Jesus’ prohibition of divorce had already been recast in pre-Pauline tradition, adapting it to a non-Palestinian setting, in the Greco-Roman world, in which a woman could divorce her husband. This recasting has happened, indeed, in the second part of the prohibitive saying of Jesus preserved in Mark 10:12: “*If she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery*,” where the evangelist explicitly has extended Jesus’ prohibition to the Gentile world for which his Gospel was being written. But here Paul is treating a different problem.

In this verse Paul uses ***chorizo****,* the verb that commonly means “divorce” in Classical and Hellenistic Greek writers and in Greek marriage contracts (Leob Classical Library, *Select Papyri,* 1.14–15). It was certainly employed in ancient Greek to designate what is commonly called divorce, i.e., the express different aspects of the separation. The verb occurs in the LXX (Deut 24:1)

**VERSE 7:11 –** *But if indeed she is separated, she must either remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband.*

Literally, “*let her remain … let her be reconciled*.” Both verbs qualify Paul’s command of verse 10 and this is simply reckoning with a hypothetical situation in a generic way. The RSV translates, “*but if she does*” (i.e., separate), which is, again, equally questionable.

Is Paul recommending one or two options to the separated woman: remain unmarried *and* be reconciled to the husband, or remain unmarried? The Greek text itself supports the two alternatives (remain unmarried or be reconciled), but not a third way (marriage to another man). According to the Gospels, that would be adultery (Mark 10:11; Luke 16:18), which Paul does not mention.

Is Paul addressing a specific existing problem that of some Corinthian Christian woman had been divorced? The Roman law would allow them to divorce, and so has Paul formulated his words just in case divorce could happen? We have no historical data to answer these questions and any other questions.

**VERSE 7:11 (cont.) –** “*and that a husband should not divorce his wife*.

Paul restates the same prohibition as in verse 10, but now from the standpoint of the man.

***Pope’s Notes***

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