

Divorce and Remarriage: Applying Biblical Standards to a Modern Culture

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Abstract

Divorce rates in America have reached historic levels. The American home has been exposed to disruption and fragmentation that has radically changed the culture of the American family. Furthermore, the uniqueness of the American situation resides in the near-apathetic approach that the American public has taken to the issue. Divorce rates are historically high and the American home is drastically changing, yet the American culture neglects the issue both in the local community of the church and the home and in the public arena of politics and government. By examining the biblical foundation of marriage, one can transition from principle to application without violating the hermeneutics of the Word of God. Examining Matthew 19 provides an insight into the teaching of Jesus Himself on divorce and remarriage, while reading through 1 Corinthians 7 reveals Paul's addition to the marital bond and dissolution. By combining these teachings and grounding them in the foundation of marriage—Genesis 2:24—one can come to a better understanding of the issue of divorce and marriage in the Scriptures.

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Modern Problem

Moral issues often construct the imaginary line that separates church and state and ignite the ever-present tension that pervades the delicate relationship between politics and religion. Few of these moral issues in modern American culture exist on a unique level that evades the attention of both political arenas and religious institutions. These issues are few in number and even less significant in attention, yet they have permeated the very fabric of American culture to the point of near normalcy. Divorce takes the lead role in such issues. According to provisional data in *National Vital Statistics Reports*, the marriage rate in America in 2009 stood at 6.8 per 1,000 total population while the divorce rate stood at 3.4 per 1,000 population—a 50 percent margin.¹ Nearly 50 percent of first marriages, 60 to 67 percent of second marriages, and 70 to 73 percent of third marriages end in divorce.² Cohabitation raises those numbers even higher, for cohabitation is a form of marriage and separation from it is an unofficial form of divorce. Cohabitation statistics only add to already alarming divorce statistics, adding 11 percent of women ages 25-44 and 10 percent of men in the same age range who are currently cohabitating.³ If half of those couples separate as well, the divorce statistics rise. Cohabitation slights the divorce statistic, for separation from cohabitation is not considered an official divorce. Even in

¹ “Births, Marriages, Divorces, and Deaths: Provisional Data for 2009,” *National Vital Statistics Reports* 58 no 25 (August 2010): 1-6. <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/divorce.htm> (Accessed 10 September 2011).

² “Divorce Statistics,” <http://www.divorcestatistics.org/> (Accessed 10 September 2011).

³ “Marriage and Cohabitation in the United States: A Statistical Portrait Based on Cycle 6 (2002) of the National Survey of Family Growth,” *Vital and Health Statistics* 23 no 28 (February 2010): 9. <<http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/mardiv.htm>> (Accessed 10 September 2011).

the face of such alarming statistics, the issue of divorce is still eluding the attention that it truly deserves. It was not always this way.

In response to the first recorded divorce in 1639, leading scholars Benjamin Trumbull and Timothy Dwight IV vehemently advocated the seriousness of the formal divorce. In fact, Dwight later used public records of his time to conclude that "...one out of every hundred married pairs in Connecticut" had divorced during a five-year period that he researched.⁴ That is *one percent* of marriages ended with divorce during the mid-17th century. Congress authorized a comprehensive study of divorce over a period of twenty years, from 1887-1907. The study by Carroll D. Wright found that 7-8 percent of marriages during that time ended in divorce. Furthermore, the divorce rate rose 157 percent during a population growth of 69 percent during just those 20 years.⁵ Nearly a century later, a study from 1973-2006 revealed the national average for divorce rate stood at 38 percent, with Evangelical Protestants the leading religious denomination at 43 percent.⁶ From only 1 out of 100 to nearly 1 out of 2 marriages ending in divorce, America clearly faces a dilemma. Yet the relatively quiet rally against divorce in the midst of rampant destruction of marriage still remains a mystery when compared to other moral issues in America. Abortion has legitimate battle grounds that occupy center stage in many political and religious circles. Even other issues that are not quite as pervasive in culture still receive more attention than divorce. When adults answer questions concerning divorce with answers such as "I don't think government can deal with issues

⁴ Mark A. Smith, "Religion, Divorce, and the Missing Culture War in America," *Political Science Quarterly* 125 no 1 (2010): 60-61.

⁵ Ibid., 67.

⁶ Ibid., 80.

of morality,” culture seems to consider morality a simple, relativistic choice.⁷ American culture takes its apathetic view of morality a step further, expressing amusement at the issue characterized by a California billboard that reads, “\$25—Cheap Divorce, Unload the Deadbeat.”⁸ The issue of divorce in America exemplifies culture’s attitude toward morality. However, divorce takes on a unique role in the morality threshold found in culture today.

Despite the obvious moral connotations that divorce carries, those who would carry moral issues into politics raise barely a murmur against the issues of divorce. With the exception of organizations such as the Moral Majority, advocates of the moral standard against divorce in American politics have virtually disappeared from the public scene; furthermore, the few organizations that do boast a moral agenda in the political field treat divorce as a secondary issue. Even the Moral Majority lasted only a decade in American politics. Conclusively, divorce disappeared from the political agenda during the 1920s.⁹ If divorce has developed at such an alarming rate, why is this particular moral issue missing from culture? Divorce has been a unique moral issue, a concept referred to as the “missing culture war” by some for its absent yet significant impact on American culture.¹⁰ An absence of awareness paired with the substantial role of divorce in the

⁷ Steven L. Nock, James D. Wright, and Laura Sanchez, “America’s Divorce Problem,” *Society* 36 no 4 (1999): 46.

⁸ Ronald J. Nydam, “The Messiness of Marriage and the Knottiness of Divorce,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 40 no 2 (2005): 211.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 73-80.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.

populous broken homes of America attest to divorce in America as the “missing culture war.”

This concept of silence on divorce, however, goes further into the background of divorce and remarriage than many non-religious scholars realize. The modern problem of silence and ambiguity on the issue can be traced to a foundation of uncertainty and silence. In fact, an argument from silence is the primary background to biblical texts that illuminate a Christian stance on divorce. The muddled interpretations of centuries past concerning the arguments of silence on divorce have created an even dimmer view of divorce in today’s culture. The few passages of Scripture that do address divorce and remarriage are vehemently debated among theological groups. The past sects of rabbinical Judaism differed on the interpretation of Old Testament texts such as Deuteronomy 24:1-4, while today denominations and academia across America debate New Testament passages such as Matthew 19 and 1 Corinthians 7. Given the lack of passages to interpret and the sensitivity of the issue, the biblical stand on divorce has never reached universal consensus among the Christian community. Even the Gospel accounts themselves seem to differ on Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 19. Thus, a proper approach to applying the true biblical standard demands a call to the very foundation of marriage. With appropriate background information and interpretive context, the issue of divorce and remarriage can be properly understood and applied to modern society both in and out of the church. The Creation account holds this background in Genesis 2:24. Before examining the foundation, one must first examine the gap of theology that allows for such wide interpretation. Matthew 19 and 1 Corinthians 7 hold the answers.

Historical Context

Jewish Culture and Remarriage

A Bible-believing Christian can biblically claim that all divorce is out of the will of God. In Matthew 19:6b, Jesus answers the Pharisaical question of divorce by stating, “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”¹¹ Upon the questioning of His views on divorce, Jesus does not respond with an answer on divorce; rather, Jesus counters with the biblical account of Creation concerning the joining together of man and wife, finishing with God’s original intention of marriage as a life-long covenant. During His ministry, Jesus consistently responds to temptation (cf. Matthew 4) and questioning (cf. Matthew 12, 15, 21) with Scripture. Including Matthew 19 in this list of scripturally-based responses allows the reader to take Jesus Christ’s reference to the Old Testament into serious consideration when interpreting the text. For this text, Jesus responds with Genesis 2:24. The Pharisees approached Jesus in Matthew 19 with a specific question concerning divorce, loaded with implications only noticeable upon the surveying of background information. His response of Genesis 2:24 aids the reader both in the interpretation of His response and in the motivation of the question.

Old Testament grounds for divorce were translated, interpreted, and advocated (naturally) by the Jews. However, it would be a hermeneutical and practical mistake to directly apply the teachings of the Old Testament to situations in modern society without any regard to cultural context or covenantal change. Jewish leaders had every right to advocate Old Testament principles. Whether properly interpreted or not, the Law was all

¹¹ All Scripture references in ESV.

they had. However, the laws of Moses in the Old Testament were predominantly case laws. Deuteronomy 12-26 contains 31 cases of this situational rulebook, a rulebook with laws for the Israelites in that time that were not “expressions of the ideal.”¹² Furthermore, Jesus came to establish something new. Hebrews 8 narrates Jesus’ purpose of establishing a new covenant and ruling the first covenant dead. Hebrews 8:13 says, “In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete....” Luke 22:20 also has Jesus speaking of a new covenant revealed through His blood. To clarify, however, Jesus did not come to completely destroy the Old Testament. Matthew 5:17 provides plain insight into His purpose: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” Through His death and resurrection, Jesus came to establish a new covenant to replace the old covenant in order to fulfill the Old Testament Law and Prophets.¹³

Understanding the context of remarriage in the New Testament era clarifies the legitimacy of remarriage after a legitimate divorce. Jewish culture viewed marriage as a prerequisite to life as a good Jew. “Marriage is the ideal state,” a concept prevalent in any Jewish understanding, specifically around Jesus’ time.¹⁴ Yev. 62b states, “He who dwells without a wife dwells without joy, without blessing, without good, without happiness.”

¹²Carl J. Laney, “Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and the Issue of Divorce,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 no 593 (1992): 5-6. Allen R. Guenther, “Interpreting the Silences: Deuteronomy 24:1-4,” *Direction* 24 no 1 (1995): 43.

¹³ Jeremiah 31:31-34. This covenant also refers to God’s former covenant with Israel, a vivid picture of the covenant of marriage.

¹⁴ Louis Jacobs, *The Jewish Religion: A Companion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 334.

Also, Yev. 67a states, “He who has no wife is less than a man.”¹⁵ Jewish culture expected every man to be a married man. Furthermore, the writ of divorce seems to have existed for the sole purpose of remarriage; remarriage was expected after a divorce in virtually all prominent Jewish circles.¹⁶ In fact, when the need arose to abbreviate such lengthy documents such as certificates of divorce, both Greco-Roman and Jewish writs alike abbreviated to the most important issue. The abbreviated versions have been documented to include the right to remarry anyone.¹⁷ The Greco-Roman world was no different, with remarriage known and recognized as a legal right in both religious and secular culture.¹⁸ Therefore, with such context in mind in a book written for the Jews, the words of Jesus concerning legitimate divorce would have simultaneously connected legitimate remarriage. The case also follows in Paul’s desertion clause in 1 Corinthians 7. In both Jesus and Paul’s writing on divorce, anything other than permissible remarriage after a legitimate divorce would need clarification in the eyes of a 1st century reader: “Jesus would have had to clarify or every 1st century reader would have misunderstood.”¹⁹

In conclusion, the center for the debate on divorce in the Gospels reveals loaded Jewish tradition countered with Scriptural foundation that is characteristic of the ministry

¹⁵ “Marriage,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, eds. R.J. Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 443.

¹⁶ David Instone-Brewer, “1 Corinthians 7 in the Light of the Greco-Roman Marriage and Divorce Papyri,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 52 (2001): 240.

¹⁷ David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 202. Darrell L. Bock and Gregory J. Herrick, eds., *Jesus in Context: Background Readings for Gospel Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 50.

¹⁸ Instone-Brewer, “1 Corinthians,” 240.

¹⁹ Ibid., 241. Edward G. Dobson, *What the Bible really says about Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage* (Old Tappan: Revell Company, 1986), 85.

of Jesus Christ. The Jewish approach to this debate involves a cultural stronghold of marriage that strongly rejects the idea of singleness. Furthermore, this strong expectation of marriage then reveals the expectation of remarriage after divorce. In passages such as Matthew 19 and 1 Corinthians 7, a legitimate divorce would imply a legitimate remarriage as well. The Greco-Roman world also held this view, adding to the idea that remarriage would have been implied to any reader of the text. Anything different would have had to be intentionally distinguished. Moving into the passages, the reader can take this historical background and better interpret the text.

Context of Matthew 19

One of the prominent passages concerning divorce and remarriage is Jesus' debate with the Pharisees found in Matthew 19:1-12. Both immediate and ancient backgrounds apply to the Pharisees' questioning of Jesus. First, Jesus' society, specifically the Jewish community of His area, was experiencing an immediate impact of marriage and divorce. Herodias had recently given divorce papers to her husband Philip. She then married his brother soon after. His brother happened to be Herod Antipas.²⁰ This public divorce and remarriage sent shockwaves through the Jewish community. In fact, John the Baptist spoke against such actions. His words condemning the actions of Herodias eventually resulted in his beheading.²¹ Furthermore, the beheading of John the Baptist for his teachings against divorce could be historical context to further shed light

²⁰ Peter Richardson, "Herod," in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 583. J. Vernon McGee, *Marriage and Divorce* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 122. Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 332.

²¹ Ibid. Mark 6:17-20 provides biblical support for Herod's motivations.

on the Pharisees' approaching Jesus and asking for His stance on divorce during that time in Jerusalem.²² Therefore, the Pharisees had possible ulterior motives in sparking the debate in hopes that Jesus would arouse authorities by condemning such an important figure.

In fact, the Pharisees always seemed to be in conflict with Jesus. Whether it was the Pharisees' continued attempts to thwart Jesus or Jesus' sermons on the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, both sides relayed their feelings to the other. Matthew 23 records Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees because of their hypocrisy. The Pharisees hated Jesus to the extent of crucifying Him. Their enmity provides direct motivation for coming to Jesus about such a divisive question. However, their enmity must not be misunderstood. Pharisees were not full of heresy and ready to condemn every good deed. In fact, many of Christ's teachings and claims to righteousness align with those of the Mishnah. Hillel emphasized the Golden Rule, while later rabbis summarized the Torah as a concept of "love your neighbor as yourself."²³ In addition, Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:27-32 aligns with traditional Pharisaical teaching by stating that "immoral thoughts" are worse than "immoral deeds," a concept that includes the idea of an adulterer sinning with his eyes.²⁴ This unhealthy obsession is easily recognizable throughout the New Testament. Whether the issue involved the Sabbath healing in Matthew 12, divorce in Matthew 19, or taxes in Matthew 22, the Pharisees desired clarity solely on the Law regardless of the

²² D.A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, eds. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 465.

²³ Gerald Friedlander, *The Jewish Sources of the Sermon on the Mount* (New York: Kat Publishing House, 1969), xxv.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

righteousness involved. In fact in Matthew 27, even when the priests themselves were using treachery to capture Jesus, their sole concern was not the lawfulness of the exchange of the blood money but the lawfulness of the place to put the blood money. Jesus recognizes this and conveys His thoughts through a defaming condemnation of their hypocrisy in Matthew 23. In addition, this Jewish attitude toward inward righteousness still remained despite Jesus' proclamation of faith alone. Paul teaches against outward piety alone in Romans 2, specifically calling into question those Jews who value outward religion more than inward righteousness. Romans 2:17, 23, and 29 summarize the passage well, saying, "...But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the Law and boast in God... You who boast in the Law dishonor God by breaking the Law... But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart...." The Jews had centuries of tradition to fight against when Jesus arrived with the new covenant and the law of faith rather than the Law of tradition (cf. Romans 3:27). This conflict provides context to the Pharisees' approach to Jesus on the question of divorce. Furthermore, if Judaism was lax on any law, both Jews and non-Jews alike recognized a lax law on divorce.²⁵ Matthew 19 paints a scene of disparity that is completely shaken by Jesus' proclamation against something so fundamental to every Jew.

As for deeper and more specific background to the Pharisaical reasoning, general rabbinic consensus centered upon the following four grounds for legitimate divorce: infertility, material neglect, emotional neglect, and unfaithfulness.²⁶ Infertility arose from rabbinic understanding for the purpose of marriage. Josephus states in *Apion* 2.199 the

²⁵ Ibid., 53.

²⁶ Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage*, 85.

Jewish belief that procreation was the sole purpose of marriage; therefore, childlessness after ten years of marriage requires divorce and remarriage to a fertile partner.²⁷ Material and emotional neglect stem from Jewish interpretation of Exodus 21:10-11. In summary, the passage states the conditions under which a woman, specifically a daughter sold as a servant, may leave a man without resulting in a penalty. The text commands the husband to provide food, clothing, and marital rights; otherwise, the woman may leave without any payment. Finally, unfaithfulness by sexual immorality earned not just divorce, but death. Even as far back as Babylonian times, Hebrew women who committed adultery were punishable by death.²⁸ Deuteronomy 22:13-23 presents God's condemnation on those who are guilty of sexual immorality before or during marriage. Specifically, if a man is found cheating on his wife by having relations with another woman, both the husband and other woman are put to death. Adultery was the most heinous and legitimate ground for divorce. Although all four reasons were generally accepted as grounds for divorce, the prominent schools of thought and the central debate of Deuteronomy 24 are discussed later in this section.

Also important to this study is the proper cultural understanding of the effects of commencement and cessation of marriage in relation to the two parties involved. During the time of the Old Testament, the idea of a woman being publicly dissatisfied with a marriage was unspeakable. The Babylonian era consisted of Jewish laws such as the

²⁷ Ibid., 91-92.

²⁸ David Janzen, "The Meaning of *porneia* in Matthew 5.32 and 19.9: An Approach from the Study of Ancient Near Eastern Culture," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 80 (2000), 76.

shaming of a husband being punishable by death.²⁹ In fact, Philo and 2 Maccabees both record the idea of a woman as something to be kept indoors and made only for inside life.³⁰ Concerning divorce, women did not even have grounds to request. Polygamy in Jewish society was not specifically outlawed until Rabbenu Gershom stood against it far after case law in the 11th century A.D.³¹ If a husband was allowed multiple wives, adultery or marital unfaithfulness would be difficult to accomplish. A wife who sought a divorce from such circumstances would find it difficult to obtain a divorce.

Overall, society viewed women with very little respect, as only part of the benefits of signing a *ketubah*. The *ketubah* was part of an initiative taken by Rabbinic authorities to prevent abuse of divorce by the husband. It was a marriage settlement that gave the wife slightly more protection by providing a sum to be claimed by the wife upon the event of a divorce or death.³² Furthermore, the Jews experienced a change under Rabbi Gershom of Mayence, with wives slowly gaining more ground for divorce and more power in the contracts of marriage.³³ The *ketubah* became almost the new centerpiece of a marriage by New Testament times. Rather than focusing on marriage as the ideal, Jews began to lose focus and centralize marriages upon *ketubah* and dowry. In fact, the *ketubah* soon became a part of the marriage process solely concerned with the

²⁹ Guenther, "Interpreting the Silences," 46.

³⁰ Friedlander, *Jewish Sources*, xix-xx.

³¹ Jacobs, *Jewish Religion*, 132.

³² Ibid.

³³ Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage*, 80-81. R. Gershom was responsible for the Herem in 1030 A.D. at Worms that officially prohibited polygamy for the Jewish community.

dowry, taking away the attention from its true intent of marriage.³⁴ Furthermore, the dowry was so central to marital contracts that the payment of dowry itself became known as the *ketubah*.³⁵ The Pharisees mention Moses' certificate of divorce in Matthew 19:7, thus a connection would then be made to the *ketubah* because of the centrality of the *ketubah* in the role of Jewish marriage and divorce. Jesus had an understanding of divorce and *ketubah* certificates of His day. His response to such an issue rightly lands on the root of the problem. Rather than addressing the corrupt divorce-centered *ketubah* contracts, Jesus draws the Pharisees' attention to the original intention of marriage. When Jesus answers their question of divorce with a response solely focused on marriage, they respond by mentioning a lawful certificate of divorce given by Moses.

Various sects and groups also influenced the Jewish scene of divorce. The parallel divorce passage found in Mark suggests a debate between the Pharisees and the Essenes. Rather than the technical terms being debated in Matthew 19, Mark 10 seems to provide a stark contrast between marriage and celibacy, incorporating a possible link to the Essene thought of the time.³⁶ Whether the connection is direct or indirect, the Essenes certainly had an impact on the marriage topic. In fact, the Essenes could be considered the conservative group concerning marriage and divorce. The Essenes took the idea of marriage very seriously. Josephus, Philo, and Pliny actually all record the Essene men's rejection of marriage. The absence of female bodies in the graves of Qumran adds to this

³⁴ Instone-Brewer, "1 Corinthians," 227. Dowry in this sense would strictly be understood in its development as the focal point of the *ketubah*, as seen in the following footnote.

³⁵ Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage*, 82.

³⁶ Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, "Marriage and Divorce," in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Vol. I), eds. Lawrence H. Schiffman and James C. VanderKam (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 513.

claim; however, the *Damascus Document*, the *Rule of Congregation*, and the *Temple Scroll* all mention married members of the Qumran community.³⁷ Regardless of the exact marital stance, once in the covenantal bond, Essenes held marriage in high and holy regard. In fact, intercourse within the confines of a marriage and between the husband and wife barred the Qumran resident from entering the city of Jerusalem for three days.³⁸

It is from this community that one can more fully understand the meaning of *porneia* found in Jesus' exception clause in Matthew 19. The Qumran community uses the Hebrew word *zona*, or *zenut*, to describe adultery. Furthermore, Qumran writers described *zenut* as "the worst of all sins."³⁹ For the Essenes at Qumran, marriage included one husband and one wife fully committed with a wife that "shall be with him (the husband) all the days of her life."⁴⁰ *Zenut* was something evil that destroyed such a holy covenant. Interestingly enough, the term *zenut* corresponds to the Greek term *porneia*.⁴¹ However, *zenut* is not at all completely clear in its interpretation. The term in other texts translates to other issues such as incest, polygamy, idolatry, and even disloyalty to a group.⁴² Regardless of the specificities, the term conveys the idea of sexual immorality displayed through various means and sheer disloyalty to another group or person.

³⁷ "Marriage," in *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, eds. Jacob Neusner and William Scott Green (New York: MacMillan Library Reference USA, 1996), 416.

³⁸ Fitzmeyer, "Marriage and Divorce," 512.

³⁹ Bruce J. Malina, "Does *porneia* mean fornication?" *Novum Testamentum* 14 no 1 (1972): 11.

⁴⁰ Fitzmeyer, "Marriage and Divorce," 511-513.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid. Janzen, "Meaning of *porneia*," 70.

All background ideas and concepts, however, should be assimilated and sorted into the two mainstream schools of thought on divorce during Jesus' ministry—the school of Shammai and the school of Hillel. Herein lays the focal point of background for Jesus' exception clause in Matthew 19:3-12. According to historical context, the Pharisees approach Jesus to ask Him about divorce in hopes of arousing Herod Antipas to arrest Jesus as he did John the Baptist. Additionally, the hostilities that existed between the Pharisees and Jesus were evident. On a deeper level, the Pharisees had more personal intentions in approaching Jesus with a question of divorce. Rabbinical debate on divorce during the New Testament era centered upon the interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1-4. The passage, specifically verse 1, addresses a certificate of divorce being written because “he (the husband) has found some indecency in her.” The debate focuses on *erwat dabar*, here in the ESV translated as “indecency.” Pharisees did not have Matthew 19 to divide their party lines, for Matthew 19 did not exist. Their distinction rested upon the interpretation of *erwat dabar* or, translated literally, “nakedness of a thing.”⁴³ Instead of wrestling with the meaning of *porneia* as do modern scholars, the context of Matthew 19 has the prominent debate resting over the meaning of *erwat dabar*. In Mishnaic Hebrew, the term simply meant “nakedness.”⁴⁴ However, it is the interpretation of the phrase rather than the actual translation that divides the Jewish schools of thought.

The school of Hillel followed a common rabbinic exegetical technique that interprets strange Hebraic constructions such as *erwat dabar* with an extra level of hidden

⁴³ Janzen, “Meaning of *porneia*,” 73.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

meaning.⁴⁵ Hillelites introduced the concept of an “any matter” divorce. The school of Hillel interpreted *erwat dabar* as two separate ideas rather than one phrase. While Shammaites believed in a “matter of indecency,” the School of Hillel translated “a matter” *in addition to* “indecency.”⁴⁶ According to the Hillelites’ interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1, the phrase *erwat dabar* constituted legitimate divorce on the grounds of “any matter.” The Mishnah provides rabbinic teaching on the topic in m. Gittin 9.10, which says the school of Hillel allowed a man to seek a legitimate divorce “...even if she (the wife) spoiled his dish.”⁴⁷ The very same text reveals the similar thoughts of a second century rabbi expanding the Hillel interpretation; Rabbi Aqiba is quoted as saying, “Even if he found someone else prettier than she.”⁴⁸ The school of Hillel provided a broad interpretation that gave way to legitimate divorce in virtually any dispute.

The School of Shammai took a conservative approach to Deuteronomy 24:1. “The House of Shammai say, ‘A man should divorce his wife only because he has grounds for it in unchastity.’”⁴⁹ Shammaites viewed adultery as the only legitimate ground for divorce. *Erwat dabar*, in order to be properly understood, is translated as “a matter of indecency.” Although the school of Shammai still allowed divorce for reasons in Exodus 21:10-11, they interpreted this passage in Deuteronomy 24:1 as referring only to adultery.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage*, 111.

⁴⁶ Ibid. Italics added.

⁴⁷ Bock, *Jesus in Context*, 85.

⁴⁸ Jacob Neusner, *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*, vol. 11 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2005), 404. Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus*, 333-334.

⁴⁹ Bock, *Jesus in Context*, 85. Neusner, *The Babylonian Talmud*, 404.

⁵⁰ Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage*, 111.

The key to linking the Shammai-Hillel debate to Matthew 19 is found in both the context of the book and the actual question. The Gospel of Matthew alone records four of Jesus' direct references to "the Law and the Prophets."⁵¹ Matthew was written to a Jewish audience. The forty-eight formula quotations from the Hebrew Bible and the ten references to Jesus as the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets are direct evidence to a Jewish audience.⁵² Furthermore, support for Matthew 19 as addressing a Jewish debate is found in that Matthew is the only Gospel that gives detail concerning Joseph's desire to put Mary away after she reveals her pregnancy. Jewish thought pervades the pages of Matthew's Gospel. If any Gospel would be written to, for and about the Jews in their context, Matthew would be the clear-cut option. In addition, the Pharisees' wording of the question bears striking resemblance to the "any matter" cause interpreted by the Hillelites from Deut. 24:1-4.⁵³ The context for a Jewish reader would have instantly sparked the Shammai-Hillel debate.

Jesus' ministry was always in opposition to the Jewish leaders of His time, and this passage is no different. By bringing up divorce in a land ruled by a practicing divorcee (Herod Antipas), the Pharisees were itching for a fight. Philosophically, the schools of Shammai and Hillel inside of the Pharisees had been at odds for decades regarding the idea of *erwat dabar* in Deuteronomy 24:1. While Shammaites thought it to

⁵¹ Matthew 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; 22:40.

⁵² David Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 14-19. These questions are formal questions in Matthew with a pattern or formula that always include some type of introductory formula ("it is written") to an Old Testament fulfillment. For an extensive list, see Turner 2008: 18-19.

⁵³ Matthew 19:3 translations: NASB-"for any reason at all." KJV-"for every cause." ESV-"for any cause." NIV-"for any and every reason."

refer to adultery only, Hillelites thought *erwat dabar* referred to any matter of dispute.

The bottom line for context in this passage is that any Jewish reader who comes across the question of divorce “for any cause” in Matthew 19:3 would have automatically recognized the rabbinical elites Shammai and Hillel.

Context of 1 Corinthians 7

The church at Corinth surely needed wisdom in a letter from Paul, specifically concerning marriage and sexuality. New converts to the faith were experiencing a barrage of negative influence from the Roman culture that saturated Corinth. The city of Corinth was an affluent trading post linking Rome to the provinces of the East.⁵⁴ As such, the city was exposed to a plethora of various cultures and beliefs. The diversity of backgrounds led to the establishment of diversity in the city as well, producing many religious influences that conflicted with one another yet still managed to maintain a following in such a diverse city.⁵⁵

Historical background on Paul’s text in 1 Corinthians 7 reveals Greco-Roman influence on the culture that contributes to a fuller understanding of its interpretation. Corinth is no exception with such a strong Roman influence, for Corinth presented a culture with no central god, but a myriad of gods to select.⁵⁶ Paul’s argument on Mars Hill in Acts 17 sheds light on such a polytheistic culture that even has an unknown god to ensure honor was kept. Paul supports such a background in his second letter to Corinth,

⁵⁴ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 4.

⁵⁵ Marion L. Soards, *1 Corinthians*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), 5.

⁵⁶ Garland, *Matthew*, 9.

in which 2 Corinthians 6:14 exhorts Christians to avoid relationships with unbelievers.

With such a vast majority of gods and confusing landscape of religion, the marriage of an unbeliever and a believer must have been very common.

In light of such relationships, 1 Corinthians 7:10-16 reveals the significance of desertion by an unbelieving spouse to believers in Corinth. In addition, Roman law interpreted the simple act of permanently leaving the house as a writ of divorce.⁵⁷ Such “unilateral separation” was practiced and accepted in the Greco-Roman world, giving allowance under any circumstance for a spouse to leave and gain a divorce without ever dealing with a written document of divorce.⁵⁸ Jewish converts now faced not a hypothetical situation but a real-life crisis. Jewish culture pushed marriage as a requirement to gain honor and fulfill God’s purpose of procreation. Converts at Corinth were under a Greco-Roman influence that exercised casual divorce. In the face of such a moral dilemma, Christians at Corinth turned to sexual asceticism to alleviate concerns. Under Jewish influence, not entering marriage would be considered the sin; at Corinth, entering marriage could be considered a mistake in some circumstances.⁵⁹ Chapter 7 supports such background, for in the very first verse Paul writes, “Now concerning about the matters which you wrote: ‘It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.’” Overwhelmed by a labyrinth of rules and beliefs tainted by Greco-Roman influence, Christians at Corinth urged Paul for advice concerning their pressing issues of

⁵⁷ Garland, *Matthew*, 295.

⁵⁸ Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage*, 190.

⁵⁹ Garland, *Matthew*, 243.

marriage and divorce. Paul responds in 1 Corinthians 7:10-16 with words of wisdom concerning legitimate grounds for divorce under the new law of Jesus Christ.

Examining the Biblical Foundation

Part One: Matthew 19 and Marital Unfaithfulness

The Pharisees approached Jesus with a question concerning divorce that was meant to be loaded with complications and implications. In fact, the author records the encounter by stating in verse 3 that the Pharisees "...came up to him and tested him...." They had underlying motivation in asking this question. Unfortunately, the debate flies right over the legitimacy of divorce in the eyes of the Pharisees. Jewish tradition did not question the permissibility of divorce; rather, the Pharisees approached Jesus asking for clarity on the grounds for which divorce was permissible. They were not asking for clarification on the Scriptures, but their own interpretations and traditions.⁶⁰ Jewish tradition had strayed from the foundation that Jesus responds with (Genesis 2:24). The Pharisees were well aware of current Jewish opposition to Jesus, looking for another way to antagonize Jesus.⁶¹ The reader can see the implications with proper background information, and then can use that understanding to interpret Jesus' response and sole exception for divorce.

The key to the exception is the beginning of verse 9. Jesus says, "And I say to you...." These words spoken in Matthew represented Jesus' new teaching in contrast to

⁶⁰ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 207.

⁶¹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Pillar Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 479-480.

the Law of old.⁶² Jesus had something new to introduce that transcended the Law and Pharisaical practice. In fact, Jesus consistently taught to live above the righteousness of the Pharisees. Matthew 5:20 and Matthew 23 both reveal Jesus' low level of respect toward the absence of righteousness in these so-called religious leaders. In addition, the disciples reacted to Jesus' exception with much surprise. Matthew 19:10 records the disciples' reasoning that, according to Jesus' teaching, it may be better not to marry at all: "Hence, it is a serious mistake on the part of Commentators to set the teaching of Christ on this subject by the side of that of Shammai."⁶³ Because the house of Shammai took a more conservative approach, some theologians believe Jesus was taking the interpretation of Shammai. However, in light of Jesus' attitude toward the Pharisees and the disciples' reaction to His teaching, Matthew 19 does not support any other ground for divorce except that of marital unfaithfulness.

Jesus condemns divorce and remarriage except in a case of *porneia*, a term translated in so many different ways by Bible translators and biblical scholars alike.⁶⁴ It is vital to note here the use of *porneia* as Jesus' exception, for *moicheia* is the Greek term used specifically for adultery.⁶⁵ In fact, Matthew 15:19 uses both Greek terms in a list of things that defile a person. *Porneia* and *moicheia* have distinct and separate meanings in

⁶² Friedlander, *Jewish Sources*, 51.

⁶³ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus*, 333.

⁶⁴ ESV, NIV, HCSB—"sexual immorality"; NASB—"immorality"; NLT—"unless his wife has been unfaithful." The majority of translations specify the term to sexual acts, while the NASB leaves the reader to interpret the meaning. The NLT directly follows the specific line argued by Janzen.

⁶⁵ Janzen, "Meaning of *porneia*," 80.

Matthean context. *Porneia* broadens the scope of *moicheia*, although only slightly.⁶⁶

Matthew is the only Gospel to mention the dilemma of Joseph because of Mary's pregnancy during betrothal. It is "...a well-known feature of Matthew's style to repeat himself and to abbreviate material found more fully elsewhere in His Gospel..."⁶⁷

Matthew 5:31-32 addresses the same issue, with Jesus giving the same answer—*porneia*.

The noun form of *porneia* alone refers to sexual relations with a prostitute, traditionally "fornication," but the context of the question by the Pharisees and of the book of

Matthew open the word for a slightly larger scope.⁶⁸ "Fornication" alone would constrict the meaning of *porneia* to sexual intercourse between unmarried people, confining the

meaning that would not fit the context in Matthew 5 or 19.⁶⁹ Rather, Matthew presents

Jesus' teaching both in Matthew 5 and 19 in combination with the story of Mary and

Joseph in Matthew 1. His Gospel is the only account in the New Testament that records

Joseph's intent to divorce Mary. However, the context of Mary and Joseph was betrothal,

not during marriage. Thus, the fact that Matthew is the only Gospel to include the story of

Joseph and Mary during the betrothal stage is the first piece of evidence that *porneia* in

Matthew was meant to convey sexual immorality during both betrothal and marriage. The

second unique aspect of Matthew that seems to intentionally distinguishes *porneia* from

moicheia is the more complete account of Jesus' teachings on *porneia* and divorce in

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Gordon J. Wenham, "The Syntax of Matthew 19:9," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* no 28 (1986): 18.

⁶⁸ France, *Matthew*, 209.

⁶⁹ Morris, *Matthew*, 121.

Matthew 5 and 19 when compared to the parallel accounts their Luke 16 and Mark 10.⁷⁰

Specifically, *porneia* includes the adulterous sexual relations of a man or woman *during* marriage as well as the sexual relations outside of the marital bond *before* marriage.⁷¹

Part Two: 1 Corinthians 7 and Desertion

Paul addresses the growing problem of unbelievers leaving their Christian spouses in a legal and moral dilemma. As Jesus did, Paul first brings attention to the original intention of marriage. Paul calls for reconciliation in 1 Corinthians 7:10-14, specifically verse 11. Paul mirrors the response of Jesus in first establishing the finality of marriage and the seriousness of the matter. Paul even adds emphasis by stating directly that his source on the matter is the Lord.⁷² However, Paul faces a different situation concerning divorce and marriage than the situation that Jesus confronted in Matthew 19. Thus, the reader sees a different side of the exception for divorce. The final two verses give Paul's exception upon the denial of reconciliation.

First Corinthians 7:15-16 addresses a situation in which the believer has no control over the actions of his or her unbelieving spouse. Verse 15 says, "In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved." It is vital for the reader to link these words to those only a few verses later in 1 Corinthians 7:39. When speaking of divorce and remarriage as explicitly allowed concerning the death of a spouse, Paul uses the phrase "bound to her husband." Further citing of verse 39 reveals Paul's use of exact wording from divorce

⁷⁰ Janzen, "Meaning of *porneia*," 78-80. France, *Matthew*, 209.

⁷¹ Ibid. Janzen, "Meaning of *porneia*," 78-80. W.D. Davies and J.C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* International Critical Commentary (New York: T&T Clark, 1997), 16.

⁷² Soards, 1 Corinthians, 146.

certificates of the time.⁷³ Under such citation, all legal obligations were broken.

Additionally, “not bound” would nullify the covenant and allow the believer to be free to remarry.⁷⁴ Comparing “bound to her husband” in verse 39 and “no longer enslaved” in verse 15 reveals a striking parallel. Paul uses such slave analogy throughout his writings, most specifically several times within that chapter alone.⁷⁵ Furthermore, the Greek term *chorizo* used to describe divorce in this chapter corresponds to the idea of divorce also found in Matthew 19.⁷⁶ Only after realizing the ideal for marriage and striving for reconciliation, Paul allows divorce and remarriage only upon the desertion of a believer by an unbelieving spouse.

Applying the Biblical Foundation

Thus far, historical context has illuminated the interpretations of Matthew 19 and 1 Corinthians 7. The Pharisees approached Jesus with a loaded question that would have agitated the public and the government no matter what His response was. The debate between the schools of Shammai and Hillel concerning divorce dominated Jewish tradition at that time. Yet Jesus remained firmly rooted in Scripture, responding to the Pharisaical taunting with Genesis 2:24. However, where does Genesis 2:24 fit in with Matthew 19, 1 Corinthians 7, and the absolute truth of divorce and remarriage established by God? Jesus responds by quoting Genesis 2:24 intentionally and purposefully. The

⁷³ Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage*, 122.

⁷⁴ Andreas J. Köstenberger with David Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 248.

⁷⁵ Romans 6:15-22, Romans 8:15, Galatians 3-5, and 1 Corinthians 11:20 all reveal extensive imagery to slavery and freedom by Paul.

⁷⁶ Dobson, *What the Bible Really Says*, 76.

answer to the debate on divorce should not be sought after in any other place, for Jesus' answer is His quotation of Genesis 2:24 in Matthew 19:5.

Genesis 2:24 and the Foundation of Marriage

Upon the reading of 1 Corinthians 7, any Christian reader should be slightly troubled by the magnitude of Paul's words. Jesus had already spoken on the grounds for divorce as recorded in Matthew 5 and 19. Jesus gives His ruling for adultery as the only legitimate claim for divorce. However, Paul's claim for a legitimate divorce seems to add to the words of Christ. This apparent ambiguity could only lead to a slippery slope of religious claims that could provide circumstantial evidence based on modern culture to further increase grounds for divorce or any other moral issue to preposterous levels. Paul's authority, the inerrancy of Scripture, and the character of God Himself all rest on continuity in the Scriptures. This is not a foreign idea to Paul. He often gives high value to the truth and continuity that is the Word of God (1 Timothy 1:3-7, 6:2-5; 2 Timothy 3:15-17). Therefore, a common link between the sole command of Jesus Christ and the additional charge from Paul does not give doubt to the stability of the Word of God, but gives continuity and strength to the covenant of marriage in the Bible.⁷⁷ Under what circumstance could Paul have added exceptions to a topic in which Jesus gave one, clear, decisive ruling? The solution to this question will lead to the solution of the debate on divorce—an idea or concept that governs over divorce must exist behind the rulings of Jesus and Paul. The solution that would maintain the consistency of the Scriptures would

⁷⁷ Craig L. Blomberg, "Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Celibacy: An Exegesis of Matthew 19:3-12," *Trinity Journal* 11 (1990): 191.

be a single concept or foundation in which both Jesus' and Paul's rulings on divorce and remarriage find common ground. That solution is hidden in Matthew 19:5.

Most commentaries refer to Jesus' initial response to the Pharisees' of Genesis 2:24 as an ideal call back to the original intention of marriage, for Jesus literally quotes the verse. This is true. However, Jesus was not deflecting the question, but *answering* the question with Genesis 2:24. God sets the foundation for marriage in this verse. It reads, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." Here the Bible provides history's first marriage.

As Jesus does in Matthew 19, it is important to highlight the fact that divorce was never meant to be in the picture of marriage. Therefore, to use Genesis 2:24 as grounds for divorce would not be correct. However, Genesis 2:24 was more than just a marriage contract; it was a covenant.⁷⁸ Even more, marriage was designed as an integral part of the Creation account.⁷⁹ Understanding marriage in this way naturally negates any trivial circumstances to legitimize divorce. This idea is supplied to highlight the nature of a covenant and, in turn, the nature of marriage in Genesis 2:24 as a covenant. Specifically, the covenant of marriage in Genesis 2:24 functions as a two-part covenant that fills the gap between Jesus' command in Matthew 19 and Paul's addition in 1 Corinthians 7.⁸⁰ While Genesis 2:24a ("leave...cleave") covers Paul's exception in 1 Corinthians 7 concerning the personal loyalties of marriage, Genesis 2:24b ("become one flesh") covers

⁷⁸ Kostenberger, *God, Marriage, and Family*, 272.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁸⁰ Blomberg, "Marriage," 191-194.

Jesus' exception clause in Matthew 19 concerning sexual faithfulness during the marriage.

Genesis 2:24 and the Covenant of Marriage

Not only does Genesis 2:24 act as the primary account of marriage from the mouth of God Himself, but it also acts as the binding clause that ties together the teachings of Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul. In the midst of centuries of muddled interpretations, Jesus provides a decisive and eternal truth in His quotation of Genesis 2:24. By establishing marriage as a covenant established by God with two distinct parts, Genesis 2:24 acts as the foundation of marriage in that it effectively combines the desertion claims of Paul with the sole exception taught by Jesus Christ.

Primarily, God sets an eternal and infallible example of the marital bond with His relationship to Israel in the OT. Because of the nature of the relationship as a covenant, God evidently experiences a "divorce" with Israel in Hosea 2:2 and Jeremiah 3:8. In fact, the well-known prophecy of the new covenant found in Jeremiah 31:31-34 gives a picture of God's marital covenant with Israel. Verse 32 says, "...not like the covenant that I made with their fathers...my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD." Passages in the OT such as Hosea 2:2 and Jeremiah 31 provide support to the idea of marriage as a covenant: "...marriage is compatible with the concept of covenant in the OT..."⁸¹

⁸¹ Ralph P. Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Colombia, Dallas: Nelson, 1984), 323-324. Cf. Hosea 1-2; Ezekiel 16; Proverbs 2:17. Stephan Schreiner takes a literal view of the passage, combining the hatred of mixed marriages in this passage with the permissibility of divorce in Deuteronomy 24 rather than putting the two ideas in opposition as most figurative interpretations do.

Malachi holds perhaps the most striking parallel of Yahweh's relationship with His people. Malachi 2:10-16 reveals God's wrath against the Jews for their irresponsible and unholy relations inside and outside of marriage. Specifically, Malachi 2:14 says, "...Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant." Not only does the verse specifically use the word covenant, but the passage is also loaded with covenantal language. The passage has "solemn legal connotations" and the use of the covenant name "YHWH" adds further emphasis to the covenantal language of the passage.⁸² Also, the combination of "*he'id*" and "*ben...uben*" is found only in Genesis 31:44, a passage in which a covenant is established between Laban and Jacob.⁸³ The passage in Malachi also refers to the wife as the *□aberet*, or "marriage companion" in 2:14.⁸⁴ The LXX uses the term *koinonos*, a term denoting a joint partnership that gives the connotation of a permanent bonding. Furthermore, Paul follows this idea of a permanent bonding by his use of *kollaomai* in 1 Corinthians 6:16-17 in reference to sexual intercourse as that same, deeply serious, deeply bonding act of initiation. These terms follow a line of thought that points toward the gravity and in-depth nature of a husband and wife and covenantal partners.⁸⁵

Finally, the focus shifts to the foundation of the covenantal references and language—Genesis 2:24. Any reader of the Word of God would acknowledge the

⁸² Andrew E. Hill, *Malachi*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 242-243.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 241.

significance of Genesis 2:24 as the founding of the marital relationship. In fact, Jewish tradition held this passage as the focal point for the nuclear Hebrew family.⁸⁶ By adding the context of the covenantal language in the marital relationship between God and His people, Genesis 2:24 emerges as the foundation for the covenant of marriage as well. The language used in this verse itself implies a covenant relationship, for “leave” and cling” are commonly used terms in the context of covenants.⁸⁷ These terms are the first half of the covenant that fulfill the teaching of the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7. Paul includes the permissibility for divorce upon the desertion of a spouse. The “leaving” implies a shift of personal loyalty on behalf of the husband and the wife. The book of Ruth uses similar terminology describing the changing of loyalty from Ruth’s family to her new relationship with her husband and his family.⁸⁸ “The use of the terms ‘forsake’ and ‘stick’ in the context of Israel’s covenant with the LORD suggests that the OT viewed marriage as a kind of covenant.”⁸⁹

The sexual union of a husband and wife identifies the second half of the covenant, for Genesis 2:24b says, “...and they shall become one flesh.” The “cleaving” mentioned here is the sexual act that unifies the couple, the initiation that the reader also sees in 1 Corinthians 6 and Malachi 2 that joins the two in a permanent bond, sealing the marital

⁸⁶ Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 223-224. (Deut. 28:20; Hos. 4:10; Josh. 23:8,12)

⁸⁷ Ibid., 222.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 223.

⁸⁹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1994), 71.

covenant.⁹⁰ Thus, the combination of the shifting of personal loyalty and the consummating of a one-flesh relationship reflect the covenant of marriage in Genesis 2:24. Jesus' teaching in Matthew 19 covers the issue of sexual dissolution, while Paul addresses his cultural needs and expounds on the other half of the marriage covenant.

Legitimate divorce occurs only upon an annulment or severing of the marital covenant. That is the common link between Jesus' exception and Paul's allowance. Both ideas, sexual infidelity and desertion, violate a part of the marriage covenant. Genesis 2:24a provides the first part of the covenant speaking of the idea of leaving the parents' household and "holding fast" to the spouse. Paul's desertion claim in 1 Corinthians 7 covers this half of the covenant. Genesis 2:24b speaks of the sexual consummation and sexual unity of the marriage covenant. Jesus' exception for sexual unfaithfulness in Matthew 19 would adhere to the second half of the covenant. Sexual consummation cannot commence a marriage alone, however. Sexual intercourse alone would leave the door open to cruel possibilities of rape or unwanted sexual interaction acting as elements of a permanent covenant.⁹¹ Thus, the commitment of a man and a woman as established by God Himself at Creation combines with sexual fidelity of the second half of the account in order to create the covenant that is marriage. In addition, the death of a spouse in 1 Corinthians 7:39 and Romans 7:2 would also be a severing of the covenant, for a dead spouse could not fulfill either half. Accordingly, no other reasons outside of Matthew 19 and the Pauline allowances through Genesis 2:24 would be legitimate grounds for divorce.

⁹⁰ Mathews, *Genesis*, 223. Hill, *Malachi*, 242.

⁹¹ Ibid.

Conclusion

The foundation of marriage as stated in Genesis 2:24 also serves in the capacity of the covenant of marriage, effectively stated by Jesus Christ during His ministry in Matthew 19 as a response to man's interpretation and successfully concluded by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 as a response to cultural pressures. Matthew 19 reveals one half of the marital covenant. The Pharisees approach Jesus with a debate that had segregated parts of Jewish tradition and strayed away from the foundation of marriage. Jesus first quotes Genesis 2:24 to clarify any existing misunderstandings of marriage and divorce, and He then moves on to give the sole exception of sexual unfaithfulness in the form of *porneia*. In the Matthean context, *porneia* would include sexual unfaithfulness outside the marriage partners before and during the betrothal period or during the marriage itself. Sexual unfaithfulness would result in the breaking of the half of the covenant, allowing the victim to legitimately divorce and remarry according to Jesus in Matthew 19:9. Desertion and dissolution of personal loyalty describes the other half of the covenant in Genesis 2:24. Paul wrote to a culture that had many issues with the marital status of believers and unbelievers. Paul maintains continuity in the Scriptures and with the teachings of Christ by staying within the marital covenant, allowing for legitimate divorce and remarriage only under the condition of the other half of the covenant.

The foundation of marriage acting as the covenant of marriage fits naturally into the context of the Old Testament and Jehovah. The relationship between God and His people itself is depicted several times in the OT as a marriage that acts as a covenant. Malachi 2 reveals such a relationship, giving a parallel between the covenant of marriage between God and Jews and the husband and his wife. The continuity of the sacredness of

marriage demands a firm foundation in the covenant of marriage. Without Genesis 2:24 acting as the foundation and covenant of marriage, the Bible would have an isolated imagery in the OT and isolated yet opposite teachings on divorce in the NT. With Genesis 2:24 as that foundation, modern Christianity can firmly stand on an established foundation of a covenant that will eternally stand alongside of the eternal literature that it was written in.

Application

“Clear thinking about biblical teaching on marriage and divorce seems to be as rare these days as healthy Christian marriages.”⁹² By uprooting the misconstrued religious interpretations on modern divorce and remarriage and applying the biblical foundation of marriage, Christianity can erase this all-too-true message from the image of religion and reclaim the territory of the family in America. Christians must first raise awareness to the public. Divorce is uprooting the foundation of the Christian home. The home is the most important part of the raising of a child. Without a solid foundation rooted in the Christian principles founded in the gospel, Christianity will be lost within the next few generations. Christians must also take care of this problem within the church, for the Christian community is no exception to the growing problem of broken homes due to divorce. Hypocrisy continues to flourish. The very opposition of the divorce text in Matthew 19 is embodied in the hypocritical nature of the modern Christian home. Awareness and advocacy are key in turning back the tide of destruction that has slowly but surely corrupted the foundation in which God once flourished.

⁹² Blomberg, “Marriage,” 161.

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