

WHAT DID PAUL REALLY SAY ABOUT DIVORCE?

By Allon Maxwell

When Jesus taught about divorce and remarriage, He accused the Jews of hardness of heart because of their insistence on taking licence from Moses for what God called ADULTERY.

The same hardness of heart has crept into the church of our time. People who wish to justify divorce and remarriage, insist on reading Paul in a way which suits their purpose.

They claim that Paul has explained and added to what Jesus said. Paul is made to say that remarriage after divorce is not adulterous at all, and that Jesus did not really mean that it was!

To be fair, there are some who limit the licence for remarriage to cases where a believer has been deserted by an unbeliever. Others, however, use that case as the jumping off point to extend the justification to virtually every case.

But did Paul really say any of these things? I do not believe that he did. Paul's words are to be interpreted by what Jesus said and Jesus did not say "except for unchastity (RSV) AND DESERTION by an unbeliever". Nor did Paul.

What Paul did say was:

1. ABOUT MARRIED WOMEN

The wife should not separate from her husband, but if she does (what she should not do) let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled (TO HER HUSBAND).

(1 Corinthians 7:10-11)

In [Romans 7:2-3](#), Paul also says that a wife is irrevocably bound to her husband as long as he lives. Only his death sets her free to marry again. Any relationship with another man, during the lifetime of her husband, is adulterous.

This teaching is repeated in [1 Corinthians 7:39](#).

Paul's words are very clear.

What he says to women, whether married, or separated, or divorced, expressly excludes remarriage to a new partner. That freedom is reserved for widows alone.

Paul has in fact taken this teaching direct from Jesus, who said that a woman who divorces her husband and marries another, commits adultery. ([Mark 10:12](#))

2. ABOUT MARRIED MEN.

A husband should not divorce his wife. ([1 Corinthians 7:11](#))

Even if the husband does **what he should not do**, there is no specifically stated approval here at all, for remarriage.

Again, Paul is in agreement with Jesus. A man who divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery. ([Mark 10:11](#), [Luke 16:18](#))

3. ABOUT BOTH MEN AND WOMEN DESERTED BY UNBELIEVING PARTNERS

If an unbelieving husband or wife desires to separate let it be so. In such a case the brother or sister is not bound. (1 Corinthians 7:12-15)

"Not bound" may certainly imply that a divorce has been initiated by the unbeliever and that the marriage has been "legally" dissolved **by men**.

It certainly also means that the deserted Christian is "not bound", unreasonably, to fulfil the duties of a marriage covenant which, through no fault of their own, they can no longer perform.

However, although the deserted believer need feel no guilt about the separation which has been initiated by the unbelieving partner, Paul certainly **does not** say, in so many words, that he or she is free to remarry.

"Not bound" in the sense used here in 1 Corinthians 7:15, must be seen in contrast with *"is bound"* in another sense, in 1 Corinthians 7:39.

In this latter verse we have already seen that Paul says that a wife **is bound** to her husband as long as he lives.

To assume that permission is **inferred** in Paul's *"not bound"*, in verse 15, is an unwarranted and dangerous ADDITION to the Scriptures.

It is not acceptable at all, to base such a radical conclusion on mere inference, especially when it makes Paul contradict himself within the space of a few verses. It is even more unacceptable when it reverses what Jesus has already said.

There is not the least hint from Jesus that He meant to include a second exception to His general prohibition against divorce and remarriage.

Since Jesus was careful enough to include one exception, and ONLY ONE, it seems very clear that there is NO OTHER.

Paul's positive statements in verses 15 and 39, agree with the teaching of Jesus that MARRIAGE IS A COMMITMENT FOR LIFE.

Separation does not confer freedom to remarry. Instead it imposes a sacrificial obligation to honour the covenant until death cancels it.

Nowhere is there a **definite positive** statement by Paul, reversing this principle BEYOND QUESTION, in the special case of desertion by an unbeliever. We must not take our permission for such a radical reversal from inference alone, especially when that inference so clearly contradicts what both Paul and Jesus have already stated elsewhere in very plain words.

4. ABOUT THE UNMARRIED (and "THE DIVORCED VIRGINS THEORY")

In 1 Corinthians 7:25-28 Paul addresses the "virgins", not the married, or separated, or divorced. He has already addressed those categories in the verses discussed above.

This word "virgins" is translated from the Greek "parthenos", which does mean "virgin", or "chaste", or "unmarried", in the sense of NEVER MARRIED.

Paul has four main points to convey to these virgins:

- a) Virgins not yet committed to marriage, would do well to consider the option of remaining celibate, both in view of *"present distress"*, (1 Corinthians 7:26), and also to have increased freedom to attend to the *"affairs of the Lord"*.
(1 Corinthians 7:32-34)

- b) Virgins already "bound", are not to seek freedom. (1 Corinthians 7:27)
- c) Virgins who are "free", are not to seek marriage. (1 Corinthians 7:27)
- d) Virgins who choose marriage instead of celibacy, are not sinning.
(1 Corinthians 7:28, 1 Corinthians 7:36)

It has been claimed that this permission for marriage of those who are not bound, extends to the divorced, on the basis that the Greek phrase translated "free from a wife", could also be translated as "divorced".

However this claim ignores the fact that Paul has already addressed the separated or divorced in the verses discussed earlier, with clear statements that they are NOT free to remarry.

A closer look at what Paul actually says to these VIRGINS will support our rejection of any claims that the divorced are included amongst them.

(It is, after all, quite inconceivable that Paul would be addressing **divorced** virgins!)

The word used here, which is claimed to mean "divorce", is not the same as that used by Paul only a few verses earlier in the chapter, ("*aphiemi*", to send away), or by Jesus in the Gospels, ("*apoluo*", to release, send away, put away).

The PRIMARY meaning of the Greek word used in this verse by Paul, ("*luisis*"), is not "divorced" at all, but "loosed" or "set free", as rendered by most of the older translations.

It is interesting to note that amongst the more commonly recognised translations, only the recent NIV, (which I personally find unreliable on other counts also), actually renders it as divorced.

It is true that most lexicons do offer "divorce" as a SECONDARY meaning for this Greek word. However they also quote 1 Corinthians 7:27 as the justification for this meaning!

To lift this doubtful secondary meaning from the lexicons and then reapply it back to the verse used to justify that meaning, is the error in reasoning which is called "**circular logic**".

This resort to the deceptive techniques of "circular logic" is unconvincing. It does great violence to the context of what Paul is saying to VIRGINS.

Further, the Greek word translated here as "wife", can also mean simply, "woman", married or unmarried, depending on the context. The RSV interlinear text does, in fact, have this alternative.

In the context of Paul's advice to virgins, who are obviously still unmarried, "woman" does convey the meaning more clearly.

Even if we do accept "wife" as valid, it is clearly in the sense of POTENTIAL wife of a male virgin. The "bondage" and "freedom" to which Paul refers, is BETROTHAL not consummated marriage.

Item "b" above is for those virgins who have already promised (bound) themselves in betrothal, to take a wife.

Item "c" is for virgins who have either never been bound to a woman in this way or have been set free from such a binding.

CONCLUSION

Hard hearted men are still with us in the church! Just like the Pharisees of Jesus' day, they seek licence to undo what God has joined.

In their attempt to justify divorce and remarriage after divorce, they seek to enlist Paul in their cause. However there is nothing at all in any of what Paul says, which in any way grants permission for remarriage of the divorced.

Nothing contradicts his earlier statement that the separated, or divorced, have ONLY TWO options.

"REMAIN UNMARRIED, OR ELSE BE RECONCILED".