

# **“May Unscripturally Divorced and Remarried Couples Continue in that Marriage without Further Sin?”**

By Allen Dvorak

## **Introduction:**

- I. A common scenario: You find a person interested in the gospel, only to discover that s/he is in a second or third marriage.
  - A. The first marriage was early in adult life, was turbulent in character and lasted a short time.
  - B. The evangelism prospect has been in the present marriage for years, has children with the current spouse and is generally “happy” in the relationship.
  - C. As hard as we try not to “pre-judge” the quality of the soil, we are also aware that such circumstances often lower the chances of a good reception to the gospel. We may approach studies with such individuals with a lowered expectation of the outcome.
  - D. How wonderful it would be if we did not have to be concerned about the “marital past” of those we teach!
- II. Some brethren have found a way around such evangelism difficulties. They simply teach that remarriage is virtually unrestricted.<sup>1</sup>
- III. The idea of preaching a gospel in which all marriages are acceptable is certainly appealing, but it is not the gospel preached by Jesus and the apostles.
- IV. The marriage question addressed in this study: “May unscripturally divorced and remarried couples continue in that marriage without further sin?”

## **Body:**

### **I. Marriage Is For Everyone!**

A. *Argument:* Marriage is God’s plan for everyone, particularly for the purpose of avoiding sexual immorality. Some passages suggested to support this argument:<sup>2</sup>

1. **Genesis 2:18 (ESV)**      <sup>18</sup> Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.”
2. **1 Corinthians 7:2 (ESV)**      <sup>2</sup> But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.
3. **1 Thessalonians 4:3–4 (ESV)**      <sup>3</sup> For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; <sup>4</sup> that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor,
4. **1 Corinthians 7:8–9 (ESV)**      <sup>8</sup> To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. <sup>9</sup> But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

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<sup>1</sup> “The Scriptures teach that God approves marriage for every person, including all who have divorced or have been divorced by a mate, regardless of cause.” – proposition defended by Olan Hicks in debate with Mac Deaver.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all passages cited are from the English Standard Version.

5. **1 Corinthians 7:28 (ESV)** <sup>28</sup> But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that.
6. **Hebrews 13:4 (ESV)** <sup>4</sup> Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.

B. Principle: One Scripture can be qualified in its application by another passage.

1. We recognize this principle as it applies to other topics.
  - a. “We are saved by faith.” What about passages that teach the necessity of water baptism for salvation?
  - b. “Do this in remembrance of Me.” What about the example of the disciples breaking bread on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7)?

C. “Marriage is God’s way to preserve purity and to aid us and enable us to live morally pure and upright lives. Marriage is God’s way.”<sup>3</sup>

1. It is certainly true that marriage is a desirable relationship, created by God and regulated by God.
2. *Argument:* If individuals are forbidden to remarry, their ability to resist fornication is hindered.

D. Some questions to consider:

1. If an unscripturally divorced person is unable to remain pure, can people who have never been married remain pure? What about teenagers, individuals not able to be married? What about those who have no suitable marriage partner?
2. If an unscripturally divorced person is unable to remain pure, can those who have homosexual urges remain pure? Marriage to a person of the opposite sex wouldn’t necessarily help in such cases.
3. Conclusion: Marriage is one way to avoid fornication, but there are situations in which individuals must exercise self-control without the benefit of marriage.

## II. Adultery Redefined

A. Matthew 19:9 and Matthew 5:32 appear to restrict remarriage.

1. **Matthew 5:32 (ESV)** <sup>32</sup> But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.
2. **Matthew 19:9 (ESV)** <sup>9</sup> And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”<sup>4</sup>
3. **Matthew 19:9 (NKJV)** <sup>9</sup> And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.”

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<sup>3</sup> Hicks-Deaver, p. 140.

<sup>4</sup> The English Standard Bible doesn’t include the second half of verse 9, as it appears in the New King James Version. However, the second half of Matthew 5:32 (contained in the ESV) is essentially identical.

B. *Argument*: Adultery has a non-sexual meaning in these passages and refers to the divorcing of one's spouse and marrying another.

1. "The 'act' in the protasis in Matthew 19:9 is the dual action of 'putting away' a wife and 'marrying another.' That is where the 'adultery' occurs each time it is done. 'Adultery' therefore, is not seen as an act of sexual intercourse with the second wife."<sup>5</sup>
2. "In Matthew 19:9, what is the adultery? You see, in that passage, these two things, divorcing one and marrying one, they are mentioned explicitly in the book. They are mentioned and they are called adultery. Over here in the marriage you will have later sexual activity, you expect that such activities come along later."<sup>6</sup>
3. "When we do this with the two words from Greek and Hebrew which are commonly translated 'adultery' now, we find them consistently used of unfaithfulness to vows, commitments, and especially covenants. Sometimes it involved sexual intercourse but many times it did not. Basic disloyalty seems to be referred to in these terms whether sexual activity was involved or not."<sup>7</sup>
4. *Argument*: "Adultery" has multiple meanings in Scripture.
  - a. Some other "meanings" of "adultery":<sup>8</sup>
    - 1) Idolatry (Jeremiah 3:9)
    - 2) Sign seeking (Matthew 12:39)
    - 3) Breaking wedlock (Ezekiel 16:38)
    - 4) Friendship with the world (James 4:4)
    - 5) Evil in general (Hosea 7:1)
    - 6) Divorce and remarriage (Matthew 19:9)
      - a) This "definition" of adultery doesn't seem to work with Matthew 5:32.
        1. **Matthew 5:32 (ESV)** <sup>32</sup> But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.
        2. In the first half of the verse, a man divorces and remarries, but the put-away wife commits adultery? She may have even opposed the divorce and nothing is said about her remarrying.
        3. In the second half of the verse, a man marries a divorced woman, but he didn't get a divorce. In fact, he may have never even been married before! Yet he commits adultery?

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<sup>5</sup> Hicks, What the Bible..., p. 149.

<sup>6</sup> Smith-Hicks Debate, p. 30.

<sup>7</sup> Hicks, What the Bible..., p. 150.

<sup>8</sup> Hicks-Deaver Debate, p. 88.

- b) Equating “divorcing and remarrying” with “committing adultery” on the basis of the fact that *moichao* is in the present tense in Matthew 19:9, i.e., “at the same time as the divorcing and remarrying,” ignores the fact that “divorces” and “marries” are aorist subjunctive verbs and the present tense’s emphasis on continuing action. Those who argue that adultery in Matthew 19:9 is a one-time sin must struggle with the tense of the verb.
- b. “The English word ‘adultery’ is a recent word. It was invented in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to accommodate these very passages ... “But the word ‘adultery,’ over the past 350 years or so, has evolved in meaning. So that now, if you pick up an English dictionary and look up the English word ‘adultery,’ it will say ‘a sex act by a married person with someone not their spouse. Now, what has happened is that the word has changed over the years to come to mean that. The original term, ‘*moichao*’ in the New Testament, did not mean that. And so, brethren today are taking the 20<sup>th</sup> century word or the modern definition of the word ‘adultery’ and feeding it back into the Bible and it changes the whole meaning of the passages.”<sup>9</sup>
- c. Hicks argues that the term is not being used metaphorically in the OT, even when connected to idolatry.
- 1) Marriage of Israel to God – metaphorical or literal?
  - 2) Elders are shepherds; members are sheep. Metaphorical or literal?
- C. What do lexicons say about the meaning of *moichao* (μοιχάω), the Greek verb translated “commit adultery” in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9? A sampling of lexicons yields the following results:
1. **BDAG** – “*be caused to commit adultery, be an adulterer/adulteress, commit adultery*”
  2. **Louw-Nida** – “*sexual intercourse of a man with a married woman other than his own spouse – ‘to commit adultery, adultery’*”
  3. **Liddell** – “*to commit adultery*”
  4. **Kittel** – “*to commit adultery*”
  5. **Moulton & Milligan** – “*commit adultery with*”
  6. **Swanson** – “*commit adultery*”
  7. **Balz & Schneider** – “*be led into adultery; be an adulterer (adulteress), commit adultery*”
  8. **Strong** – “*commit adultery*”
  9. **Lexham Analytical** - “*to commit adultery; (metaph.) to practice idolatry*”
  10. **Vine** describes the “adulterer” as “one who has unlawful intercourse with the spouse of another.” Although I believe that Vine’s definition is technically flawed, it is clear that he understood “adultery” to be a sexual sin.

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<sup>9</sup> Smith-Hicks Debate, p. 65.  
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- D. Although lexicographical definitions are helpful, the best way to understand the meaning of a word is to examine how it is used in a particular context.
1. In classical Greek literature, the Greek word for adultery (*moicheia*) clearly was used with the meaning of *illicit sexual conduct of a married person, or with a married person*.<sup>10</sup> It indicated a sexual sin.
  2. In the Old Testament, it is evident that adultery (when not used in a metaphorical sense) referred to sexual immorality.
    - a. Leviticus 20:10
    - b. Jeremiah 13:27
    - c. Ezekiel 16:25, 32
    - d. Hosea 2:2
  3. What is the meaning of adultery in these New Testament passages?
    - a. **Matthew 5:28 (ESV)** <sup>28</sup> But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.
      - 1) The phrase “lustful intent” suggests sexual sin, rather than the desire to break a covenant.
    - b. **John 8:3–4 (ESV)** <sup>3</sup> The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst <sup>4</sup> they said to him, “Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery.
      - 1) The “act” of adultery – divorcing and remarrying? Did the scribes and Pharisees catch her at a wedding ceremony?
    - c. **Hebrews 13:4 (ESV)** <sup>4</sup> Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.
      - 1) Adultery is associated with the defilement of the marriage bed.
      - 2) See Genesis 35:22 and Genesis 49:4 for an example of the defilement of the marriage bed. Reuben had sexual relations with Bilhah, his father’s concubine.
- E. “In recent years though, a new view of adultery has been espoused by a minority element within the church. It is the notion that adultery is merely the act of repudiating one’s marriage vows (whether or not the covenant-breaker ever enters a new marital union). The motive behind this novel theory is perfectly transparent. It is a result-oriented dogma. It suggests that if one commits adultery, i.e., he repudiates his marriage vow (admittedly an evil thing), then he may simply “repent” of that action, i.e., pledge not to do it henceforth, and, if he desires at some subsequent point, he may secure a new mate. According to this view, one can abandon his spouse for any trivial reason, pledge to never do such again, and then enter a new marriage.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Jackson, in his article “What Is Adultery?” cites several examples of such usage.

<sup>11</sup> Jackson, Wayne. “What Is Adultery?”

### III. “Bound” and “Married”

A. *Argument*: When a marriage is ended by divorce, no bond or obligation remains. Thus anyone can remarry regardless of the cause of the breaking up of a former marriage.

1. One of the passages that appears to restrict remarriage is 1 Corinthians 7:10-11.
  - a. **1 Corinthians 7:10–11 (ESV)** <sup>10</sup> To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband <sup>11</sup> (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.
    - 1) The argument is made that “separate” (*chorizo*; χωρίζω) doesn’t mean “to divorce,” i.e., the wife has physically separated from her husband, but she is still married to him. This is the same verb used in verse 15a.
    - 2) The typical verbs translated “to divorce” or “to put away” are *apoluo* (ἀπολύω; e.g., Matthew 19:9) and *aphiemi* (ἀφίημι; e.g., 1 Corinthians 7:11).
    - 3) It appears that there is a symmetry to the passage (ignoring the parenthetical information in the middle of the two verses) in terms of instructions to the spouses. The wife is not to separate from her husband and the husband is not to divorce his wife.
  - b. The parenthetical information in the first part of verse 11 indicates that the wife is unmarried; Paul doesn’t write that she should “become unmarried,” but that she should “remain” unmarried, indicating her present state.
  - c. The response is made by some that she is “unmarried” only in the sense that she doesn’t want to be married, not literally unmarried (divorced).

B. A common definition of “adultery”: “unlawful sexual intercourse with someone other than one’s spouse.”

1. How are we to understand Matthew 19:9 and 5:32b? How does a man commit adultery with a woman to whom he is married?
  - a. **Matthew 19:9 (NKJV)** <sup>9</sup> And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.”
  - b. **Matthew 5:32 (ESV)** <sup>32</sup> But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.
2. Some have resolved the difficulty with this definition by affirming that the marriage never really ended, even though a divorce has taken place.
  - a. After an unscriptural divorce, the former spouses are “not married in the eyes of men, but still married in the eyes of God.”
  - b. Matthew 19:6 – why warn about “putting asunder” if men can’t do it anyway?

C. Consider Paul's definition of adultery in Romans 7:1-3.

1. **Romans 7:1–3 (NKJV)** <sup>1</sup> Or do you not know, brethren (for I speak to those who know the law), that the law has dominion over a man as long as he lives? <sup>2</sup> For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to *her* husband as long as he lives. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law of *her* husband. <sup>3</sup> So then if, while *her* husband lives, she marries another man, she will be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from that law, so that she is no adulteress, though she has married another man.
  - a. A woman is bound to her husband *as long as he lives*. Paul did not write “as long as they are married.”
  - b. If she marries another man while her husband still lives (and thus she is bound to him), she will be called an adulteress.
    - 1) She is married to the second man, but not bound with reference to him.
    - 2) She is still bound to the first man.
    - 3) Even though she has sexual relations with her husband (the second one), it is adultery because she is not bound to him.
  - c. Adultery: sexual relations between a bound person and someone to whom that person is not bound
2. The important issue in recognizing adultery is being bound rather than being married.
3. The ESV has a significant difference from the NKJV in verse 3:
  - a. **Romans 7:1–3 (ESV)** <sup>1</sup> Or do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives? <sup>2</sup> For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. <sup>3</sup> Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.
  - b. “if she lives with another man” (ESV); “if...she marries another man” (NKJV)
    - 1) The ESV accommodates the common definition of adultery. The woman is an adulteress because she is still married to the first man while having sexual relations with another man.
    - 2) “Lives with another man” might suggest that no second marriage has been contracted.
  - c. However, the phrase “lives with” in verse 3 (ESV) is the same verb (*ginomai*; γίνομαι) as translated “has married” in the last half of the verse!
  - d. The difference in translation does serve to raise the question: is *ginomai* legitimately translated “to marry”?
    - 1) The verb has various nuances in meaning, depending on the context. Its primary meaning seems to be “to become.”

- 2) Louw-Nida suggests that the verb's combination with the noun for man (*aner*) forms "an idiom, literally 'to become to a man,'" giving the meaning "to become married to a man – 'to marry.'"<sup>12</sup>
    - a) Thus the NKJV translation of verse 3 and the ESV's translation of the second occurrence of the verb in verse 3.
    - b) BDAG gives ten definitions of *ginomai*, but places Romans 7:3 under the definition "to be closely related to someone or someth., *belong to*."
  - 3) *Ginomai* also appears in verse 4 ("may belong" – ESV; "may be married" – NKJV) in Paul's application of the principle introduced in verse 1. Were Paul's readers married to Christ...
  - 4) *Ginomai* is translated "to marry" in the Septuagint (e.g., Deuteronomy 24:2 [verse 4 in the Greek text]).<sup>13</sup> The ESV reads "becomes another man's wife."
4. It should be recognized that the Greek verb γαμέω (*gameo*) is the typical verb behind the translation "to marry."

#### IV. Repentance – What Does It Require?

- A. *Argument*: The person who commits adultery by divorcing his spouse and remarrying someone else must simply make the decision not to "break wedlock" again. Leaving a second marriage is not only unnecessary, it would be in opposition to his "repentance."
- B. Consider these quotations:
  1. "Repentance as taught in the Bible applies to the sin of divorce in this way: 1. Marriage breaking is the thing repented of because that is the thing that is wrong in the picture, not marriage itself. 2. One does not throw out the truth that humans have need of marriage merely because they have sinned against it. 3. Other factors are not ignored such as the grace of God to forgive the sin, the best interests of all concerned parties, the value of marriage and family life in righteous living, etc. 4. The 'amendment' to be made in the conduct of life is that whereas one did act in an unfaithful way toward marriage, he now resolves never to do that again. This puts away what is evil in the scene and retains what is good."<sup>14</sup>
  2. "The reason they charge that we do not teach real repentance is that they **assume** a major point at issue. What we deny is not that repentance demands the cessation of the sin. What we deny is that repentance demands the cessation of marriage. We deny that the marriage relationship is what constitutes the sin. Our issue is not 'May the sin continue?' Our issue is 'What is the sin of adultery?' According to the text the sin of adultery is committed when a man does two things. **1. Puts away his wife without cause** and **2. Marries another**. They dispute that and assume that the sin of adultery occurs in the course of the subsequent marriage relationship and thus it continues in practice. To accuse us of contending that 'The sin may continue,' one has to assume that the sin is in the subsequent marriage relationship instead of where Jesus said it is. The difference then is not in the **meaning of repentance**, but in **identifying the sin**."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Louw-Nida, 34.69.

<sup>13</sup> *The Septuagint Version, Greek and English*.

<sup>14</sup> Hicks, *What the Bible...*, p. 216.

<sup>15</sup> Hicks, *Divorce and Remarriage: The Issues...*, p. 73.

3. As these quotations make clear, the issue is: of what sin(s) must the individual who has divorced a spouse and remarried repent?
- C. Although there are probably some who would argue for the legitimacy of all divorces, most recognize that Jesus gave a clear and specific prohibition against divorce and Paul reiterated His instruction (Matthew 19:6; 1 Corinthians 7:10-11).
1. **Matthew 19:6 (ESV)**                      <sup>6</sup> So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”
  2. **1 Corinthians 7:10–11 (ESV)**        <sup>10</sup> To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband <sup>11</sup> (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.
- D. Marriage is a covenant relationship in which a man and woman promise to be faithful to each other for life.
1. Divorcing a mate is certainly a violation of that covenant (setting aside the circumstances of a divorce for fornication).
  2. Having sexual relations with another (even a spouse in a remarriage) is also a violation of that original covenant...and continues to be a violation of that covenant with every occurrence.
- E. Repentance is a change of mind (*metanoia*, *μετάνοια*; literally the “after-mind) that is to be reflected in a change of behavior (cf. Matthew 3:8).
1. In the case of divorcing one’s mate, the change of mind is concerning the action (process) of divorcing. The act cannot be undone, but reconciliation for the purpose of fulfilling the marriage covenant would certainly be a “fruit” of the change of mind (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:11).
  2. In the matter of adultery (assuming that it is a sexual sin), repentance would require a change of mind concerning the act of violating the original marriage covenant.

### **Conclusion:**

- I. Major errors of the position being reviewed include:
  - A. The failure to harmonize all of what God’s Word says on the matter of divorce and remarriage
  - B. An improper definition of “adultery”
    1. A misunderstanding of what repentance requires in the case of an unscriptural marriage stems from the improper definition of adultery.
  - C. A failure to recognize the difference between “married” and “bound”
- II. The truth is that God’s commandments are designed for our good and the good of those we contact.
  - A. We must be careful that we don’t abandon God’s Word because of our dislike of certain provisions. Caught in the emotions of relationships, men often fail to see “the big picture.”

- B. Sin has consequences, often dire even in life under the sun.
- C. We are constrained to preach the Word of God as it was delivered to us, regardless of divinely stipulated consequences or the responses of those who hear.

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