

## ANOTHER LOOK AT THE ERASMIAN VIEW OF DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

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"And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."<sup>1</sup> (Matt 19:9).

NT scholars have long debated the content and form of Jesus' multiple and apparently contradictory pronouncements on divorce and remarriage.<sup>2</sup> Within evangelical Protestant circles, however, the harmonization of the divorce texts appears to be settled with the interpretation that was first set forth by Erasmus, that was then taken up by the reformers, and that subsequently found its way into the confession of faith drawn up at Westminster in 1648.<sup>3</sup> Certainly this is the predominant view among contemporary evangelical authors.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the evangelical or Erasmian interpretation of Jesus' divorce logia is not even counted a viable option by the vast majority of nonevangelical scholars.

### I. OVERVIEW OF THE PROBLEM

The tension involved in the harmonization of Jesus' divorce sayings recorded by the NT writers should become apparent in the following summary of the NT teaching.

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<sup>1</sup>The decision of the *UBSGNT* to omit the longer reading is a poor decision. It is supported by p<sup>25</sup>, B, C, W, Family<sup>1</sup> & <sup>13</sup>, the Majority text, lat, syp.<sup>h</sup> and bo. Concerning the text the fathers attest to see H. Crouzel, "Quelques remarques concernant le texte patristique de Mt 19,9," *BLE* 82 (1981) 83-92. All Biblical quotations are from the *NASB*.

<sup>2</sup>See for example J. P. Arendzen, "Ante-Nicene Interpretations of the Sayings on Divorce," *JTS* 20 (1919) 230-241; B. Vawter, "The Divorce Clauses in Mt 5,32 and 19,9," *CBQ* 16 (1954) 155-167; H. G. Coiner, "Those 'Divorce and Remarriage' Passages (Matt. 5:32; 19:9; 1 Cor. 7:10-16)—With Brief Reference to the Mark and Luke Passages," *CTM* 29 (1968) 367-384; R. N. Soulen, "Marriage and Divorce: A Problem in New Testament Interpretation," *Int* 23 (1969) 439-450; D. R. Catchpole, "The Synoptic Divorce Material as a Traditio-Historical Problem," *BJRL* 57 (1974) 92-127; and most recently G. Wenham, "May Divorced Christians Remarry?," *ChMan* 95 (1981) 150-161.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. V. N. Olsen, *The New Testament Logia on Divorce: A Study of their Interpretation from Erasmus to Milton* (BGBE 10; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1971) esp. 2-42; R. J. Ehrlich, "The Indissolubility of Marriage As a Theological Problem," *SJT* 23 (1970) 303-305.

<sup>4</sup>Evidenced by the two most recent articles on the subject published by *JETS*: R. H. Stein, "Is It Lawful for a Man to Divorce His Wife?," 22 (1979) 115-121; P. H. Wiebe, "The New Testament on Divorce and Remarriage," 24 (1981) 131-138. Notable exceptions include C. C. Ryrie, *The Place of Women in the Church* (New York: Macmillan, 1958) 43-48; J. M. Boice, "The Biblical View of Divorce," *Eternity*, December 1970, 19-21; G. Bromiley, *God and Marriage* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) esp. 38-52, but cf. 67-68; J. D. Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) 357-358; J. C. Laney, *The Divorce Myth* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1981) 62-90.

It is God's intention that marriage be an indissoluble union. "What therefore God has joined together let no man separate" (Mark 10:2-9 = Matt 19:3-8).

For a man to divorce a woman is not only for him to sin but to force her to commit the sin of adultery (Matt 5:32a).

For a single or formerly married man to marry a divorced woman is to commit adultery (Matt 5:32b; 19:9b; Luke 16:18b).

For a man to divorce his wife and to remarry is to commit adultery (Mark 10:11; Matt 19:9; Luke 16:18).

For a woman to divorce her husband and to remarry is to commit adultery (Mark 10:12).

If a divorce does take place, whatever the circumstances, both husband and wife must remain unmarried or else be reconciled (1 Cor 7:10-11).

A believer deserted by an unbeliever is not bound by the Lord's command not to divorce (1 Cor 7:15).

A wife (or husband) is bound in marriage to her husband (or his wife) as long as the other lives. Only the death of one of the spouses gives permissible grounds for the other to marry again (Rom 7:1-3; 1 Cor 7:39).

A man whose wife has committed immorality may divorce her and marry another, for her immorality has destroyed the marriage bond (Matt 5:32; 19:9; 1 Cor 6:16).

It is clear from the above summary that the major problem in the harmonization of the NT teaching on divorce and remarriage is the evangelical Protestant interpretation of the Matthean exception phrases (5:32; 19:9). According to this view a serious sexual sin "dissolves" the marriage bond, thereby permitting the divorce and remarriage of at least the "innocent" party. But this contradicts the clear teaching of the rest of the NT that remarriage after divorce for any cause amounts to adultery and that only the death of one of the spouses frees the other to remarry. This was the near-unanimous understanding of Jesus' teaching by both Greek and Latin fathers for the first five centuries of the Church.<sup>5</sup>

There are currently seven major interpretations<sup>6</sup> of the meaning of the excep-

<sup>5</sup>H. Crouzel, *L'église primitive face au divorce du premier au cinquième siècle* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1971); see the English summary, "Remarriage After Divorce in the Primitive Church: A Propos of a Recent Book," *ITQ* 38 (1971) 21-41.

<sup>6</sup>The views and key proponents: (1) patristic view—J. Dupont, *Marriage et divorce dans l'évangile: Matthieu 19,3-12 et parallèles* (Desclee de Brouwer, 1959); Wenham, "Divorced Christians"; (2) preteritive view—R. Banks, *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition* (SNTSMS 28; Cambridge: University Press, 1975) 146-159; (3) Erasmian view—R. H. Charles, *The Teaching of the New Testament on Divorce* (London: Wms. & Norgate, 1921); J. Murray, *Divorce* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961); (4) betrothal view—A. Isaksson, *Marriage and Ministry in the New Temple: A Study with Special Reference to Mt. 19.13 [sic]-12 and 1 Cor. 11.3-16* (ASNU 24; Lund: Gleerup/Copenhagen: Munsgaard, 1965) 122-142; (5) unlawful marriages view with three variations, most common being *porneia* = Lev 18:6-18 forbidden degrees of kinship—Laney, *Divorce Myth* 71-81; J. R. Mueller, "The Temple Scroll and the Gospel Divorce Texts," *RevQ* 38 (1980) 247-256; F. J. Moloney, "Matthew 19,3-12 and Celibacy. A Redactional and Form Critical Study," *JSNT* 2 (1979) 42-60; (6) no further relations view—J. D. M. Derrett, *Law in the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1970) 363-388; W. J. Harring-

tion phrases as they now stand in Matthew's gospel, but only one of them allows remarriage after divorce for the reason of a serious sexual sin: the evangelical Protestant or Erasmian position. All the other views affirm unanimously that, in the teaching of Christ, remarriage following divorce for whatever reason amounts to adultery. The purpose of this article is to evaluate critically a few of the problems involved in the Erasmian view of the Matthean exception phrases.

## II. STATEMENT OF THE POSITION

The evangelical Protestant view, as it is promulgated today, has two variations within it. Some, like J. Murray and R. Stein, understand *porneia* in Matt 19:9 to be the equivalent of *moicheia*. Others, like G. Duty and J. Adams,<sup>7</sup> give *porneia* a wider sense to cover a broad range of sexual sins. Both of these variations construe the exception phrase as qualifying the entire protasis<sup>8</sup> (put away and [re]marry), thus permitting both divorce and remarriage of the "innocent" party in the case of *porneia*. Appeal is usually made to 1 Cor 6:15-18 to indicate the serious nature of such sexual sins within marriage and the consequent "dissolution" of the marriage that results.<sup>9</sup> Though divorce is allowed in such cases it is usually suggested that a Christian should see it as a last resort. Appeal is made to Deut 24:1-4 to prove that Jesus had in mind the Jewish dissolution divorce, and thus divorce for *porneia* must have carried with it the right to remarry.<sup>10</sup> Such remarriage, then, would not be considered adulterous since the marriage bond is "dissolved." Matthew's conflict with Mark's and Luke's absolute prohibition of divorce and remarriage whatever the cause is explained by saying that "Mark gives the general law of marriage and Matthew gives the exception to it."<sup>11</sup> Jesus is seen as basically in agreement with or slightly stricter than the school of Sham-mai on the interpretation of *erwt dbr* ("some indecency") in Deut 24:1. Others, more cautiously, refrain from linking Jesus' pronouncement with the concession of Moses. Like the classical Catholic interpretation, but unlike the fathers of the first five centuries,<sup>12</sup> most evangelicals believe Paul permitted the believer de-

ton, "The New Testament and Divorce," *ITQ* 39 (1972) 178-186; (7) traditio-historical view—Catchpole, "Synoptic Divorce Material"; L. Sabourin, "The Divorce Clauses (Mt 5:32, 19:9)," *BTB* 2 (1972) 80-86. The traditio-historical view does not appear to be an option for evangelicals.

<sup>7</sup>Murray, *Divorce* 21; Stein, "Is It Lawful?" 119; G. Duty, *Divorce & Remarriage* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1967) 52-62; J. Adams, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980) 6, 51-55.

<sup>8</sup>Some grammarians would label Matt 19:9 a "present general supposition"; others prefer to call it an "indefinite relative clause." Cf. BDF #377, 380. It is clearly a conditional sentence.

<sup>9</sup>See esp. Charles, *Teaching* 32, 62-71; Murray, *Divorce* 43; C. Brown, "Chōrizō: Divorce, Separation and Remarriage," *NIDNTT* 3 (1978) 535, 539.

<sup>10</sup>Murray, *Divorce* 35-43; Duty, *Divorce & Remarriage* 32-44; J. Job, "The Biblical View of Marriage and Divorce 4—New Testament Teaching," *Third Way* 1/22 (November 17, 1977) 13.

<sup>11</sup>Duty, *Divorce & Remarriage* 71. Cf. R. L. Saucy, "The Husband of One Wife," *BSac* 131 (1974) 232; Stein, "Is It Lawful?" 119.

<sup>12</sup>Crouzel, "Remarriage" 28; T. P. Considine, "The Pauline Privilege," *Aust Cath Rec* 40 (1963) 107-119.

serted by an unbelieving spouse to remarry (the so-called "Pauline privilege"). More recently appeal has been made to 1 Cor 7:27-28 to prove that Paul did not consider remarriage after divorce a sin.<sup>13</sup>

### III. A CRITIQUE OF THE EVANGELICAL POSITION

1. *The problem of Biblical authority.* One of the serious problems for the proponents of the Erasmian interpretation of the Matthean exception phrases concerns the nature of Biblical authority. It is practically unassailable that the Jesus of both Mark's and Luke's accounts permitted no exception that would permit divorce and remarriage. Mark, for instance, is writing his account with a particular group of readers in mind who in all probability (even if Markan priority is denied) did not have Matthew's account before them. If Markan priority is assumed, there can hardly be any doubt that Jesus teaches that all divorce followed by remarriage amounts to adultery. If it is insisted that Matthew presents Jesus as teaching one instance where remarriage is permissible, then we have a blatant contradiction within the synoptic tradition.

It cannot be assumed that Mark's or Luke's or even Paul's readers understood the Erasmian interpretation of the Matthean exception phrases in the early stages of the transmission of Jesus' teaching.<sup>14</sup> One can only assume that these other NT writers intended to communicate to their readers precisely what they wrote. That the other evangelists assumed the implicit operation of Matthew's exception phrase (and a very particular interpretation of how that exception was to operate), in addition to what they clearly recorded in their accounts, is not the proper approach to the synoptic differences in the divorce sayings. The exegetical option of a divorce for a particular reason with the right also to remarry is not even remotely hinted at by Mark, Luke or Paul.

Stein's solution to the synoptic differences is that "Matthew, led by the Spirit, teaches us that there is at least one instance in which divorce [and remarriage] is permissible."<sup>15</sup> There are two reasons why this is an unacceptable solution.

First, the contradiction still remains: An exception that permits both divorce and remarriage is not an exegetical possibility for Mark, Luke or Paul. Though divorce (a "breaking" of the conjugal life) may take place because of the stubborn refusal of man to submit to God's will, remarriage (an attempt to break the union completely, reversing what God has done) must not. "The replacement of one spouse by another is adultery."<sup>16</sup>

It is surprising that Stein, in choosing the possibility that the exception phrases were never uttered by Jesus—an opinion held by many scholars of which he is obviously aware—should then insist on maintaining the Erasmian interpre-

<sup>13</sup>Duty, *Divorce & Remarriage* 109; Job, "New Testament Teaching" 14; Brown, "Separation" 536-537; Adams, *Marriage* 84-86. For correction of this see J. K. Elliott, "Paul's Teaching on Marriage in 1 Corinthians: Some Problems Considered," *NTS* 19 (1973) 219-225.

<sup>14</sup>Cf. N. B. Stonehouse, *Origins of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) 56.

<sup>15</sup>Stein, "Is It Lawful?" 119.

<sup>16</sup>E. Stauffer, "Gameō," *TDNT* 1 (1964) 650. Cf. Crouzel, "Remarriage" 31; Wenham, "Divorced Christians" 152.

tation that permits remarriage after this particular exception for divorce. Scholars who assume that the Matthean exception phrases are to be interpreted in the Erasmian fashion are those who, like T. W. Manson, also assert: "I assume that it is as certain as anything can be in N.T. criticism that the qualifications *parektos logou porneias* and *mē epi porneia* (Mt. v. 32; xix. 9) are not part of the genuine teaching of Jesus on this point."<sup>17</sup> If Stein chooses to believe that the phrases were redactionally inserted by Matthew, he ought at least to interpret them in a sense that is not out of harmony with what the rest of the NT teaches on the subject. Why should Erasmus' interpretation of a difficult saying be allowed to establish the meaning of other texts that are clear and unambiguous?

The second reason why Stein's solution to the problem is inadequate is that he gives, for Matthew's first-century readers, an interpretation to Jesus' divorce saying that was not accepted in the Eastern Church before Justinian's legal reform in the sixth century and in the Western Church before Erasmus' suggested interpretation was taken over by Protestant reformers. If the Erasmian interpretation is correct and Matthew presents an "easier" stand on divorce and remarriage than Mark or Luke, then one might expect such an understanding to be fairly well attested by the early fathers, especially since Matthew was the most-read gospel in the early Church. The exact opposite is the case. The fathers in the first five centuries did not understand Jesus' teaching as giving permission to the "innocent" party to remarry. This was contrary to Scripture. Nor did the vast majority of the fathers permit a believer deserted by an unbeliever to remarry (1 Cor 7:15). Hence when Stein wants to appeal to the particular interpretation of 1 Cor 7:15 that permits remarriage as a second proof for understanding Jesus' words in Mark and Luke as an "overstatement," his exegesis of the meaning of the Matthean exception phrases has little support.<sup>18</sup>

2. *The contextual congruence problem.* Another problem with the Erasmian interpretation of the Matthean account of Jesus' dialogue with the Pharisees is that it is contextually incongruent in two places. First, Matt 19:3-12 begins with the Pharisees asking Jesus about possible grounds for divorce (v 3). They assume the then-dominant Hillelite position. Jesus then responds with an absolute prohibition of divorce based on his exegesis of Gen 1:27; 2:24 (vv 4-6). The Pharisees recognize this as such because Deut 24:1 is brought forward as a definite objection to what Jesus has just said (v 7). Jesus resumes the controversy by interpreting the Mosaic writing as a concession (v 8). Then he adds v 9, a precept that supposedly prohibits divorce and remarriage except where immorality has occurred. In a discussion of the Hillelite view Jesus ultimately appears to come down on the

<sup>17</sup>T. W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus: Studies of Its Form and Content* (Cambridge: University Press, 1948) 200 n. 5.

<sup>18</sup>Though the general-principle/specific-instance type of hermeneutic may have application elsewhere, it is out of place here. This writer sees a similar hermeneutic being employed by the Church of Christ denomination to the question of what one must do to be saved. Based on Acts 2:38 and the textually suspect Mark 16:16 one must not only believe in Christ but also be baptized even though the force of the NT seems to indicate that faith alone is necessary. Yet these two exceptions indicate, under a certain interpretation out of harmony with the rest of the NT teaching, that one must also be baptized in addition to faith in Christ if one wants to be an heir of eternal life. Likewise the force of the NT is clear that divorce followed by remarriage in every case results in adultery unless one interprets the clear teaching of the other NT texts in light of his particular interpretation of the exception phrases in Matthew.

side of Shammai. Shammai allowed (demanded) divorce in the case of immorality based on his exegesis of Deut 24:1. In the Erasmian view, then, v 9 does not belong naturally with what precedes it because vv 4-8 do not discuss grounds for divorce at all. If the Erasmian view is accepted then Jesus is contradicting himself.<sup>19</sup>

Secondly, the response of the disciples (v 10) to this new teaching is inexplicable under the Erasmian understanding of the exception phrase. Despite Ederheim's disclaimer,<sup>20</sup> the right to divorce and remarry in the case of immorality was so close to Shammai's view that Jesus' precept would have caused little surprise to the disciples. Such a reaction can only be explained either if Jesus had prohibited separation absolutely, prohibited remarriage after separation for whatever cause, or, more probably, if the "exception" phrase is understood not as giving "grounds" for divorce as we think of it today, but rather that the

drift of the clauses, then, is not that the Christian husband, should his wife be unfaithful, is permitted to divorce her, but that if he is legally forced to do this he should not be open to criticism if by her conduct his wife has made the continuation of the marriage quite impossible.<sup>21</sup>

That men were compelled to put away their wives in such cases appears clear from Matt 1:18-19.<sup>22</sup> The complex set of social and moral values that confronted Matthew's readers cannot be assumed to be like those that pertain to our day.

It should also be noted that in the sermon on the mount the controlling thought of chap. 5 is found in v 48: "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." It is observed, along with B. Metzger, that if the Erasmian interpretation of 5:32 is correct, Jesus is not substituting the perfect standard of God for the standard recognized by the Jews of his day but again is giving a teaching little better than that of Shammai.<sup>23</sup>

3. *The meaning of apolyō.* The fathers did not understand divorce for the reason of *porneia* in the context of Matt 19:3-12 as conferring the right to remarry. Yet one of the main arguments that defenders of the Erasmian view set forth is that the Jews of Jesus' day and the Roman empire in which Paul traveled knew of no such "divorce" that did not also confer the right to remarry. One must stop and ask, however, if it is proper to make the assumption that Jesus must have held to the same kind of divorce that was prevalent among the Jews of his day. Should not the exegete make allowance for the possibility that Jesus' teachings

<sup>19</sup>Cf. Catchpole, "Synoptic" 93-95.

<sup>20</sup>A. Ederheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (reprint ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 2. 333. Vawter, "Divorce Clauses" 159-160 n. 19, rejects such reasoning.

<sup>21</sup>F. Hauck and S. Schulz, "*Pornē ktl.*," *TDNT* 6 (1968) 592. Cf. B. Vawter, "Divorce and the New Testament," *CBQ* 39 (1977) 528-542.

<sup>22</sup>A. Phillips, "Another Look At Adultery," *JSOT* 20 (1981) 3-25, has concluded that adultery in Jewish law was a sin against God that demanded punishment by the community as a whole. The husband would not be allowed to pardon his wife. Cf. G. J. Wenham, "The Biblical View of Marriage and Divorce 1—Cultural Background," *Third Way* 1/20 (October 20, 1977) 4-5.

<sup>23</sup>B. Metzger, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth and Content* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1965) 163 n. 10.

transcended Jewish ideas? Jesus obviously differed with the Jews of his day on other matters, and if the evidence leads one to believe that he taught the possibility of divorce without the right to remarry, then the exegete should not argue from the Jewish understanding to the contrary. What evidence is there that Jesus did not permit his disciples to remarry after divorce for any cause?

It is interesting to note that Jesus qualifies his use of *apolyō* ("to divorce") in Matt 5:32; 19:9; Luke 16:18 with the unconditional statement: "And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery." It seems that the only way to understand such a statement is from the perspective that divorce, even for *porneia*, does not dissolve the marriage bond. A. Isaksson, whose treatment of the synoptic differences is superb, helpfully observes:

If we regard the original form of the logion as being the one which says that the husband makes himself guilty of adultery if he divorces his wife and marries another woman, the other forms of the logion can quite simply be understood as examples of the applications and expositions of this original form which the Christian churches felt the need to make. From this original formulation it was clear to the disciples that Jesus maintained the indissolubility of marriage.<sup>24</sup>

Related to this is the inference that Murray drew over thirty years ago: "The divorce permitted or tolerated under the Mosaic economy had the effect of dissolving the marriage bond." Therefore with reference to Matt 5:32 and 19:9 Murray maintains that "we should not expect that remarriage would be regarded as adultery."<sup>25</sup> This would be true if Deut 24:1-4 teaches a dissolution divorce, but it has been demonstrated that it teaches no such thing. As J. D. M. Derrett has observed: "Where the Jewish law went wrong was in the failure to perceive that the one flesh persisted after divorce."<sup>26</sup>

Though an extensive discussion of the five different interpretations offered for the legislation found in Deut 24:4 cannot be entered into here, it is sufficient to say that 24:1-4 has nothing to do with legislating grounds for divorce or prohibiting hasty divorce. The Law does remove the right of a man to divorce his wife in certain cases "all his days" (Deut 22:13-19, 28-29), and it does limit a man's right of remarriage after divorce by the legislation set forth in 24:4 (as do the lists of forbidden unions in Lev 18:6-18). But nowhere does one find legislation in the OT regarding grounds for divorce. Neither does the OT teach that the bill of divorce "dissolves" the original union. On the contrary, the basis for the legislation found in Deut 24:4 appears to be the continuing one-flesh union of the original couple, which remains even after the divorce by or death of the second husband.

An even more reliable witness than the fathers to the understanding that Jesus' use of *apolyō* did not automatically confer the right to remarry in *porneia* cases is the apostle Paul. One of the two terms Paul uses to convey the Lord's precept of "no divorce" is the word *chōrizō* ("be separated"). This word appears in the papyri (as does *apolyō*) with the meaning of "divorce with the right to remarry," and this is surely how Paul's Greek and Roman readers in the city of Corinth would have understood the term. So how does Paul convey the Lord's pre-

<sup>24</sup>Isaksson, *Marriage and Ministry* 73. Few evangelicals seem to be aware of Isaksson's work.

<sup>25</sup>Murray, *Divorce* 41-42.

<sup>26</sup>Derrett, *Law* 377. Cf. Isaksson, *Marriage and Ministry* 21-27, and esp. G. Wenham, "The Restoration of Marriage Reconsidered," *JJS* 30 (1979) 36-40.

cept regarding divorce and remarriage to the Corinthians who, by their faith in Christ, have entered into a new sphere of accountability under a new King? To prevent these believers from taking the Roman legal recourse open to them—the right to divorce and remarry—Paul, like Jesus, clarifies his use of the secular divorce terminology by inserting the qualification in case a divorce should take place: “Let [them] remain unmarried or else be reconciled” (1 Cor 7:11a).<sup>27</sup>

This is likewise how *chōrizō* ought to be understood when Paul uses it again in 1 Cor 7:15 of both the unbelieving husband or wife who separates from his Christian spouse. The developing context from the beginning of chap. 7 has been Christ’s command not to divorce. Thus when it says that “the brother or sister is not under bondage in such cases,” Paul is not saying that the believer is no longer bound in marriage to his unbelieving spouse. This introduces an idea foreign to the context and contrary to the nature of marriage as a creation ordinance that applies regardless of one’s faith or the lack thereof. Paul is saying that the believer is no longer bound by Christ’s command not to divorce when his unbelieving spouse wants to leave. The Christian may allow his partner the legal formality of a divorce even though he himself does not recognize its validity in the eyes of God.

It is interesting to note in passing that whenever Paul is speaking about the legal aspects of being bound to one’s spouse (or bound by a promise of marriage to one’s betrothed, 1 Cor 7:27) he uses the verb *deō* (Rom 7:1-3; 1 Cor 7:39), not *douloō* (“enslave, subject”) as he does in 1 Cor 7:15.

4. *The syntax of the protasis of Matt 19:9.* The understanding of Jesus’ use of *apolyō* as not including the right to remarry may very well be intrinsically associated with the position of the exception phrase in relation to the verb that precedes the negated prepositional phrase (*apolysē*) and the one that follows it (*gamēsē*). Syntactical relations and the groupings of words are “factors just as important for the bearing of significance as the more purely lexicographical aspect of the single word.”<sup>28</sup>

A. C. Thiselton informs his readers that “meaning implies choice.”<sup>29</sup> In considering the word order of the protasis of Matt 19:9, there are clearly three possible positions that Matthew could have found suitable to express Jesus’ saying on divorce and remarriage. First, Matthew could have placed the exception phrase before *apolysē* and after *hos an*, in which case the sentence could be read: “Whoever does not, on the grounds of *porneia*, put away his wife and marry another, commits adultery.” Second, Matthew could have placed it where he did place it in the Greek text. To bring out the syntactical function of this construction, it can be expanded as follows: “Whoever puts away his wife—if it is not on the grounds of *porneia* that he puts her away—and marries another commits adultery.” Third, Matthew could have placed the exception phrase after the second verb *gamēsē* and before *moichatai*. The coordinating *kai* would have connected the two

<sup>27</sup>It is this explanatory phrase that stands in the way of Charles’ (*Teaching* 52-53) understanding of the NT teaching on divorce. Charles thinks these are the only words in the NT that forbid remarriage after divorce. He thus concludes that the clause is a marginal and misleading gloss, a later interpolation.

<sup>28</sup>J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: University Press, 1961) 222.

<sup>29</sup>A. C. Thiselton, “Semantics and New Testament Interpretation,” *New Testament Interpretation* (ed. I. H. Marshall; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 83.



sequential actions in the protasis ("put away and marry another"), and Matthew would have clearly heard Jesus teach: "Whoever puts away his wife and marries another, if it is not for *porneia* that he puts away his wife and marries another, commits adultery." Prepositional phrases are adverbial in nature and normally follow the unit they qualify. Hence this last construction would have required the interpretation of Matt 19:9 that most evangelicals now give to it. G. Wenham summarizes:

Thus, although the present position of the exceptive clause does not eliminate all ambiguity, another word order would have served Matthew less well, assuming that he wished to express the patristic view. Had the clause come after "marries another", it would have expressly sanctioned remarriage; while placed before "puts away" it would have made separation mandatory for unchastity.<sup>30</sup>

Unfortunately P. Wiebe has made the same assumption that Murray did in presuming that the exception phrase must qualify both the divorce and remarriage aspects of the protasis. Wiebe correctly understands that Matt 19:9 is in the form of a conditional statement, but he does not understand the precise nature of the protasis in this conditional sentence. His example, "All major political parties in Canada, except the Parti Quebecois, support the continuation of a united Canada,"<sup>31</sup> is completely inadequate as a starting point in his "logical" discussion of the meaning of Matt 19:9. Whereas Wiebe's example contains only one actual simple condition, the protasis of Matt 19:9 contains a compound condition: "to put away . . . and to remarry." When both of these conditions are fulfilled, then the sin stated in the apodosis is realized: "He commits adultery." Now while Wiebe wants to believe that Jesus teaches, "If a man divorces his wife, and the ground for the divorce is his wife's unchastity, and the man marries another, then he does not commit adultery," he would have been correct had he said ". . . and the man does not marry another, then he does not commit adultery." The protasis of Matt 19:9 consists of divorce and remarriage, the occurrence of these two sequential events always amounting to adultery.

Wiebe's unconscious assumption that the thrust of Jesus' teaching was against the wrong of divorce and not the wrong of remarriage leads to his "logical" error in confusing the teaching of Jesus on this subject. Both Murray and Wiebe would have had some basis for argument had the exception phrase been placed after the two verbs in coordination and just before *moichatai*, but such is not the case.<sup>32</sup> That Murray did not understand the syntactical possibilities outlined above is evident from his comment at the close of his own discussion of the syntax of Matt 19:9: "Where else could the exceptive clause be placed if it applies to all three elements [to put away, marry another, and commit adultery] of the situ-

<sup>30</sup>G. Wenham, "The Biblical View of Marriage and Divorce 3—New Testament Teaching," *Third Way* 1/22 (November 17, 1977) 9.

<sup>31</sup>Wiebe, "New Testament" 132.

<sup>32</sup>Duty, *Divorce & Remarriage* 49-50, analyzes the syntax of Matt 19:9 based on his conception of English word order. He also thinks that J. A. Bengel supports the Erasmian view of Matt 19:9. But Duty should have noted the brackets around the words that supported his view in the *Gnomon*: They signify not the comments of Bengel but the annotations of Steudel, the editor of the German edition of the *Gnomon*. Though the two do not always go together, Duty should have noted Bengel's comments at 1 Cor 7:15 where Bengel apparently agrees with the early fathers that Paul did not allow remarriage to the deserted believer.

ation expressed?"<sup>33</sup> Murray's insistence that the coordination of putting away and remarriage must not be broken is a logical one that he imposes on the text. Divorces do take place without remarriage following. These are sequential actions that do not have to follow one another—indeed, must not follow one another if it is understood that Jesus taught that all remarriage during the lifetime of one's original spouse amounts to adultery.

5. *The eunuch-saying in Matt 19:12*. Q. Quesnell<sup>34</sup> has argued with great erudition that the eunuch-saying in Matt 19:12 contextually refers to the state of those named in v 9: those who, having put away their wives for *porneia*, would not be able to marry another woman without committing adultery. It is interesting that the earliest known reference to this text—Clement of Alexandria *Strom.* 3.6.50—does understand it of the husband whose wife has been put away. This consideration alone deserves another article to discuss fully, and the implications are staggering. In G. Bromiley's paraphrase of Matt 19:12: "For God's sake some people may have to forego marriage, some may have to put it in a new perspective, and some who have broken their marriages may have to refrain from remarriage."<sup>35</sup> The message of Matt 19:9-12 on this understanding would communicate the following: The reason that separated believing spouses should, in faithfulness to their Master's teaching, not remarry is because they have grasped the significance of the Messiah's lordship over their lives. Jesus' disciples

must be ready to obey God and not remarry after separation even though they might plead, as they often do, that they have a right to happiness or to the fulfilment of natural desires. To talk of a right to happiness is to delude oneself. Happiness, when it is attained, is a gift from God and it cannot be attained, nor can human life be fulfilled, where there is conflict with God's stated will or a defiant refusal to see that true happiness and fulfilment lie only in a primary commitment to God's kingdom and righteousness.<sup>36</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Space does not permit a more complete treatment of these matters or an analysis of the errors that the Erasmian position, as it is promulgated today, makes in its use of 1 Cor 6:15-18; 7:25-28 and in the supposed lexical equation of *porneia* with *moicheia* in the Matthean exception phrases. It is only hoped that this article will encourage evangelicals to examine critically some of our own traditional views and be willing to abandon that which we have long held if the exegetical and historical evidence should point in another direction.

<sup>33</sup>Murray, *Divorce* 41.

<sup>34</sup>Q. Quesnell, " 'Made Themselves Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven' (Mt 19,12)," *CBQ* 30 (1968) 335-358. See the additional considerations I have added to Quesnell's arguments in "A Critique of the Evangelical Protestant View of Divorce and Remarriage," *Studia Theologica et Apologia* 1/1 (1981) 23-31.

<sup>35</sup>Bromiley, *God and Marriage* 41.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.