

Does the Bible Allow Remarriage after Divorce Based on Adultery?

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[Notice the “Draft” watermark. This paper is currently in a preliminary form, focusing on exegesis and analysis of biblical passages, with relatively little interaction with and citation of relevant literature. Further, its conclusions on this difficult topic are tentative. I present it with a desire for input and correction.]

Divorce and remarriage are among the most important and controversial topics among conservative Christians today. While few if any Bible believers approve the lax and permissive practices of current society, not all agree on what the Biblical standards for divorce and remarriage are. At an extreme are some who emphasize apparently absolute statements such as “The Lord...hath putting away” (Mal. 2:16) and “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” (Matt. 19:6, Mar. 10:9) and forbid divorce on any grounds. Others moderate the absolutism of these statements on various grounds that seem to have Scriptural warrant. For example, in I Corinthians 7:15, Paul clearly allows a believer to consent to divorce initiated by an unbelieving spouse. This passage is so clear that the vast majority of interpreters allow at least divorce in this situation, and many believe that the passage implies a liberty to remarry as well.

One of the more vigorously debated scenarios is a marriage marred by adultery. Is adultery grounds for divorce? If so, is remarriage also allowed? If remarriage is allowed, is it allowed to both parties or only to the innocent one? Conservative interpreters differ over what the Bible teaches about these questions. The purpose of this paper is not to cover the whole range of issues about divorce and remarriage but rather to examine several key passages with the goal of understanding the will of God expressed in Scripture for cases of adultery.

Introductory Considerations

For the purposes of this discussion, *adultery* is defined as “Voluntary sexual intercourse between a married man and someone other than his wife or between a married woman and someone other than her husband” (*Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, hereafter *MWCD*). Notice that the word “voluntary” excludes victims of rape, and “intercourse” seems to imply heterosexual immorality, though there is no reason to insist absolutely on that aspect of the definition, especially in light of the generic “someone” used with reference to the partner. “Married” excludes the case of premarital sex; for that sin, *adultery* is not the right word. Notice also that the definition places no limitation on the marital status of the partner in adultery, though a partner *is* part of this definition: solo sexual activity is not termed adultery. We will understand *adultery*, then, to mean any voluntary sexual activity between a married person and anyone other than his

or her spouse. When a marriage is marred by adultery, does God allow divorce and remarriage?

We should first note that divorce was a point of controversy among the rabbis of Jesus' day. One school of thought, following the rabbi Shammai, insisted that the only permissible grounds for divorce is adultery. Another rabbi, Hillel, taught that permission for divorce was much more liberal. A man could divorce his wife because of bad cooking or even because he had found a more attractive woman (see *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* [ed. Bromiley], s.v. "Divorce").

Though all conservative interpreters today reject the extreme leniency that characterized the school of Hillel, considerable difference in understanding still exists. For example, in 1990 InterVarsity Press published *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*. In this book J. Carl Laney argues for blanket prohibition of both divorce and remarriage, William Heth for limited permission to divorce with no permission for remarriage, and Thomas Edgar for permission to divorce and remarry on grounds of adultery or desertion. The fourth view, argued by Larry Richards, is that while both divorce and remarriage are sinful, human weakness makes these sins at times inevitable and that God deals in these situations with grace rather than legal prohibitions. In the process of arguing their own positions and responding to the others, these writers also refer to a wide range of other authors and their various points of view. It is clear that no consensus exists.

Consensus is lacking not only about biblical standards for divorce and remarriage but even about how the whole matter should be framed and discussed. Before launching into our own handling of the topic, it will be good to get a feel for the territory by overviewing the four positions listed above and seeing how they approach the questions. Space limitations do not permit enough description to make each writer's arguments perfectly clear; the gist will have to suffice.

Overview of Representative Positions

In *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*, J. Carl Laney represents the position that divorce and remarriage are completely prohibited. Like the other writers (a rare point of agreement!) he begins with the creation account's clear teaching that God established marriage as a lifelong relationship between one man and one woman. The legislation in Deuteronomy 24, while not prohibiting divorce and remarriage outright, serves to discourage them. The putting away of Gentile wives in Ezra 9-10 was a tragic step required to bring Israel back into obedience to the Mosaic prohibition against intermarriage with the heathen. It was a matter of restoring and preserving national purity, not a pattern for dealing with marital problems on an individual level. Coming to the New Testament, Laney emphasizes Jesus' teaching on the permanence of marriage in Matthew 19, noting that the parallels forbidding remarriage in Mark 10 and Luke 16 include no exceptions. The exception that does appear in Matthew 19, the case of *πορνεία*, Laney sees as referring to marriage within prohibited degrees of family relationship as outlined in Leviticus 18. Since such marriages are "illegal," God

does not sanction them, and divorce is proper. Laney claims that the placement of the exception clause in the overall statement restricts its applicability to the act of divorce only; even where divorce is permitted, remarriage is not. Laney's treatment of Paul's teaching on the topic emphasizes I Corinthians 7:11, where the only options Paul presents to a divorced person are reconciliation or remaining unmarried.

William Heth (limited divorce, no remarriage) takes Jesus' teaching in Matthew 19:3-11 as providing an overall paradigm for discussing the topic. In this passage Jesus divides human history into three periods with respect to God's administration of the institution of marriage. The first period is "the beginning," (v. 8) where marriage was in its ideal form in paradise. The second period was a time of compromise and concession to human "hardness of heart" (v. 8), when divorce and remarriage were permitted in the Mosaic law. The third period is governed by Jesus' own teaching, which marks movement back toward God's original intent, resulting in standards stricter than those outlined in the Old Testament. Heth sees the "one flesh" language of Genesis 2, along with the prohibitions against marriage and sex among close relatives, including in-law relationships, as indicating that marriage forms a kinship relationship that is no less permanent than blood relationships within a family. Thus, while divorce may be permitted in certain circumstances, the marriage bond is indissoluble and any remarriage constitutes adultery. Nevertheless, Heth argues, in the Old Testament period God chose to accommodate the then-prevailing practices by not forbidding remarriage entirely. Because of human hard-heartedness (as Jesus said in Matt. 19:8), God simply limited such practices and provided for the woman's legal protection (Deut. 24:1-4). In the New Testament time frame, though, Jesus declares the indissolubility of marriage and prohibits remarriage. The exception that Jesus provided in the case of marital unfaithfulness works as follows. In Matthew 5:32, the exceptional case does not remove the adultery of the wife's remarriage; it removes only the husband's responsibility for it. In Matthew 19:9, Heth argues, the exception clause allows only the divorce, not the remarriage. Reasons for this view are the nearly unanimous prohibition of remarriage by the early church fathers, the permanence of the marriage bond, the grammatical structure of the statement, the content of the subsequent verses, the parallels in Mark and Luke that omit the exception, and Paul's understanding of Jesus' teaching. In response to the question, "Where does God's grace enter the picture of your no-remarriage position," Heth asks, "Does God give grace for Christians to sin?" Rather, God gives grace to prosper spiritually in the single state. In fairness to Heth, we must not conclude this description of his argument without calling attention to the fact that he has since reconsidered his view and now believes he was mistaken. His contribution to the 2006 book, *Remarriage after Divorce in Today's Church: 3 Views*, argues for remarriage in cases of adultery and desertion. Nevertheless, the case he originally outlined represents a viewpoint that some continue to hold and is therefore worth including here.

Thomas Edgar (divorce and remarriage in cases of adultery or desertion) especially emphasizes the seemingly plain statement of Matthew 19:9: "Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry

another, committeth adultery.” Assuming that the Greek word for “fornication” includes all kinds of sexual immorality, including adultery, Edgar sees this verse a statement of such clarity that it is only reasonable to interpret debatable passages in harmony with it.

The Teaching of Jesus

Matthew 19 and Mark 10

Such controversy over divorce is the background behind the question put to Jesus in Matthew 19:3: “Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?” Though the details of Jesus’ answer have been subject to much debate, it seems clear enough that He taught something stricter than either Hillel’s or Shammai’s view, because when He was finished, the disciples exclaimed, “If the case of a man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry” (v. 10).

So what did Jesus teach? He began His teaching on this occasion with a strong corrective. “Is it lawful to divorce for just any reason?” they had asked. His answer was, “Don’t divorce at all!” That His hearers understood His answer so is clear from their follow-up question, “Why then did Moses command...to put her away?” Again, Jesus’ answer insists on a no-divorce policy: He explains that, although Moses allowed divorce “because of the hardness of your hearts,” God intended marriage to be permanent. In follow-up teaching for the disciples, Mark’s gospel records this further statement: “Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her” (Mark 10:11). The logic is perfectly clear: if God views marriage as permanent, then divorce does not dissolve that marriage, and sexual activity with another partner in remarriage constitutes adultery.

Matthew’s account of the discussion, though, introduces a complicating factor: an exception clause. In Matthew, the statement reads, “Whosoever shall put away his wife, *except it be for fornication*, and shall marry another, committeth adultery.” An exception, of course, is “a case to which a rule does not apply” (*MWCD*). Here the rule is that the one who divorces and remarries commits adultery; in the exceptional case of fornication, the one who divorces and remarries does *not* commit adultery.

Here arises a controversy among interpreters: what is the definition of *fornication*? The Greek word πορνεία can be shown to cover the full range of voluntary sexual immorality, much like its English counterpart *fornication*, which is defined as “consensual sexual intercourse between two persons not married to each other” (*MWCD*). In some passages, however, the word clearly has a narrower reference. Among the clear examples are those that include both fornication and adultery, such as Hebrews 13:4: “whoremongers [fornicators] and adulterers God will judge.” Fornication apparently does not include adultery in this verse. Here, then, is a significant point of controversy in Bible interpretation today: does the exception clause in Matthew 19:9 allow divorce and remarriage in a case of adultery, or must πορνεία be understood more narrowly to refer to something like premarital sex or perhaps a marriage violating the OT prohibitions

against marrying a close relative (Lev. 18:6ff.)? Only if πορνεία is taken with broad reference can this text be understood to allow divorce and remarriage in a case of adultery.

It does not seem possible to prove conclusively what πορνεία in this passage must mean. Therefore, we will leave the question hanging for the moment and proceed to examine a similar passage in Matthew 5. But before doing so, it is good to observe that Jesus' teaching in Matthew 19 clearly refutes at least the permissive view of Hillel. The only possible grounds for divorce and remarriage covered by the exception clause are sexual in nature.

Matthew 5

Like Matthew 19:9, Matthew 5:32 contains teaching on divorce qualified by the exception of πορνεία, "saving for the cause of fornication." In other respects, though, Matthew 5 differs from Matthew 19. In this section of Matthew 5 (vv. 21-47), Jesus is not responding specifically to questions about divorce. Rather, He is engaged in a process of amplifying the Mosaic Law for the purpose of bringing the self-righteous to conviction for their sins. Many of His hearers saw themselves as keepers of God's commandments while God saw them as grievous violators of them. To bring such people to see themselves as God sees them, Jesus takes up a series of Mosaic commands and declares that each command demands much more than His hearers were inclined to think. The prohibition of murder, for example, implies a prohibition of lesser forms of abuse as well: insults and unjustified anger. The prohibition against adultery is violated at the moment of the lustful look. It is within the context of this series of six such topics that Jesus juxtaposes His discussions of adultery (vv. 27-30) and divorce (vv. 31-2).

Sound hermeneutics and theology require the interpreter to establish matters of context and flow of thought through a passage before drawing conclusions about theology and application. We will therefore examine these aspects of Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage in Matthew 5:31-32 very closely, and the importance of our findings will become apparent at the end of the process.

The Relationship of the Divorce and Adultery Sections. Interpreters of Matthew 5:31-32 do not generally give sufficient attention—if any at all—to the connection between these verses and Jesus' teaching on adultery in verses 27-30. But the linkage is both clear and crucial. The most obvious linkage joining these two sections into a unit is the recurrence of the adultery vocabulary (μοιχεύω and μοιχάομαι) that spans both sections, appearing twice in each. This recurrence is especially noteworthy in light of the *absence* of such vocabulary recurrence in other pairs of sections within Matthew 5:21-47.

The vocabulary of the whole passage consists of 170 Greek words. Many of the words, such as articles, pronouns, and most prepositions, do not carry distinctive conceptual content. Of the words that do carry conceptual content,

seventeen appear in more than one section of the passage.¹ But of those seventeen, only two carry content that lies anywhere near the heart of the topic of their respective sections: the adultery words already noted and the word *woman* (γυνή), which also recurs in this same pair of sections. A further impressive factor about the recurrence of the adultery vocabulary is that it bookends the pair of sections on adultery divorce: it is the first “content” word after the introductory formula for the adultery section, “You heard that it was said,” and it is the last word of the divorce section. It seems clear that Jesus intends the two sections to form a unit dealing with adultery; divorce is a secondary element.

The recurrence of these words, though, is not the only factor supporting the unity of the adultery and divorce sections of the passage. The construction of the introductory statements also contributes to this unity. The one element common to all six introductory statements is, “It was said (ἐρρέθη/ἠρρέθη).” Each statement also includes additional wording, as displayed below.

21-26 (murder)	ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη	τοῖς ἀρχαίοις
27-30 (adultery)	ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη	
31-32 (divorce).....	ἠρρέθη	δέ
33-37 (swearing) πάλιν	ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη	τοῖς ἀρχαίοις
38-42 (strict justice)	ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη	
43-47 (love neighbor/..... hate enemy)	ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη	

It is evident that the basic introductory statement, occurring three of the six times, is “You heard that it was said” (ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη). The departures from the statement relate to two factors: the initial introduction to the whole series of topics and several variations from the pattern in connection with the divorce section in verses 31-32. The initial introduction expands the basic statement with the necessary time reference, “to those of ancient times.” Once Jesus has established this audience for “it was said” at the outset, it needs no repetition, so in fact He does not repeat it except in verse 33—for a reason to be explained in a moment. The second section, dealing with adultery, establishes the basic introductory statement omitting “to those of ancient times.” The introduction to the third section, on divorce, though, is radically different from the others. It is much shorter, omitting “you heard that,” and it is the only one that includes a coordinating conjunction, δέ (“and”). These two factors strongly suggest that this third section expands upon the second rather than form a completely independent unit. That structure is reinforced when Jesus moves on to the fourth section. This longest of all the introductions, including not only “to those of ancient times” but also an initial “again,” seems clearly designed to signal a major discourse break that moves on to a third independent topic. The fifth and sixth sections get the

¹ The seventeen words that appear in more than one section, in alphabetical order, are ἀκούω, ἀποδίδωμι, ἀρχαῖος, ἀφίημι, βάλλω, Γέεννα, γυνή, δεξιός, δίδωμι, λόγος, μοιχεύω, οὐρανός, ὀφθαλμός, περισσός, ποιέω, πονηρός, and ὑπάγω.

standard introduction, indicating that each forms a separate topic. In a nutshell, each introduction including “You heard” indicates a new topic; the one lacking that verb also includes a coordinating conjunction, indicating that it introduces only a subsection of the previous topic.

The structure indicated by these introductory statements, combined with the vocabulary recurrence detailed above, makes clear that the primary focus of the divorce discussion is not to present a standalone treatment of divorce and remarriage but rather to treat these topics as they relate to the larger issue of adultery. Consistently with the function of the whole series of six topics, Jesus’ purpose here is to show that far more people are guilty of adultery than are willing to admit it. The importance of this fact will become more apparent further on.

The Teaching of Matthew 5:27-32. What, then, does Jesus teach in Matthew 5:27-32 about the prevalence of adultery among His hearers? When we examine the passage closely, we find that Jesus implicates quite a number of people in this sin. He begins with the presumably married man who looks at a woman “to lust after her.” The words πρὸς τὸ ἐπιθυμῆσαι αὐτήν seem to point, not to an accidental or unwanted moment of stimulation through the eye-gate, but rather to a purposeful gaze of longing desire. Here is where adultery begins, and adultery it is, even if here it ends. But Jesus’ words make clear that it does not end here. The expression “hath committed adultery with her” is actually a transitive construction with the woman as the direct object: ἐμοίχευσεν αὐτήν. If I read the construction accurately, it speaks not only of what the man himself does but also of what he does to the woman: he defiles her with adultery.² I do not mean that she actually becomes guilty of adultery under his gaze (unless, perhaps, by her dress or demeanor she intentionally solicits his lustful look?) but rather that this man has already expressed in heart a willingness to defile her along with himself. Adultery is not a one-party sin! At the moment of his lust, then, the man has on his record two counts of adultery: his and hers.

But the problem goes deeper. What if, in order to gain intimacy with this new woman, the man proceeds to divorce and remarry? Remember that this is perfectly allowable, according to Hillel, and therefore, we can be sure, it was commonly done. This man may think that divorce allows him to enjoy the charms of another woman without taint of adultery, but Jesus has bad news for him. The one who divorces his wife (leaving out the exception clause for the moment) causes her to commit adultery.

Perhaps the charge, “maketh her to commit adultery” is a surprising twist. Wouldn’t we expect Jesus to speak of the man’s own immorality, as He did in Matthew 19 and Mark 10? No, remember that Matthew 5 is different. In Matthew 5, the man’s adultery comes at his first lustful look. Jesus now adds that, by divorcing, the man compounds his guilt by forcing his wife to commit adultery as well. How so? By putting her into a position practically requiring her to remarry at the first opportunity—how does a divorcee support herself in the ancient world? The clear implications of the text are that she remarries and that her remarriage constitutes adultery, and the clear statement of the text is that the man

² Cf. Liddell & Scott, s.v. μοιχεύω: “*debauch* her, c. acc.”

who divorced her bears responsibility for it. Nor does Jesus stop here; He says further that the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

This passage, then, shows a sequence of abounding adultery: the man is guilty at the first lustful look, and God sees in his heart a further guilt for his willingness to defile that woman as well. The divorce freeing him to marry his new love (bringing her adultery, by the way, to reality) then forces his first wife into a remarriage that is adulterous both for herself and for the one who marries her.³ These people think they are innocent of adultery? Their culture is saturated with it! And the lustful man is responsible for more of it than just his own.⁴ This seems clearly to be the thrust of Jesus' teaching in this passage, designed to strike self-righteous hearts with conviction for the sin of adultery. The coherency of this sequence of development across the two sections, by the way, provides a further support for taking them as comprising a single major topic of discussion.

We have arrived now at a point where we should be able to grasp the importance of context and thought flow for the theology and application of this passage. The passage is not designed to answer the question, "When may I divorce and remarry?" The question it answers is, "Am I innocent or guilty of adultery?" Remarried people who fancy themselves innocent based on what they believe is a properly executed divorce prior to sexual intimacy with someone other than their first spouse are now soundly disabused of that false notion. Within this paradigm of understanding, the exception clause does not function as a regulator of the permissibility of divorce or remarriage but only as an indicator of who is responsible for the adultery of a divorced wife's remarriage.⁵

The Exception Clause. The exception clause, though, deserves deep scrutiny of its own. Might in fact a case of *πορνεία* alleviate the adultery of some remarriages? Here we must look closely at the rule to which the exception clause is attached: "Whosoever shall put away his wife...causeth her to commit adultery" [when she remarries]. That outcome consists of two parts: she commits adultery, and he bears responsibility for it. Which part of the rule, though, does fornication negate? Is it that she commits no adultery? Or is it that, though she commits adultery, he bears no responsibility?

Here we must come back to the two possible interpretations of *πορνεία*: a broader one that includes adultery and a narrower one that does not. Let's assume for a moment the narrower interpretation. One narrower interpretation is that *πορνεία* refers to marriage to a close relative. In such a case it seems perfectly reasonable to view this as no valid marriage in the eyes of God. His will is for it

³ Jesus' words do not go so far as to make the first husband responsible for the second husband's adultery. The man who marries a divorcee is under no coercion similar to that to which the first husband subjects his divorced wife. The grammatical construction involving the verb *ποιέω* lays to the first husband's charge only the wife's adultery in her remarriage, not that of her new husband.

⁴ The man's responsibility extends to his first and second wives, but not to the man who marries his first wife. That man enters into that marriage of his own will and therefore bears his own responsibility for its adultery.

⁵ This may sound like a question-begging statement, but the qualifier "within this paradigm of understanding" leaves the question in fact open.

to end, and it is hard to see any reason why each party should not be free to contract a legitimate marriage later. When a man divorces his wife for this reason, then, he does not make her commit adultery because she may enter a legitimate marriage that entails no adultery. Another narrower interpretation is that *πορνεία* refers to immorality during the period of betrothal, much like a modern engagement. In the Jewish custom, a betrothed couple are considered husband and wife, even though the marriage has not yet been finalized and physically consummated. The scenario in view, then, would be one in which the husband finds, perhaps when entering into first intimacy on their wedding night, that the bride is not a virgin. If in this case he divorces her without consummating the marriage, the assumption would seem reasonable that her eventual marriage to another man entails no adultery. An unconsummated marriage is widely recognized as no marriage at all, and the woman therefore remains an unmarried woman after such a divorce. What if the marriage *were* consummated, though? In this case the negation of either part of the rule could make sense. Perhaps in God's eyes this is a marriage that can be dissolved without entailing adultery in a remarriage. Negating the other part of the rule, though, seems to make better sense: the man is not responsible for the divorced wife's status as immoral. She bears that responsibility, since the pre-marital immorality was a matter of her own choice.

But what about the broader interpretation of *πορνεία* that includes adultery? Adultery is the case that this paper addresses, so let us consider in detail a scenario where a man divorces his wife, there has been adultery, and so this divorce is assumed to qualify for relief under the exception clause. Already we have noted that the rule has two parts—the remarried woman's adultery and the divorcing husband's responsibility for it—requiring us to consider two interpretations of the exception. But a further question arises: Is Jesus talking about adultery committed by the wife or by the husband? These two sets of two alternatives combine for a total of four possible interpretations to consider.

Table 1 — Possible interpretations of Matthew 5:32

	wife's remarriage not adulterous	wife's remarriage adulterous but husband not responsible
<i>πορνεία</i> is wife's adultery	1. When the wife commits adultery, she may remarry without adultery.	2. When the wife commits adultery, her remarriage is adulterous but the husband is not responsible for it.
<i>πορνεία</i> is husband's adultery	3. When the husband commits adultery, the divorced wife may remarry without adultery.	4. When the husband commits adultery, the divorced wife's remarriage is adulterous but the husband is not responsible for it.

The passage seems more naturally to point to the wife's adultery, so, taking that case first, we will, within that case, consider first whether Jesus is saying that this remarriage involves no adultery at all (interpretation 1). If so, an adulterous divorcee's remarriage is more righteous than that of an innocent divorcee (whose

remarriage is not covered by the exception). How could that be? Is it not much more reasonable to understand the exception as negating the other part of the rule (interpretation 2)? Where the marriage breaks up due to the woman's adultery, what the exception clause relieves is not the adultery of her remarriage, but the divorcing husband's responsibility for it. In this case the man did not force her into adultery by divorcing her; she chose adultery herself while still married to him. This focus on responsibility is consistent with the passage's focus on the question of moral status: is someone guilty or not? The rule and exception function together to assign responsibility for the guilty status that remarriage brings upon the divorcee.

Now for the sake of completeness, suppose the less likely case: Jesus intends the exception clause to refer to the man's adultery; we presume the wife innocent. The possibilities, again, are that she may remarry without committing adultery or that she does commit adultery but the husband is not responsible. We can quickly rule out the latter (interpretation 4): by what logic would the innocent victim of adultery be charged with adultery in her remarriage while her guilty spouse is released from responsibility? The verse clearly declares that an innocent man who divorces an innocent wife makes her commit adultery; does committing adultery against her lessen his responsibility? Since that logic seems absurd, let us go on to consider the other possibility (interpretation 3). Did Jesus mean to say that an innocent wife divorced by an adulterous husband may remarry without adultery? This suggestion involves no inherent logical flaw, and it is consistent with Matthew 19:9, where the exception clause exempts the innocent party's remarriage from adultery. It is, however, inconsistent with the obvious intent of the wording of this passage. The passage, again, says that the man who divorces his wife, except in a case of *πορνεία*, makes her commit adultery. The rule charges the one initiating the divorce with a fault; the exception should relieve the fault. But if the exception is itself a fault, what relief does it provide? Does Jesus really say, "A man who divorces his wife makes her commit adultery, unless *he* committed adultery against *her*, in which case her remarriage entails no adultery for him to be charged with"? While this interpretation is not impossible, it is strangely convoluted and certainly runs strongly contrary to the passage's whole sequence of thought, as discussed above. Furthermore, immorality occasioning divorce is assumed *much* more naturally to be the fault of the spouse *being* divorced than of the one *initiating* the divorce. It seems safe, then, to understand Jesus as referring to immorality by the wife, not the husband.

If Jesus intended the exception clause in Matthew 5:32 to include adultery, then, the only relief we can reasonably find in it is that when a husband divorces a wife who has committed adultery against him, her status as an adulteress (and possibly the ongoing adultery of her eventual remarriage as well) is her fault, not his. Table 2 and Chart 1 at the end of this paper map out the interpretive possibilities for this verse.

Does Adultery Dissolve a Marriage?

A reader who is astute or is acquainted with the details of divorce and remarriage controversies has undoubtedly noticed my omission so far of one important factor. What if, in the eyes of God, adultery dissolves a marriage? In that case, adultery committed by either spouse creates a scenario in which there no longer exists any marriage for a remarriage to violate. Though Scripture nowhere teaches this idea explicitly, this viewpoint is fairly widely held, as part of the rationale that allows remarriage after divorce based on adultery.

I must wonder, though, whether people who hold this view have thought seriously enough about its problems. I will mention three. First, imagine yourself in a disintegrating marriage. This understanding of the exception clause might well incline you to arrange for an adulterous liaison, either your spouse's or your own, in order to free you to remarry. Of course this objection is easy enough to answer in the words of Dr. Bob Jones, Sr.: "Do right until the stars fall." And, "It is never right to do wrong in order to get a chance to do right." If the divorcee must commit adultery, it's better to do it under compulsion, she should reason, than by her own choice; at least her first husband would then share her guilt. Furthermore, Scripture allows for remarriage after the death of a spouse, but only a warped mind would take that allowance as encouraging murder. God can hardly be expected to bulletproof His laws against perverted abuse. So this first problem is not a compelling one.

The second problem, though, is more difficult. On what basis can adultery be seen as dissolving a marriage more thoroughly than divorce does? From Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 it is clear that divorce on grounds other than *πορνεία* does not dissolve a marriage in God's eyes. Is there something about adultery that is more inherently destructive to marriage than divorce is? Many marriages survive adultery; how many survive divorce? It is clear from Scripture that an act of sex does not constitute a marriage; how then can an act of adultery dissolve one?

The third objection is that, if adultery dissolves a marriage, then on what basis can a marriage marred by adultery continue at all? If a spouse is caught in adultery or comes forward with a confession of it, and if adultery automatically dissolves a marriage, then for the couple to have further sexual intimacy without marrying again would be immoral. And certainly there is no Scriptural warrant for multiple marriages to the same spouse after one or more adulterous liaisons.

One possibility does present itself, though, that would allow one to interpret Scripture as allowing remarriage after a divorce occasioned by adultery. Perhaps one could maintain that, while neither divorce nor adultery alone dissolves a marriage in God's eyes, divorce *based on* adultery does. It is very difficult to see, though, what additional factor is brought into the picture by the *combination* of these two sins. Adultery is a sin, and Jesus makes it clear that God never intended divorce. By what logic does the *combination* of these two wrongs *eliminate* the wrong that remarriage would otherwise entail? I cannot find any defensible line of reasoning to validate the idea that adultery dissolves a marriage. Chart 2 at the end of this paper maps out the logic of this discussion.

Matthew 5:32 in Summary

We are now in a position to summarize the interpretation and application of Matthew 5:32. First, indisputably, a divorced wife's remarriage in a case involving no invalid first marriage or immorality within it entails adultery. It would seem only fair to reverse the roles and maintain the same for the husband. Second, where there *is* immorality leading to divorce, the possibilities are two: 1) where the marriage broken by divorce is invalid or sexually violated prior to its consummation (narrow interpretation of *πορνεία*), there is no adultery in a later marriage, and 2) where the broken marriage is a valid one violated by adultery (an additional case allowed by a broader interpretation of *πορνεία*), a later remarriage constitutes adultery for which the divorcing spouse is not responsible. The narrower interpretation of *πορνεία* puts adultery completely outside the exception, allowing only scenario 1); the broader interpretation allows for both 1) and 2). The discoveries of this paper do not indicate that, in either case, adultery within a first marriage provides an exemption from adultery in remarriage.

Before moving on to the next point of discussion, I will add one further possibility for how the exception clause might work in a case of fornication of the sort that does not involve the formation of a valid marriage. It is possible to take Jesus' words to mean that an eventual (re)marriage *does* involve sexual immorality, but adultery is not the right word for that kind of immorality. This interpretation seems unlikely to me, however, because it operates in a realm of legal technicality that seems foreign to the simplicity with which Jesus obviously intends His words in this passage to be taken. He is not engaging the lawyers of His day in sophistry; He is declaring simple truth.

Harmony of Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9

Before we consider our conclusions final, though, we must test them against the other passage containing the exception clause, Matthew 19:9. That passage appears clearly to give fornication as the exceptional case in which remarriage *can* take place without adultery. This is a major challenge to this paper's findings so far. I find three potential ways to reconcile Matthew 19:9 with what I have set forth regarding Matthew 5:32. The first is hardly acceptable: Matthew 19:9 gives to the innocent husband a liberty of remarriage that Matthew 5:32 denies to the innocent wife. This reconciliation is theoretically possible due to the fact that Matthew 19 speaks about the husband's situation initiating divorce while Matthew 5:32 speaks about the wife's situation as the victim. But would God really maintain a gender-based double standard? Perhaps the gender distinction can be passed over and the two passages distinguished in terms of who is divorcing whom. The problem of consistency remains, though: does the innocent initiator of divorce (Matt. 19) deserve a liberty to remarry that is denied to the innocent victim of divorce (Matt 5)?

The second potential reconciliation is to accept a narrow interpretation of *πορνεία*, possibly consisting of *both* of the options given above or even more (betrothal immorality, marriage to close relatives, or other aberrations like forced

marriage). The exception would then refer to uncommon situations of invalid marriage, which do not preclude a later, valid marriage. A variation on this approach, theoretically possible but unattractive, would be to assign the narrower meaning to *πορνεία* only in Matthew 19, allowing the ordinary broader meaning to stand in Matthew 5. We have seen that the broader meaning is possible in Matthew 5 but that the exception in that case would only transfer responsibility for adultery—it would not remove the fact of it. Obviously, if Matthew 5 teaches that remarriage after divorce grounded on adultery is still adultery, so must Matthew 19, and we must therefore interpret *πορνεία* narrowly in Matthew 19, so that cases of adultery are not covered by the exception. If, however, *πορνεία* *must* be interpreted narrowly in one passage and it *can* be interpreted narrowly in the other, the most reasonable approach would seem to be to adopt the narrow interpretation consistently. Some interpreters, of course, do precisely this.

The third potential reconciliation is of an altogether different sort. Any good textual apparatus will show for Matthew 19:9 quite a variety of readings. Of special interest are those that, instead of saying “and shall marry another, committeth adultery,” say “makes her commit adultery,” in exactly the words of Matthew 5:32. The manuscript evidence for this wording is substantial, featuring both age and geographic distribution, and the variant is important enough to appear as a marginal note in several English versions (NAS, ESV, NRSV). If this reading somehow proved original, the result would be impressive: Matthew 5 and the incident recorded in Matthew 19 and Mark 10 would turn out to cover almost exactly the same points: the man who divorces and remarries commits adultery (Mark 10:11), he causes his first wife to commit adultery (Matt. 19:9a, following the variant), and the man who marries the divorcee commits adultery (Matt. 19:9b, in most manuscripts though absent from most modern English versions).

Which of these approaches to harmonizing the passage is best? In favor of adopting the textual variant is the complete harmony that results, which, as indicated above, extends beyond the mere wording immediately at issue. Weighing very heavily against this approach, though, are at least two facts. First, no principled view of textual criticism yields a philosophical basis for accepting the variant. The reading does not appear in the Received Text, it is not found in the majority of manuscripts, and the critical philosophy discounts it as secondary due to its harmonistic nature. Harmony of interpretation among parallel passages does not generally carry weight in text-critical evaluations. The second disadvantage to this view grows out of the first. So far as I can determine, no editor of the Greek New Testament and no modern translator has adopted this variant. Can Bible readers really be expected to accept, for a key text in a high-profile debate, a reading found only in marginal notes?

But we must not draw a conclusion without evaluating the other viable options for harmonization. The narrow view of *πορνεία* fits well in Matthew 19:9; how well does it work in Matthew 5:32? We have already seen that a narrow interpretation is not impossible in Matthew 5, but we must consider whether the passage suffers at all under it. The flow of the passage’s thought outlined earlier reflects a focus, not on one’s ongoing practice of adultery, but one’s status before the Law as guilty or innocent. Reinforcing this view of the passage are the aorist

tenses used for both the man's adultery at the time of his lustful look (ἐμοίχευσεν) and the woman's at the time of her remarriage (μοιχευθῆναι). The present tense referring to the adultery of the man who marries the divorced woman (μοιχᾶται) can easily be understood as referring to simple rather than ongoing action, especially after "whoever" (cf. the earlier ποιεῖ after πᾶς ὁ ἀπολύων, which by nature cannot be an ongoing action). If this reading of the passage is correct, then the specific charge against the man who divorces his wife, except for πορνεία, is that he is responsible for her change in legal status from innocent to adulterous. And therein lies the problem with the narrow view of πορνεία in this passage. On the narrow view, a case of an adulterous wife is outside the exception clause, and the adulterous wife is therefore categorized with the innocent wife for the purpose of determining the man's responsibility for her adultery. When a man divorces an innocent wife who must then remarry, he can justly be charged with making her into an adulteress. But if he divorces due to her adultery, such a charge would seem unjust. His divorcing her did not make her into an adulteress; her own actions did. Matthew 5 seems to read much more naturally if πορνεία can be understood as referring to all manner of sexual immorality so that the distinction Jesus draws matches the major line that readers will most naturally assume: morally guilty or innocent? The narrow view forces the line instead to be drawn artificially between one form of immorality and another.

For me the decision regarding the best way to harmonize Matthew 19:9 and Matthew 5:32 is no easy matter. From an "ivory tower" perspective, I personally find the fullest conceptual coherency in these passages by accepting the variant ποιεῖ αὐτήν μοιχευθῆναι in Matthew 19:9. It has enough support to deserve respect, and I wish I could adopt it. But should one base textual choices on interpretive expediency rather than principled textual philosophy? Certainly not as a matter of course; yet the question remains whether here and there may be a passage where the preponderance of evidence warrants just such an eclectic approach. Nevertheless, I think I would prefer to err on the side of the public ministry perspective instead. I am unwilling to be a lone voice calling for what can only appear to God's people as an aberrant handling of an important passage, especially when the nature of my handling of this passage is something that I myself would strongly reject elsewhere. The case supporting the textual variant, as I currently see it, is simply not strong enough to demand such extreme action. If more evidence should arise, though, and the variant should begin to win more support among capable interpreters, I would be quick to throw in my lot with them.

Summary and Conclusion Regarding Jesus' Teaching

We return, now, to the original question. Does the Bible allow remarriage after divorce on grounds of adultery? Does Matthew 5:32 more clearly call such a remarriage adultery, so that Matthew 19:9 should be understood in conformity to it, or does Matthew 19:9 more clearly allow the remarriage, thereby dictating our understanding of Matthew 5:32? The options allowing the former approach to

stand appear to me stronger than those favoring the latter. Matthew 5:32 certainly does not stand as a strong ally to Matthew 19:9 within the argument for allowing remarriage in the case of adultery. Matthew 19:9 is left standing alone, and itself called into question on textual grounds. A fair assessment is that the case for remarriage is highly tenuous at best.

Other New Testament Teaching

What about other New Testament passages? No other New Testament passage clearly allows remarriage while a divorced spouse remains alive. Paul declares, without qualification, that “If, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress” (Rom. 7:3). In another passage he prohibits divorce but then adds, “But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband” (I Cor. 7:11). This passage seems clearly to undercut the claims of some that an allowed divorce carries an assumed permission to remarry. The one passage that might be taken to permit remarriage is where Paul says regarding a believer who is being divorced by an unbelieving spouse, “But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or sister is not under bondage in such cases” (I Cor 7:15). Some interpreters see in the words “not under bondage” a permission not only for the divorce but also for remarriage. However, nowhere in the immediate context is remarriage even under discussion; the one place in this chapter where it is explicitly mentioned it is prohibited (v. 11). One would think that if Paul had intended here a permission to remarry, after prohibiting remarriage just a few verses earlier, he would have thought it necessary to make that permission explicit. In light of verse 11, one simply cannot maintain that permission to divorce automatically implies permission to remarry.

The rest of the New Testament, then, seems clearly to support the conclusion toward which this paper inclines: remarriage after divorce on grounds of adultery is simply more adultery. Even the one passage that *might* be taken to allow remarriage, I Corinthians 7:15, deals with a case where the grounds for divorce are other than adultery.

Pastoral Considerations

It is one thing to face the question of remarriage in the theoretical sphere of exegesis and theology. It is quite another to face it in the real-life setting of pastoral counseling, fraught with the pressing realities of human needs in the face of human failures. Must a pastor really tell a young mother divorced against her will by a husband who since remarried that her children can never have an at-home father and that she herself can never again rest in the security and intimacy of marriage to a godly husband?

It is important in such heart-rending cases to remember that God is the healer of broken hearts, the father of the fatherless, and the protector of the abandoned. He is also the Sovereign of the Universe, and attempts to thwart His will never turn out well. Those who know and love Him have nothing to fear from

obedience. So the pastor's response to such situations must arise out of a well-developed Theology Proper, not his own perfectly understandable compassion. If God wills this family to go without husband and father, then to go without husband and father is truly best for them.

But *does* God always will such strict application of His standards? Jesus exonerated David from eating the showbread when David could have chosen a strict obedience in trust that God would provide for him and his men some other way.⁶ When questioned on the topic, Jesus responded in a way not quite tantamount to categorical prohibition. It is almost as if His response to the question amounts to, "I will not answer that question with a simple yes or no. I will tell you, though, that [with the one possible exception of *πορνεία*] when you separate what God has joined and then you form a new union of your own, you are committing adultery."

In response to that teaching, the God-fearing divorcee sets his or her heart on a life of singleness. But what then? God created men and women as sexual beings, and before long, that sexuality asserts itself in some form that clearly comes under the condemnation of Matthew 5:28, where Jesus equates the lust with the act. In fact, where can we find even a happily married person who is completely free from any taint of such adultery? The effect of Jesus' teaching is not so much to show us how we can be righteous in this area as to show us how unrighteous we are and therefore how desperately we need God's mercy. A child of God who finds himself or herself in a divorced state must seek God's mind about the most righteous way forward in life, not cherish illusions of perfect purity on this earth. In many cases God will no doubt provide grace to develop a pattern of resisting temptation and looking to him for emotional provision. I, for one, would like to think that this is the path to which Jesus primarily points—and perhaps even more importantly His teaching points to the importance of keeping marriages intact instead of letting them fall apart.

But might some cases involve an overall set of circumstances pointing favorably toward remarriage as the least sinful way forward? Space constraints prohibit developing plausible scenarios, but a little imagination (or experience!) will provide a few easily enough. Remarriage is no substitute for self-denial coupled with trust in God, and there is no reason to think that God would approve the remarriage of those who prioritize fleshly needs over the pursuit of such spiritual growth. But like the showbread in David's case, is God not at liberty to provide, in particular cases, in ways that run counter to His general commands? It is not clear to me that it is necessary for a pastor's rejection of remarriage to be absolute.

The question naturally arises, "If this view is scriptural, what guidelines can we find in Scripture for deciding individual cases?" The answer must be, "What guidelines *could* Scripture give?" Individual situations are far too varied to allow simple categorization. Even those who believe that the New Testament *does* provide such simple categorization are actually oversimplifying. What is the definition of an "innocent party"? Suppose a wife regularly denies her godly

⁶ A caution about this line of reasoning is in order: David's status as God's anointed may have entitled him to special consideration that the average Israelite would not have been granted.

husband's sexual advances, and he ends up the victim of a seductress in a one-time fall that he confesses. He has been trying his best to obey Scripture all along, but she refused and left him vulnerable. Does the simple fact that he committed adultery and she did not put her at liberty to divorce him and remarry while he must remain single? Such a scenario certainly violates any reasonable sense of justice. So, rather than definite guidelines, we must base our evaluation upon broader Scriptural principles and more subjective assessment of God's providential guidance.

If I understand the overall tenor of Scripture on all the issues I can think of related to this question, I find myself impressed with these values that I would want to emphasize in pastoral counseling.

1) Keep marriages together to the very greatest extent possible! Warn believers contemplating divorce that a sensitive conscience that carefully and honestly probes the totality of Scripture's teaching on marriage can never come away with undoubted liberty to fully enjoy a remarriage. On the other hand, that conscience can certainly enjoy full Scriptural liberty to forgive offenses and to pursue growth in love to God and spouse. This is not to say that there is no place for temporary separation and even divorce in cases of clear abuse of various kinds. But divorce should be absolutely the last resort. It is interesting to note that in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, Paul admonishes each spouse not to abandon the other, but he also attaches the further directive that if one does leave, he or she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled. Paul does not envision an absolute absence of divorce.

2) Divorcees should make every effort to reconcile with a spouse who has not remarried, and those not burdened with the care of children should redirect their temporal energies into various forms of service to God, as Paul upholds the ideal for the unmarried in 1 Corinthians 7:8, 32-35. They should earnestly seek God's grace and provision to maintain moral purity. It would seem wise to err on the side of self-denial by not *seeking* remarriage, while remaining open to the possibility that by some unmistakable providence God may provide that opportunity.

3) Those trying to discern whether God is directing toward a remarriage should contemplate the strong possibility of hard realities. The second spouse may turn out as bad or worse than the first. Relationships with step-relatives can prove very difficult. His or her conscience may later assert itself and condemn the remarriage as adulterous. The life of a divorcee is certainly difficult, but remarriage may well make matters, on balance, worse instead of better. They did not foresee the problems that ended the first marriage; how can they be certain that their judgment about the remarriage is sound?

In short, the wise pastor will assert himself to help keep divorce rare among his people, and remarriage rarer yet.

What does a pastor say, though, to someone who has already remarried? Scripture gives no clear direction to compound the sin by a further divorce, though a disastrous remarriage might well be terminated under the teaching of 1 Corinthians 7:11. Wise pastoral counsel to believers in this situation who love one another and wish to make the best of their lives together for the Lord will help

them to face honestly the reality of their offense against God, followed by assurance of forgiveness where honest confession is made. Adultery is among the sins for which Jesus shed His blood and secured atonement. A remarried couple who simply cannot get peace of conscience before the Lord about their situation might also consider a I Corinthians 7:11 divorce, but only after gaining assurance of conscience that they are not jumping from the frying pan of Matthew 5:32 into the fire of I Corinthians 7:9! Surely for most remarried couples the best course of action is humbly and sincerely to confess their sin, accept forgiveness, and commit themselves, by God's grace, to a pattern of life that henceforth honors the Savior.

DRAFT

Table 2
Possible Interpretations of the Exception Clause of Matthew 5:32

- Matthew 5:32: “...Whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery.”
- The rule: A divorced woman who remarries commits adultery, and the husband who divorced her is responsible.
- The exception: A case of fornication (πορνεία) relieves either the adultery of the remarriage or the divorcing husband’s responsibility for it.
- Πορνεία is capable of a variety of interpretations.
- The table shows the various possibilities for what sort of fornication would relieve which part of the rule, explaining and evaluating each.

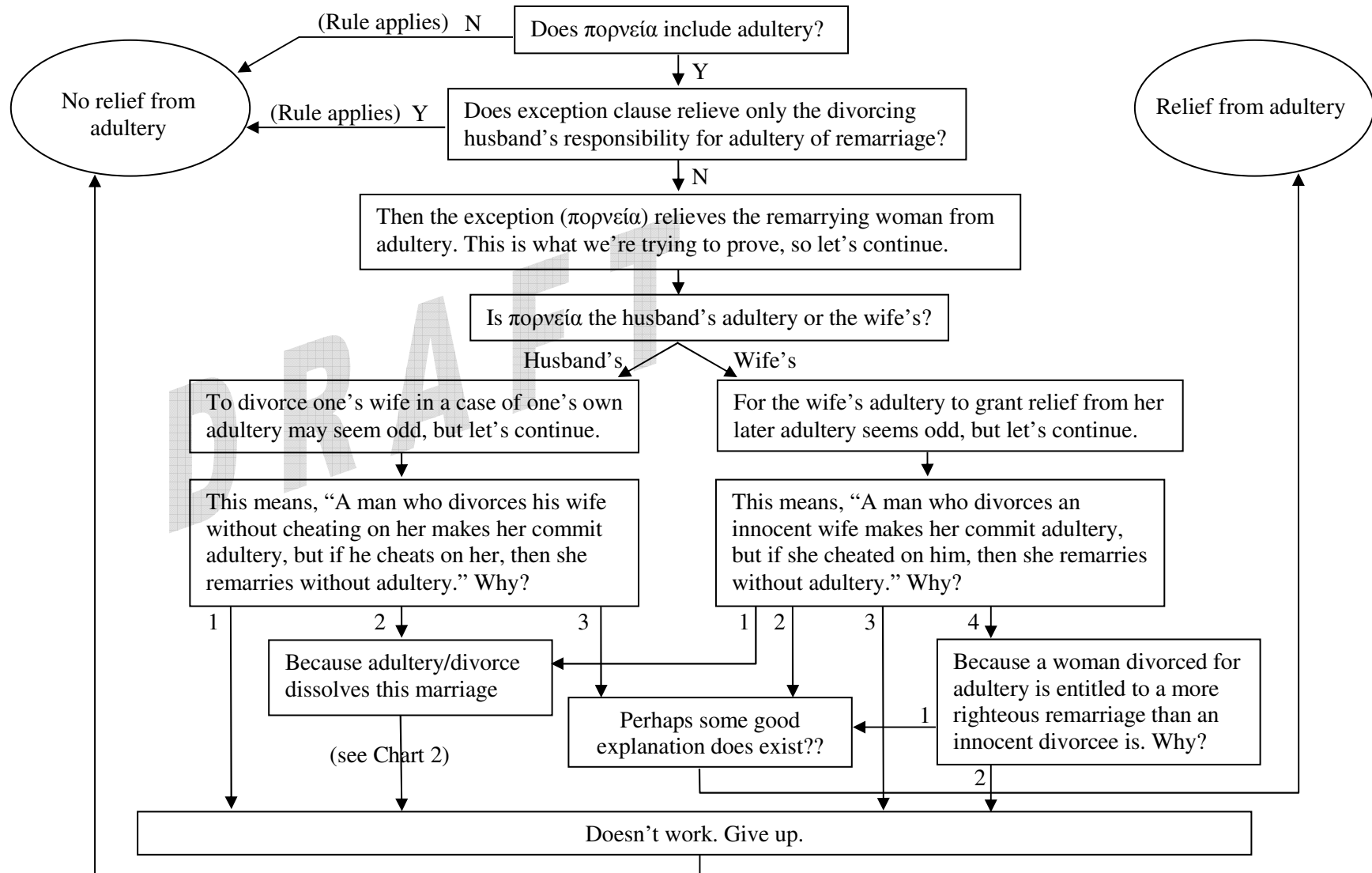
		Meaning of πορνεία					
		Not adultery			Adultery		
		Sex prior to marriage		Sex within invalid marriage	Validly married husband’s sex with other woman	Validly married wife’s sex with other man	
		Marriage not consummated	Marriage Consummated				
Nature of Relief	Remarriage not adultery	Explanation	No valid marriage existed. <u>Therefore</u> no adultery in remarriage	Valid marriage existed; God nullifies. <u>Therefore</u> no adultery in remarriage	No valid marriage existed. <u>Therefore</u> no adultery in remarriage	Adultery & divorce dissolve first marriage or husband’s guilt gives wife special entitlement. <u>Therefore</u> no adultery in <i>her</i> remarriage	Adultery & divorce dissolve first marriage. <u>Therefore</u> no adultery in remarriage
		Evaluation	Makes good sense	Why nullified? Questionable	Makes good sense	1. Unnatural reading 2. Dissolution illogical. 3. No entitlement when husband innocent; why when he is guilty? Doesn’t work	1. Dissolution illogical 2. Remarriage is adultery when both innocent; why OK when wife guilty? Doesn’t work
	Remarriage adultery but husband not responsible	Explanation	Unconsummated marriage still valid; God does not nullify <u>therefore</u> adultery—the woman’s fault	Valid marriage existed; God does not nullify <u>therefore</u> adultery—the woman’s fault	Marriage treated as valid; God does not nullify <u>therefore</u> adultery—the woman’s fault	Valid marriage not dissolved <u>therefore</u> adultery—the woman’s fault	Valid marriage not dissolved <u>therefore</u> adultery—the woman’s fault
		Evaluation	Why valid? Questionable	Makes good sense	Why treat marriage as valid? Questionable	1. Unnatural reading. 2. Why does guilty husband get relief when innocent wife does not? Doesn’t work	Makes good sense

- Summary: 1) At least one reasonable interpretation exists for each meaning of πορνεία ≠ adultery.
- 2) The only reasonable interpretation for πορνεία = adultery relieves only the divorcing husband’s responsibility, not the remarrying wife’s adultery.
- 3) Therefore, the exception clause of Matthew 5:32 makes no allowance for remarriage after divorce based on adultery.

Chart 1

Attempted Proof That the Exception Clause of Matthew 5:32 Provides Relief from Adultery in Remarriage after Divorce Based on Adultery

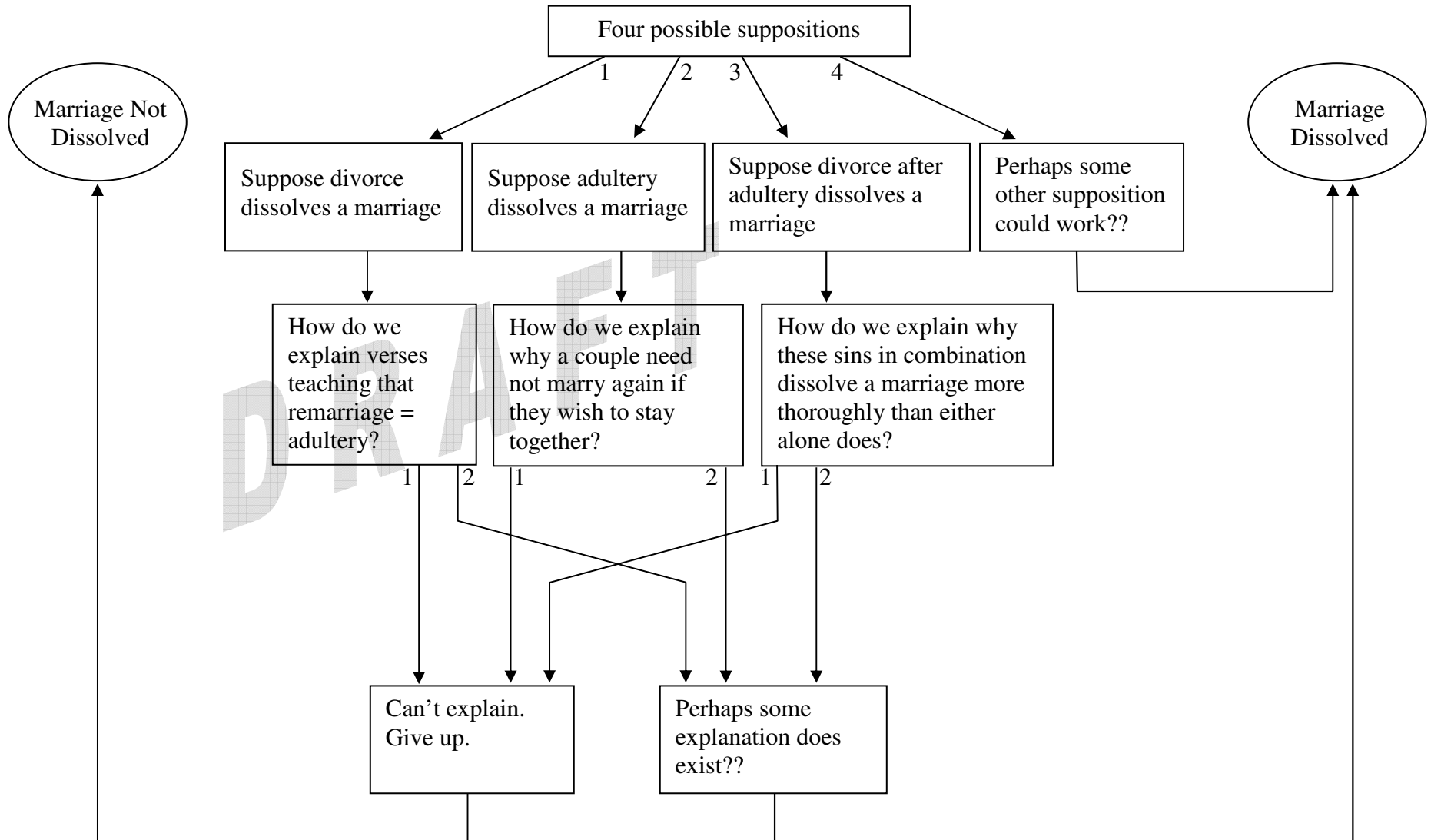
- Matthew 5:32: "...Whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery."
- The rule: 1) A divorced woman who remarries commits adultery, and 2) The husband who divorced her is responsible.
- The exception: A case of fornication (πορνεία) relieves either 1) or 2). If it relieves 1), 2) becomes moot. If it relieves only 2), then remarriage is still adultery.



- Conclusion: No explanation yet discovered allowing Matthew 5:32 to provide relief from adultery in remarriage after divorce based on adultery.

Chart 2
Attempted Proof That Adultery Dissolves a Marriage in God's Eyes

In the absence of any clear Bible statement that divorce and/or adultery dissolves a marriage, we can maintain such a view only if we can somehow square it logically with what the Bible *does* say about such matters.



Conclusion: No adequate explanation yet found allowing the view that adultery, with or without divorce, dissolves a marriage in God's eyes.