

MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE ACCORDING TO THE APOSTLE PAUL
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Introduction

Though never married, Paul's unique authority as an apostle, who wrote approximately half of the New Testament, makes his position on marriage and divorce essential to understanding the Biblical position on this topic. In order to understand Paul's position, his background must first be examined. Then Paul's high view on marriage can be examined. This will then provide the proper context for understanding Paul's view on divorce.

Paul's Background

Paul's background consists of three important factors. First, Paul lived as a citizen in the Roman empire and was consequently well acquainted with Rome's laws and practices related to marriage and divorce. Even more importantly, Paul was born into a Jewish home and was trained as a Pharisee. Therefore, Paul was extremely knowledgeable of the Jewish laws related to marriage and divorce. Most importantly, Paul was cognizant of and conversant with the teachings of Jesus. These teachings form the basis for Paul's own unique contribution to the topic of marriage and divorce. These three factors will be examined in order of their increasing relevance.

Greco-Roman World

Interestingly, the definition of marriage in the Greco-Roman

world was remarkably similar to the definition of marriage we would expect to hear in our day: "Marriage in Roman times was held to be monogamous and for life" (Hawthorne, p. 594). However, marriage was also able to be ended by the choice of either the husband or wife "if marital affection (*affectio maritalis*) ceased to exist between them" (Ibid.). In order to secure this "divorce," no legal proceedings were required, only an oral or written notification (Ibid.). Either the husband or the wife could initiate divorce in the Roman Empire (Ibid.).

Judaism

The earliest influence upon the Apostle Paul was his background in Judaism. He was born and raised in a Jewish home in which he undoubtedly received early instruction concerning Jewish beliefs. Later he studied under the Rabbi Gamaliel and subsequently became a member of the Pharisees, who were known for their strict observance of the Law.

Judaism had a high view of marriage. This is true because of Judaism's recognition of marriage as an institution established by God at creation (Ibid., p. 595). According to Genesis 2:21-25, God created one man and one woman for each other in the Garden of Eden. These two are "one flesh" (Genesis 2:24, KJV). Since the adherents to Judaism believed Genesis 1 and 2 to be faithful accounts of how everything came to exist, it is natural they would have a high view of marriage based on their interpretation of this passage.

Given Judaism's high view of marriage, it is easy to understand that divorce was considered contrary to God's original plan (Ibid.). As Jay Adams points out, "Unlike marriage, divorce is a human

institution" (Adams, p. 27). While never commanded or encouraged by God, divorce is regulated through the law of Moses in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. This statute required a "bill of divorcement" to be written and given to the wife by the husband (Deuteronomy 24:1). This was intended by God to be a protection for the divorced party: "The bill protected the one who received it from false accusations, misunderstandings, etc., and clearly set forth her status as unmarried" (Adams, p. 28). Interestingly, in this passage when divorce is permitted, remarriage is also permitted (Deuteronomy 24:2).

By the first century, some Jewish rabbis were allowing divorce for almost anything. Other Jewish rabbis only allowed divorce if there was unfaithfulness on the part of the wife (Keener, p. 59). This was the background for not only the Apostle Paul's teaching, but also the teaching of Jesus.

Teaching of Jesus

The most important influence on the Apostle Paul's view of marriage and divorce is the teaching of Jesus himself. In Paul's most developed teaching on the subject of marriage there is a constant reference made both to what Christ had taught (1 Corinthians 7:10) and what Paul has added "as an inerrant apostle" (Adams, p. 37). While asserting his authority as an apostle, Paul still does not discredit the teaching of Jesus. Instead, Paul deliberately submits to the law of Christ, even while advocating his own Holy Spirit inspired perspective.

The most extended teaching by Jesus on the topic of marriage and divorce is found in Matthew 19:3-12. This didactic opportunity came as a response to the Pharisees diabolic question: "Is it lawful

for a man to put away his wife for every cause?" (Matthew 19:3). Jesus began his answer with a reference to the Genesis account of creation. The institution of marriage is grounded in the act of the Creator Himself. After establishing this high view of marriage, Jesus (in response to another question) explains the allowance contained in the Mosaic law for divorce. Moses "permitted" (Matthew 19:8, NASB), but did not "command" (Matthew 19:7) divorce.

The context of the first question asked by the Pharisees which sparked Jesus' response is the debate between two schools among the Pharisees who debated this very question (Keener, p. 96). The Shammai, which was the predominant school in Jesus' day, argued that Deuteronomy 24:1-4 "allowed divorce only if one's spouse was unfaithful (Ibid.). The Hillel, the school whose view eventually became accepted, "said that a man could divorce his wife if she burned the toast (Ibid.). Both schools agreed, however, that when ever a divorce had been acquired, remarriage was also allowed (Ibid.). While Jesus agreed with the Shammai school which acknowledged only infidelity as the proper ground for divorce, he disagreed with both schools by asserting that any remarriage, except where divorce was the result of marital infidelity, was an act of adultery (Matthew 19:9). Thus, Jesus' standard was higher than both schools of interpretation in his day. It is this high standard which forms the basis for Paul's teaching on marriage and divorce.

The background of the apostle Paul's teaching on marriage and divorce consists of three important factors. The Greco-Roman culture of his day offers a high view of marriage, while at the same time an easily accessible system for divorce. The Judaism of Paul's day

argued for a much higher view of marriage and divorce due largely to its commitment to the historical accuracy of the creation account in Genesis 1 and 2. The teaching of Jesus with his high standard for divorce contributed the most important factor in the background of Paul's teaching on the subject. Now, Paul's view of marriage may be examined.

Paul's View of Marriage

As one might guess from the study of his background, the apostle Paul held a very high view of marriage. Although never married himself, the apostle nevertheless refers to marriage in his letters as both an illustration and application of spiritual truth. In order to establish Paul's high view of marriage, two such passages will be examined in detail. Also, the significance of the qualification of a bishop as "the husband of one wife" (1 Timothy 3:2, KJV) will be explored.

Romans 7:1-3. According to the apostle, marriage was a commitment made for life. In this passage, Paul's high view of marriage serves as an illustration of the necessity of an individual's death to allow the individual to be free from the law of God. The law concerning marriage as a lifelong commitment illustrates this concept well. "This idea of marriage was so much a part of Paul that almost without thinking he could use it as an illustration while discussing another subject altogether" (Hawthorne, p. 596). Marriage, Paul assumes in this passage, is between one man and one woman for one lifetime.

Ephesians 5:21-25. In a more familiar passage, Paul this time

shows marriage as an application of a spiritual truth. In this passage, the apostle exhorts husbands to love their wives "even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it" (Ephesians 5:25). The spiritual truth is that "Christ . . . loved the church, and gave himself for it." The application is Paul's command, "Husbands love your wives" (Ephesians 5:25).

Not only is a husband's responsibility linked to the spiritual truth of Christ's relationship to the church, the wife's responsibility is likewise linked to this same spiritual truth. In Ephesians 5:22-24, wives are commanded to "submit" to their husbands "as unto the Lord." This relationship of submission is linked directly to the church's submission to Christ. Thus, "Paul proclaims the sacredness and honorableness of marriage by boldly using the marriage bond between husband and wife as an analogy of the bond that has been forged between Christ and the believing community" (Hawthorne, p. 597).

1 Timothy 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6; and 1 Timothy 5:9. Each of these four verses contain a similar phrase. In 1 Timothy 3:2, 12 and Titus 1:6, the phrase is identical "the husband of one wife." In 1 Timothy 5:9, the phrase is inverted "the wife of one man." However, all four references contribute to understanding Paul's high view of marriage.

1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 contain the list of qualifications for bishops (pastors) and deacons. One of the requirements for both offices is that the men be "the husband of one wife." Regardless of what this phrase means (and there are multiple interpretations which are beyond the scope of this paper to explore); one thing is clear,

pastors and deacons must be men with high integrity in their marital relationship.

In 1 Timothy 5:9, a widow's qualification for being added to the list of those whose care was provided by the church is being discussed. The widow in question must have been "the wife of one man." This phrase was used in the first century to refer to "faithful and good wives" (Keener, p. 617). Again, Paul's high view of marriage is shown by the importance which he places upon marital faithfulness.

Paul's high view of marriage is evident by the way in which he used the permanence of marriage as an illustration of the importance of death to free one from the law's authority in Romans 7:1-3. The exhortation to husbands and wives in Ephesians 5:21-25 to love and submit respectively based on the relationship between Christ and the church also shows Paul's high view of marriage. Additionally, the qualification of bishops, deacons and even widows of the church to be faithful in their marital relationships demonstrates the high position which the apostle Paul recognizes marriage as holding.

Paul's View of Divorce

Paul's high view of marriage suggests that the apostle would have a corresponding strict view on divorce. Most of what the apostle says on the subject is confined to one chapter of Scripture, 1 Corinthians 7. It is from this chapter that this study will seek to determine Paul's view of divorce.

Paul follows the teaching of Jesus in regard to divorce. In verse seven, a direct reference is made to the teaching of Jesus: "Let not the wife depart from *her* husband." This mirrors the statements found in both Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 where Jesus condemns all divorce

as adultery, except that which is the result of "sexual immorality" (NKJV). "The burden of Christ's command was that the married were not to be divorced - a principle Paul summarizes from both sides of the marriage partnership - the woman is not to be separated from her husband, and the husband must not divorce his wife" (Mare, p. 57). Paul's view is clearly dependent upon the teaching of Jesus in this regard.

The apostle, however, goes beyond the teaching of Jesus by adding a second exception to the general law prohibiting divorce. Jesus prohibited divorce except when sexual immorality had occurred. Paul must contend with a new dilemma, believers who have unbelieving spouses. This was clearly not an issue before the establishment of the church. But with the rise of Christianity among the Gentiles, this situation does become an issue. The apostle is clear that he is speaking, but not Jesus. In other words, Paul is no longer referring to the explicit teaching of Jesus. "This is not a denial of inspiration or an indication that Paul is only giving his own human opinion. It is only to say that God had not given any previous revelation on the subject, but Paul was now setting it forth" (MacArthur, p. 166). Paul's new revelation is found in 1 Corinthians 7:15, "But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases." This second exception allows divorce in cases where an unbelieving spouse departs from his/her believing spouse.

This begs the question, does the Scripture allow remarriage in the two cases where divorce is permitted? Not only does the apostle Paul argue that a woman is "free" from the law of marriage when her

husband dies (Romans 7:3 and 1 Corinthians 7:39, KJV), he also encourages remarriage in the case of the younger widows in 1 Timothy 5:14. The same terminology of being bound and free found in Romans 7:1-3 and is also found in Paul's discussion of those believers from whom unbelievers have departed. The deserted believer is said to be "not under bondage in such cases" (1 Corinthians 7:15). If the widow is not only free but encouraged to remarry, is the deserted believer any less free to remarry since the same terminology is used to refer to the status of each? The teaching of both Jesus and Paul appear to be clear. Where divorce is permitted, remarriage is assumed. The terminology "not under bondage" (1 Corinthians 7:15) "alludes to the wording of Jewish divorce documents, which told the woman, 'You are free to remarry any man'" (Keener, p. 467). To be "bound" meant one was still married by law, to be "free" meant one was able to remarry legally (Ibid.). Another clue that this is Paul's meaning in 1 Corinthians 7 is the fact that a "loosed" person is classified in the same category as a virgin who has never married in verses 27 and 28. Neither person has sinned if they marry. Therefore, remarriage is permitted in three cases: death of spouse, sexual immorality by spouse, and desertion by an unbeliever.

To summarize, Paul's view of divorce is based upon Jesus' teaching on the subject. Divorce is not to be permitted except in the case of immorality. Paul, however, adds an exception: when an unbelieving spouse departs. In any case, where divorce is permitted the right to remarry is assumed. This summarizes Paul's view of divorce.

Conclusion

Paul was a man of his times and his position on marriage and divorce were influenced in three primary ways: the Greco-Roman culture, Judaism, and the teaching of Jesus. Paul's view of marriage reflected a Jewish understanding of marriage as a divine institution established at creation and Jesus' strong teaching on the topic. The apostle's own high view of marriage is seen most clearly in the way he uses marriage as both an illustration and application of spiritual truth and by the qualifications given to pastors, deacons and widows. Paul's high view of marriage corresponded with an equally stringent view of divorce. Divorce and remarriage for any reason besides sexual immorality and desertion by an unbeliever constituted a violation of God's law according to the apostle. This is marriage and divorce according to the apostle Paul.

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