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1 Corinthians 7:10–16: Divorce of the Unbeliever or Reconciliation with the Unfaithful?

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“I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries. . . . ‘Return, faithless Israel,’ declares the LORD, ‘I will frown on you no longer, for I am merciful,’ . . . Return, faithless people,” declares the LORD, “for I am your husband.” (Jer 3:8, 12, 14, NIV)

Even in the secular world, divorce is a catastrophe. About a third of the students at the state university where I teach come from broken homes, and from reading their papers and listening to their stories I know the effect of their parents’ divorce on them is often devastating, life-shattering. Yes, there are plenty who adjust well, love their new step-mothers, step-fathers, and step-siblings. Often there is relief that the shouting and fighting have stopped. But even these students would usually prefer that their natural parents would have been happy together and kept the family intact.

I’ve known women who were terribly abused by their husbands, children abused by their parents. It’s hard, after talking with these victims, to tell them they were wrong to leave an abusive situation.

I have a friend whose parents drive to church together every week, but they can’t stand each other, have as little contact with each other as possible, don’t talk to each other except when necessary. They are in their eighties and have been married sixty years. Perhaps they would be happier apart, but for them this is not an option. They’ve promised to stay together “till death do us part,” but they’ve somehow forgotten about “to love and to cherish.” Neither has committed physical adultery, but have they broken their wedding vows? Are they faithful to the oath they’ve sworn to each other?

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Sometimes people get married too young, then mature emotionally and intellectually in ways that separate them. Sometimes people seem very nice, but turn out to be monsters. I have a friend who unwittingly married a lesbian. The first he knew of it was when his new wife insisted on bringing her lover along to Hawaii on the honeymoon and made my friend sleep on the couch. He was deceived and his wife was unfaithful. The marriage was annulled, but it was a traumatic experience for him.

Is There a Loophole?

Jesus' statements on divorce have seemed crystal clear to centuries of Christians and hundreds of denominations—even though they have not always agreed on their meanings—but the marital problems cited above remain. Is there a way around Christ's uncompromising position which takes into account the real situation in the real and sinful world and offers solace and hope for the battered and unloved? Is there a loophole which might expand the grounds for divorce?

Certainly divorces are happening in the church as well as in the secular world. How should the church respond? Should those who divorce be disfellowshipped? If they sincerely repent, can they return to full membership? What about pastors? Should a divorced pastor ever be re-credentialed? What if the divorced person remarries? If this constitutes a permanent state of adultery, can we welcome into fellowship those who, according to Christ, are active and continual adulterers?

Yesterday I met a pastor who, after ten years of marriage, began an affair with a younger married woman in 1982. In 1983 his ministerial credentials were withdrawn. In 1984 he divorced his wife, and the next year, 1985, he married the woman with whom he had committed adultery. Now he has children by this second wife. He had a change of heart, however, around 1990, and began working as a lay evangelist, with great success. In 1998 his credentials were returned. Since then he has baptized over a thousand people.

Are these baptisms a sign that he has been born again, that the Holy Spirit is working through him, or is he simply a talented evangelist? Many pastors in his union are incensed that his credentials have been returned, and their dissension threatens church unity. Is there a time to forgive? Is there a time to recognize a changed life? But is this second wife really his wife, according to the Bible, or is he living in a state of continual adultery?

Some scholars think they have found a loophole in 1 Corinthians 7:10–16, in which Paul seems to allow divorce when an “unbelieving” spouse deserts the believing one, ostensibly on religious grounds. The implications of this “loophole” are unclear. Some fear it can be readily expanded to make divorce much more acceptable. Some see the changes as humane, loving, welcoming, making the church a place where the fallen can come to be lifted up.

The purpose of this paper is to explore 1 Cor 7:10–16 in the light of other biblical statements on marriage and divorce and offer an alternative reading

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which is, I think, more closely aligned with what Jesus says about divorce.¹ It is based on a sound, though unusual retranslation from the Greek text not found in any English translations, to my knowledge. I offer it to provoke thought and discussion, and it should be seen as a provisional approach, a sort of thinking things out in print.²

The Biblical Background

The Old Testament strongly condemns sexual immorality. The usual punishment is death, though in some cases the punishment is actually marriage (see, for example, Deut 22:29). In Acts 15:29, sexual immorality is specifically forbidden for Gentile Christians by the Jerusalem council. Paul states explicitly that the sexually immoral will not “inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 6:9–10; Gal 5:19–21; Eph 5:3–6; see also John’s statements in Rev 21:8, 22:14–15). So there can be no grounds for arguing that adultery or fornication is acceptable, whatever its form, even though it can be forgiven.

The most important text on divorce in the Torah is Deut 24:1–4. Richard Davidson has recently written with great insight on this passage (see his article in this issue of *JATS*, 2–21). The rabbis developed from this passage many laws about divorce, and in Jesus’ day divorce was not infrequent, if we can judge from the evidence in the Gospels. However, Jesus also explicitly states, “‘Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives’” (Matt 19:8; see also Mark 10:4–5. All quotations are from the NKJV or are my own translation, unless otherwise indicated).

¹ The biblical definition of divorce is clearly stated in the NIV translation of Jer 3:8 cited above. Divorce is the sending away or “putting away” of a spouse, ideally with a certificate of divorce (Deut 24:1–4), with the intention of a permanent severance of all physical, emotional, intellectual, or spiritual ties through the legal cancellation of the marriage vow or oath or covenant. Paul’s reference in 1 Cor 7:11 to a separation without remarriage which leaves open the possibility of reconciliation brings to mind something closer to what we would today call a “legal separation.” We may see something similar in Judg 19:1–3, where the Levite’s concubine departs from him and returns to her father’s house, and after four months the Levite, now called “her husband” (*anēr*, LXX), arrives to persuade her to return to him.

² Most of the views in this paper are in line with the new “Chapter 15: Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage,” which will appear in the new edition of the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* and was printed in *Adventist Review*, July 20–27, 2000, 47–50 [1255–1258]. That book provides explicit guidelines, which I do not. This paper provides more discussion of implications and more textual analysis. Where the book and the paper differ are that the position taken here, in line with the position held by most of the early church fathers, is that Jesus offers divorce for spouses of adulterous people but does not clearly allow remarriage—though I provide a way of reconciling Christ’s “exception clause” with Rom 7:2–3 that allows remarriage while the guilty spouse is still physically alive. Also, I argue that 1 Cor 7:10–16 is not talking about unbelieving spouses, but unfaithful spouses, and explore the implications of that. Again, I am not suggesting a change in church policy or claiming that the church policy is in error—it is perhaps more likely that I am in error—but offering some possibilities that may help us think more clearly about the issue and avoid missteps as we seek to understand God’s Word.

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Should we say, then, that Deut 24:1–4 is not available to Christians as a sanction for divorce, as it was given especially to the Israelites because of their hard hearts, and our hearts are no longer hard? Most commentators agree that Jesus' teaching transcends this Torah rule by putting in its place a higher standard. By these words Jesus eliminates the entire body of rabbinical elaborations and speculations on the passage in Deuteronomy by reminding His listeners of an earlier, edenic covenant between man and wife instituted by God.³

Or should we admit that our hearts are still hard, and therefore, we still need access to divorce? If a hard heart is a sign that the Holy Spirit is not allowed in to soften it and bring it to love, then yes, we may well argue that those who choose to divorce their spouses are usually hard-hearted (though I have known otherwise loving, gentle, Spirit-filled workers for God who also have marital problems). But in the Torah the hard-hearted died in the wilderness, and in later books they suffered from famine and warfare and were taken into captivity. Perhaps we could argue that those who divorce do so because they are already suffering, and in doing so they cause more suffering, and so suffer a penalty for hardheartedness. They don't need extra suffering sent from God to call them to awareness of their sin, because suffering is inherent in their sin. Perhaps when the church sees this happen, it should try to soften those hearts and bring them to Christ. Perhaps the Church should assume that those who divorce are at the time turned away from God, or perhaps have never been born again. When one repents and turns away from sin, that sin is forgiven, even if it is divorce and the hardness of heart that led to it.⁴

Perhaps, though, in considering what Jesus means when He says, "Moses, because of the hardness of your heart, permitted you to divorce your wives," we do best to look at it this way. Jesus is talking to the Pharisees. They assume the provision for divorce in Deut 24:1–4 is righteous in whole because it is in the Torah. Jesus explains that righteousness lies in being one in heart and body with one's spouse, as intended at the creation. Divorce is not God's intention, but is allowed to us because we are sinful, we do not love as God would have us love, our hearts are hard.⁵ (This is similar to the laws regulating slavery.

³ But what about Jesus' statement, in the Sermon on the Mount, that He "did not come to destroy" the Law or the Prophets "but to fulfill," or His warning against breaking even "one of the least of these commandments" (Matt 5:17–19)? Some have argued that for Jesus the Law and the Prophets all went to explain the Decalogue by precept and example, and that He meant thus that the Ten Commandments are eternal. (See Keith Burton's "The Decalogue as Essential Torah in Second Temple Judaism," *JATS*, 9/1–2 (1998): 310–317.) We find Jesus taking a rather lax position on several Torah laws (cf. Exod 12:11 and John 13:23 NIV, where we find Jesus reclining with His disciples as He eats the Passover, rather than eating with His sandals on and staff in His hand).

⁴ These are in fact the recommendations in the *Church Manual*: marriage counseling, loss of membership for those whose hearts have grown hard, and rebaptism and reconciliation for the repentant.

⁵ See Peter M. van Bemmelen, "Divine Accommodation in Revelation and Scripture," *JATS*, 9/1–2 (1998): 221–229.

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Slavery was not God’s plan and is not good, but rather than abolishing it at that time God chose, knowing the unwillingness of the Israelites to obey Him, knowing their hard hearts, to regulate this evil.) The “certificate of divorce” lessens the trauma of divorce, but it is still not God’s intention, and in God’s eyes this breaking of the marriage covenant leads to adultery if there is remarriage and is always sinful, except perhaps when a righteous man puts away an adulterous wife, as God divorced Israel (Jer 3:8). By this light, Jesus is revealing that divorce is the result of sin and leads to sin, is the result of suffering and leads to suffering. It is never neutral or positive or good or righteous or acceptable, but always a defeat, a tragedy.⁶

Witness of the Latter Prophets. Of immense importance to our understanding of Deut 24:1–4 is God’s commentary on it through the prophet Jeremiah. Moses specifies that if a man divorces his wife and she then remarries and is divorced again, the first man may not marry her again. No exceptions given. Cut and dried. It’s an abomination. It defiles the land. In Jer 3:1 God paraphrases this passage. In v. 6 He accuses His wife Israel of multiple adulteries. In v. 8 He says, “I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries” (NIV). According to Deut 24:1–4 and Jer 3:1, God cannot now take her back.⁷ Leviticus 21:7 forbids priests to marry prostitutes or women who have been divorced because priests are “holy to their God” (NIV). Surely, then, a holy God will not marry a divorced prostitute, even symbolically. But in vs. 12–13 He pleads for “faithless Israel” to return. “Return, faithless people,” declares the LORD, ‘for I am your husband’” (v. 14). Whatever Deut 24 may say, whatever the defilement of the land, God wants His wife back. Here is our Example.

One of the most important Old Testament texts for understanding 1 Cor 7:10–16 is Malachi 2:14–16, where God reveals that “He hates divorce” (v. 16).

. . . the LORD has been witness between you and the wife of your youth, with whom you have dealt treacherously; yet she is your companion and your wife by covenant. But did He not make them one, having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly

⁶ In his article on “Divorce” in the *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 192, R. H. Stein writes, “All exegetes agree that Jesus saw divorce as a tragedy. Any divorce denotes a failure of the divine purpose, for those God joined together in marriage should not be separated. Thus there is no so-called good divorce.”

⁷ We could perhaps argue that Israel has not remarried but only committed adultery, but recall that the penalty for fornication was death. Surely we should see this continued fornication after Israel’s divorce as at least the equivalent of remarriage, so far as the consideration of defilement and abomination goes. After all, Jer 3:1 says, “If a man divorces his wife and she leaves him and marries another man, should he return to her again? Would not the land be completely defiled? But you have lived as a prostitute with many lovers—would you now return to me?” declares the LORD” (NIV). Clearly God is equating remarriage and fornication after divorce as defilements. It is interesting to consider this verse in light of Jesus’ words to the Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar.

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offspring. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of your youth. “For the LORD God of Israel says that He hates divorce,⁸ for it covers one’s garment with violence,” says the LORD of hosts. “Therefore take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously.”

The idea here is that, as at the Creation, husband and wife are “one,” not only by covenant (i.e., vow, pledge, betrothal, marriage agreement), but by having a shared “spirit” or, in a sense, “breath.” There is a oneness which is real, even though we may use metaphor to describe it. Note that the “covenant” between man and wife is that they will be *companions*. (This of course takes us back to God’s statement in Gen 2:18 that it isn’t good for man to be alone.)⁹ Thus, unfaithfulness to the oath of betrothal is not limited to physical or even mental adultery. To stop being a companion is the equivalent of unfaithfulness to the marriage covenant. To be unfaithful to this covenant is similar to Israel, God’s bride, being unfaithful to Him (Jer 3 again, among many).

What Does Jesus Say?

Christ’s statements on divorce have been often interpreted to mean that if one spouse commits adultery, the other is free to divorce and remarry. Is that in fact what the texts say? According to the newly revised statement “Biblical Teachings on Remarriage” in the *Church Manual*,

*There is no direct teaching in Scripture regarding remarriage after divorce. However, there is a strong implication in Jesus’ words in Matthew 19:9 that would allow the remarriage of one who has remained faithful, but whose spouse has been unfaithful to the marriage vow.*¹⁰

Jesus says, in Matt 5:32,

“But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.”

⁸ The Geneva Bible (1560), adopting Calvin’s reading, translates this sentence quite differently, but in line with Deut 24:1–4: “If thou hatest her, put her away, saith the Lord God of Israel.” It gives the following gloss on the text: “Not that he doeth allowe diuorcement, but of the two fautes he sheweth, which is the lesse.” This has been considered a very difficult verse.

⁹ The great Puritan poet John Milton, author of *Paradise Lost*, in his 1644 pamphlet *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (second edition, Book I, Chapter IV), writes, “The dignity and blessing of marriage is placed rather in the mutual enjoyment of that which the wanting soul needfully seeks than of that which the plenteous body would joyfully give away.” Milton argues that in 1 Cor 7:9, “It is better to marry than to burn,” Paul speaks not of lust, but of burning with loneliness for “joining to itself in conjugal fellowship a fit conversing soul (which desire is properly called love).”

¹⁰ 48 (emphasis added). The frankness of this statement is admirable, but still it gives one pause. Should church policy be based on “a strong implication” which many commentators have found ambiguous?

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We find similar sayings in Matt 19:9, Luke 16:18, and Mark 10:11–12, but we must note that Mark adds another aspect to what Jesus says which Matthew does not have:

“Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.” (NIV)

These passages may be difficult to accept, but are they difficult to understand? No! If a man divorces his wife *because* she has committed adultery, she is of course *already* guilty of adultery. Jesus recognizes this, merely adding that if he divorces her for any *other* reason and she *remarries*, then *both* she and her new husband commit adultery. Jesus says in Mark that *whenever* there is a divorce, *any* spouse who remarries commits adultery.

Jesus is saying, in effect, that the marriage covenant ordained in Eden is a sacred agreement in the eyes of God, that the husband and wife become one flesh. Paul tells us this covenant can be broken only by death.¹¹ Therefore, if a divorced wife remarries while the first husband is still alive, both she and her new husband are guilty of adultery. The same would be the case if a woman divorced a man, Mark reveals.¹² (Later in this paper I will provide a possible rationale allowing the sin-free remarriage of those whose divorce is a result of the “exception clause.”)

This is a hard saying! I have heard women say, “Why should I do without a husband’s love for the rest of my life because I’ve had a bum of a husband who ran off with another woman?” My heart cries out for them. If I were designing marriage for a sinful world, I wouldn’t do it that way. But God knows best and I don’t, and if I made the rules, there would be catastrophe. He is holy, and He understands holiness and requires it. Holiness is so much a part of His character that He had to send His Son to die in our place, bearing our sins, including our adulteries and divorces and remarriages. He had to do this because He could not give us a dispensation to sin freely, yet He wanted sinners to be able to repent and come home to Him. It is because God cannot give us a dispensation to sin that Christ had to condemn remarriage after divorce as adultery. The rabbis had

¹¹ Paul explains in Rom 7:2–3 that the covenant is not eternal but broken by death.

¹² R. H. Stein writes, of the view that “Divorce in the Case of Unchastity Is Permitted, but Not Remarriage,” “This was the view of the majority of the early church fathers. Exegetical support is found in the placement of the exception clause in Matthew 19:9. ‘Except for unchastity’ is interpreted as modifying only the verb ‘divorces’ and not the verb ‘marries.’ Thus the text is interpreted, ‘Whoever divorces his wife except for unchastity commits adultery and the one who remarries [without exception] commits adultery.’ The purpose of the exception clause is not to permit remarriage in cases of unchastity but simply to say that in such a situation, divorce, in the sense of separation from bed and board, is not adultery. (This idea of divorce as separation only, once thought of as unknown in Judaism, may be alluded to in the Dead Sea Scrolls, for in 11Qtemple 56:17–19; 57:17–19 and CD 4:20–21 polygamy and remarriage after divorce appear to be forbidden.) Divorce is permissible in cases of unchastity, but not remarriage” (193).

seen Deut 24:1–4 as a dispensation to sin, but Jesus said no, it was because your hearts were hard.

Is Jesus Exaggerating? One of Jesus' favorite rhetorical devices is hyperbole, saying something so extreme, so exaggerated, that listeners will know He does not mean His words to be taken literally, but as signs pointing to a deeper meaning (though modern readers are not always perceptive enough to realize this). The Sermon on the Mount has several notable hyperboles. Think of Matt 5:29: "And if your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you." Are the blind immune to lust? Of course not! Jesus is using hyperbole to make a point.

Is it possible that what Jesus says about adultery is also hyperbole?¹³ It is possible, but given that He cites the creation story as the support for His saying, it seems unlikely (Matt 19:4–6; Mark 10:6–9). He seems, rather, to be explaining the implications of marriage as sacred covenant. However, it is important to bear in mind that Jesus is not presenting "the bare minimum" for salvation. He is showing people, disciples, religious leaders that, as Isaiah writes, "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (55:9).¹⁴

A Higher Standard of Holiness. In understanding Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage, on adultery and murder, on the cost of discipleship, on the difficulty of a rich man entering the kingdom of heaven, on the sheep and the goats in the last day, on giving to Caesar (bear in mind that most coins bore Caesar's image, and so belonged to him!), or any other shocking ethical teaching, it is absolutely crucial that we understand that Jesus is deliberately holding up an unreachable standard of holiness which leads us to despair of our ever reaching it by our own works. (Yes, by God's grace and the work of the Holy Spirit we may approach it, but never can we in our own right claim the holiness Christ models for us.) The Old Testament standard of holiness, on the other hand, seems at times to be somewhat lower.¹⁵ What God reveals to Job about

¹³ Milton argues for hyperbole in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, book II, chapter I. "So here he may be justly thought to have given this rigid sentence against divorce, not to cut off all remedy from a good man who finds himself consuming away in a disconsolate and unenjoyed matrimony, but to lay a bridle upon the bold abuses of those overweening rabbis; which he could not more effectually do than by a countersway of restraint curbing their wild exorbitance almost into the other extreme, as when we bow things the contrary way to make them come to their natural straightness."

¹⁴ Stein writes, "Thus Jesus, in his great concern to show that divorce destroys God's purpose in marriage and in light of the loose attitude of his audience toward divorce, expressed the will of God without exception. 'God hates divorce! All divorce is wrong!' (cf. Mal 2:16a). The very question of the Pharisees, 'When is divorce permissible?' witnesses to a decidedly wrong focus. This may at times be a legitimate question, and later Matthew and Paul would deal with that question, but in this particular instance Jesus used emotive and exaggerated language to emphasize the divine ideal and purpose in marriage" (197).

¹⁵ Look at the following texts, for example, to see where the Old Testament authors say that a person "did what was right in the sight of the LORD," despite continuing to sin or neglecting to

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the height of His knowledge of and power over the natural world (Job 38–41), Christ reveals to His listeners about the height of God’s ethical standards and righteousness. Just as Job’s response is to “abhor” himself “and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:6), we realize that “all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags” (Isa 64:6; cf. Phil 3:9–10). In the Old Testament world one could divorce one’s wife without committing adultery, or at least without realizing one was committing adultery.

Why does Jesus do this? He wants to show us that “by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified” (Gal 2:16 KJV). We think we’re righteous because we’re ten percent better than our neighbor. Jesus reveals that our neighbor is only twenty percent righteous, so we’re only thirty percent righteous. Jesus shows us what one hundred percent righteous would look like. Then He proceeds to be that for us, in our place, and call us to be like Him.

This does not mean that what Jesus teaches about marriage is wrong. Marriage is holy in God’s eyes. His plan was that husband and wife would be one flesh, one mind, one heart. God never condones divorce. How can a sinless God give us a dispensation to sin freely? He holds up the high view of marriage at which we are to aim. But He also offers forgiveness for those who repent, band-aids and hugs for those who fall and hurt themselves.

However, to say that Jesus allows divorce only for adultery is to miss what Matt 5:32 is saying. When does a divorced woman commit adultery? The mere fact of being divorced does not make her an adulteress. It is *remarriage* that makes her an adulteress and her new husband an adulterer.

Remarriage Is Adultery. One can fairly argue that according to a strict grammatical reading, Jesus is not calling divorce adultery, but remarriage. This does not mean He *approves* of divorce. The marriage vow, as instituted in Eden, requires lifelong commitment and companionship between partners. There are many ways in which a partner might be unfaithful to that vow without committing adultery either in the flesh or the heart, but when the partners are living together such unfaithfulness can be repaired, there can be reconciliation, and the covenant remains intact, though sinned against. If the partners decide they cannot get along and they separate, that too is a sin against the marriage oath, though not in itself adultery. In God’s eyes the covenant continues and can still be restored, though He grieves over their lack of companionship. However, if a partner remarries, adultery does take place, because in God’s eyes the original partners are still married. However, by that remarriage the partner not only commits adultery but cancels the original covenant, because, as Deut 24:1–4 shows, there is no longer a possibility of returning to the original partnership.

stamp out idolatry in the land: 2 Kgs 12:2–3; 14:3; 15:3–4; 15:34–35; 18:3–7 (cf. 20:14–19); 2 Chron 14:2; 16:7, 8; 20:31–33.

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Instead, a new covenant is entered into, even though it is entered into by way of sin.¹⁶

Christ is bound by the “one flesh” explanation of Gen 2:24 (He was, after all, there at the event), and He envisions no remarriage without sin, except, many scholars hold, in case of adultery. Why might remarriage be allowed when divorce follows adultery? I suspect (and I will argue that Paul reads Christ’s words the same way) that what Christ is envisioning is *porneia* followed by a breakdown of the marriage, a decision by the guilty spouse to leave, and a refusal to be reconciled. Thus, this *porneia* is not a single episode, but a persistent condition the adulterous spouse clings to, what in the Old Testament is sometimes called “rebellious sin” or “high-handed sin,” a sin that *cuts the sinner off* from God’s people. Even if the Jews since Solomon’s day rarely punished adultery by stoning the guilty parties, such “high-handed” adultery should be considered in the light of the appropriate punishment. Thus, the adulterer should be *considered dead in God’s eyes*, cut off, the contract of marriage cancelled, and the innocent spouse free to remarry without sin. As Mark points out, this prohibition of remarriage applies as well to the man whose wife has committed adultery. The verse says nothing that might lead one to think one is free to remarry, unless one assumes one’s adulterous wife has been stoned to death, in which case one could remarry, or adopts an explanation similar to the one above.¹⁷

But what if a couple *does* divorce and remarry? What should they do? Are they living in permanent adultery? Can they return to the church? Can they return to positions of responsibility and authority?¹⁸

My friend Ron du Preez has argued logically and biblically that a polygamist who wants to join the church must give up all wives but the first, because all the others are adulterous relationships. If he kept his youngest wife, he might have only one wife, yet still be living in adultery.¹⁹ I suspect du Preez would take a similar approach to this issue. By this light, the adulterous pastor men-

¹⁶ This is why the *Church Manual* is correct in prohibiting pastors from performing the marriage ceremony when one or both of those being married has been divorced without the use of the *porneia* exception clause. To do so would be to bless sin. However, the *Church Manual* is also correct to allow a couple married after divorce to be rebaptized following conversion and welcomed back into church fellowship.

¹⁷ But stoning for adultery is thought to have been very unusual in Jesus’ day. Note Matt 1:19, where Joseph decides to divorce his pregnant fiancée, breaking the contract because of adultery, rather than have Mary stoned as an adulteress. See also Prov 6:32–35; Hos 2:3, 10; Ezek 16:37–39; 23:29.

¹⁸ Again, the protocol in the *Church Manual* on these points is sound and should be followed, though even when it is there can be problems. For example, in the case of the adulterous pastor mentioned above, his credentials were returned after consultations at the top level of division administration, yet some pastors are still upset by the decision.

¹⁹ See his article “The Divine Marital Mandate: Monogamous, Heterosexual, Intrafaith,” in this issue, 23–40, and his book *Polygamy in the Bible* (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 1993).

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tioned earlier should not be returned to church membership until he has demonstrated his true repentance by giving up his second wife and living a celibate single life. His first wife remains unmarried, and so free of adultery, but on the basis of Deut 24:1–4 he cannot now return to her. While this passage may not be binding on us, surely if God calls it an abomination, we should pay attention.

Guidance from Bible Stories. Is there a possible alternative? Not if we go by the letter of the law. Are there hints we can draw from Bible stories? We find evidence in certain stories that God is merciful and forgives those who approach Him with humble and contrite hearts (Isa 66:2). We have already looked at such evidence in Jer 3.²⁰

When David commits adultery with Bathsheba and has her husband killed, God takes Bathsheba's child's life. Sin matters to God, and it is punished here in a heartbreaking way. But He does not tell David to give up Bathsheba; He

²⁰ I will argue in this paper that in 1 Cor 7:10–16 Paul is not dealing with the question of divorce from unbelievers but divorce from those who are unfaithful to their marriage covenant. 2 Cor 6:14 does forbid being yoked with unbelievers, however, as does Exod 34:16. Whether or not my thesis is right, thus, entering into marriage with unbelievers is forbidden. Some have argued that if believers do marry unbelievers, no real covenant of marriage can take place, for God has already forbidden it, so the marriage can be annulled. It is interesting to note, however, that if no marriage has taken place, then the couple are committing fornication, which was punishable by death. How odd that some are willing to admit to the sin of fornication in order to escape an unhappy marriage.

A couple months after Ezra arrived in Jerusalem, some finally came to him and revealed that a number of the people—even leaders and priests and Levites—had married local women (Ezra 9:1–2). This of course was one of the sins which led to idol worship and eventually to the Babylonian captivity (see Neh 13:23–30; Ezra 9:11–12). After Ezra recovered from his dismay and confessed the people's sins to God, the people too repented. One man said, "We have been unfaithful to our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. So now let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law" (Ezra 10:2–3 NASB). The men proceeded to divorce their unbelieving wives.

Is this an example for us? We might note that the men sinned by marrying these women, but if they continued with these women they were in great danger of also returning to idol worship. Nothing in the chapters suggests that these were not real marriages. Nowhere in these chapters did God tell them they were doing right or wrong by divorcing these wives. He had already told them to not enter into such marriages, so in doing so they sinned deliberately. In divorcing these wives they removed themselves from temptation, to some extent.

If 1 Cor 7:10–16 is talking about unbelievers, then in counseling reconciliation wherever possible is it going against the OT teaching? Is it contradicting 2 Cor 6:14, which forbids being yoked with unbelievers? Peter has written in 1 Pet 3:1–6 that believing women may by their actions help to draw their husbands to Christ, and Paul has done the same in 1 Tim 2:8–15 (see my article on these verses in this issue of *JATS*). Thus, we should see marriage with unbelievers as forbidden, but divorce of unbelievers as also a poor option, unless the unbeliever insists on leaving (whatever we make of 1 Cor 7:10–16). Certainly unbelieving spouses can lead their husbands or wives away from God, but evidently with much less certainty in Paul's day than in the days of Balaam or Ezra or Solomon.

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allows her son Solomon to take the throne; He allows Bathsheba and David to be ancestors of the Messiah. While God does not condone this adulterous marriage, He does forgive David after David sincerely repents (Ps 51:10–11; 2 Sam 12:13), even though He allows David to suffer the consequences as Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah do evil with impunity, knowing their father is no better than they. This seems highly pertinent to the case of the pastor described above. (One might argue that Bathsheba was free to marry because Uriah the Hittite was dead, but surely we would not condone murder as a way of avoiding adultery, and of course she was already an adulteress while her husband was still alive.)

By the light of 1 Tim 3:4, both Eli and Samuel should have resigned their positions because of their unruly and ill-trained sons. They both were punished for their failures, but neither was removed from office.

When Jesus meets the woman at the well in Samaria, He rightly tells her she has had five husbands and is now living with a man who is not her husband. He tells her those who worship God “must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24), but He neither commands her to marry the man she is living with nor tells her she must remain unmarried and celibate. Perhaps He assumes that having received the Living Water, the woman will now digest it and in time do the right thing. But if He tells her what that right thing may be, the text doesn’t share that with us.

With the woman taken in adultery, Jesus refuses to condemn her, despite the laws in the Torah, but He does command her to “go and sin no more” (John 8:11). There is no evidence that He then tells her what that entails. Does she stop having adulterous affairs? If she obeys, yes. Does she remain unmarried, but celibate? We don’t know.

These stories are neither conclusive, nor sound bases for doctrine. They do, however, *suggest* that perhaps a truly repentant adulterer may be restored to his church, even though married to a new spouse.

Unbelieving or Unfaithful?

We turn at last to 1 Cor 7:10–16. My thesis, if I may be so brash, is that throughout the history of English Bible translation translators have erred in translating, in this passage, the word *apistos* (in its several forms) as “unbelieving” rather than “unfaithful.” When the words are translated correctly, a new reading emerges which solves several problems and harmonizes closely with Jesus’ statements on divorce.

The Linguistic Background. First we must look briefly at the relationship between faith and faithfulness.²¹ The verb *pisteuō* occurs 241 times in the

²¹ The introduction to the entries on “Faith” in the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* includes the following sentences: “The words of the *pistis* group are derived from the same verbal stem. They denoted originally the *faithful relationship of partners in an agreement and the trustworthiness of their promises*” (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 587–588 (emphasis

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New Testament and is nearly always translated by the word “believe” or a closely related word. In most instances it could be translated “have faith” just as easily, except that it would be a wordier verb and direct object. “Believe” and “have faith” are close synonyms. In many cases “trust” could also be an acceptable translation of *pisteuō*, but in some cases it would be a bit strained. “Trust” and “believe” are also synonyms, but not as closely related as “believe” and “have faith” (though it is interesting to go through these 241 occurrences and substitute “trust” for “believe”).

The noun *pistis* occurs 243 times in the New Testament, and in nearly every case it is translated as “faith.” In the NIV it is translated by some form of the word “believe” about a dozen times, and four times as “faithfulness.” In the Septuagint, however, the Greek translation of the Old Testament frequently quoted by New Testament authors, *pistis* is the word translated “faithfulness” in the English Old Testament versions. Hebrews 11 says “By faith,” but the Old Testament says “by faithfulness.” Only twice is a word which the LXX renders *pistis* translated “faith” in the KJV Old Testament: Deut 32:20, “children in whom is no faith,” and Hab 2:4, “the just shall live by faith.” But the NASB and the NRSV both translate as “faithfulness,” in Deut 32:20, what the LXX translates as *pistis*, and the New Jerusalem Bible more accurately and consistently translates Hab 2:4 as “the upright will live through faithfulness.”²²

To bring these two together, I would say faithfulness is the *evidence* of faith. Without faithfulness there is no evidence of belief or trust. In the New Testament there are a number of verses where *pistis* might well be better translated as “faithfulness.” I would suggest this hasn’t been done for imposed theological reasons, rather than solid linguistic reasons. The New Testament writers read and quoted the Septuagint, where they would find *pistis* used in many instances where “faithfulness” is the clear meaning. It would be odd if they all decided that *pistis* would now nearly always mean “belief” rather than “faithfulness.” But this is not the place to explore the issue.

The words *apistos* and *apiston* in 1 Cor 7 are simply negative forms of the adjective *pistos*, which occurs 67 times in the New Testament. In the NIV *pistos* is translated “faithful” thirty-six times and “trustworthy” (a synonym of “faithful”) thirteen times. Various forms of “believing” occur only thirteen times.

Not Unbelieving but Unfaithful. Beyond doubt the verse “be not unequally yoked with unbelievers [*apistois*]” (2 Cor 6:14) is correctly translated.²³ I

added). In the same article, O. Michel writes, “Hence, experience of faithfulness and unfaithfulness belongs to the idea of faith from the beginning” (594).

²² This is more accurate than the KJV, but consider the blow to the Reformation if Luther had more correctly read Romans 1:17 in his Latin Bible as “the righteous shall live by faithfulness”!

²³ This verse is not speaking specifically about *marriage* to unbelievers, but it certainly offers wisdom to those considering such an alliance.

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would suggest, though, that the translation of this verse has affected the translation of *apistos* in 1 Cor 7. While “unbelieving” is certainly a *possible* translation of *apistos* in 1 Cor 7, however, there is an alternative which is, I believe, a *better* translation, as I will now seek to demonstrate. The following is my own quite literal (and so rather wooden) translation from the Greek, with some explanatory notes in brackets:

- 10 But to the married I proclaim—not I but the Lord—let a wife from her husband not be separated
- 11 (but if indeed she is separated, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband) and let a husband not leave his wife.
- 12 And to the rest I say—not the Lord—if any brother has an unfaithful wife, and she consents to live with him, let him not leave her.
- 13 And if a woman has an unfaithful husband, and he consents to live with her, let her not leave the husband.
- 14 For [it has been known to happen that] the unfaithful husband has been brought to holiness by the [forgiving] wife, and the unfaithful wife has been brought to holiness by the [forgiving] brother. Since then [if you separate] your children are unclean, but now [if you reconcile] they are holy.
- 15 But if the unfaithful one separates, let him be separated—the brother or the sister in the matter has not been enslaved [two possible readings: either, “nothing’s keeping them from going,” if it speaks of the ones who leave; or, perhaps, “they aren’t required to remain married to a spouse who insists on remaining unfaithful and leaving,” if it speaks of the ones left behind]. But God has called you to peace;
- 16 for what knowest you, wife [i.e., how do you know], but that [by reconciling] you might save your husband, or how do you know, husband, but that you might save your wife?

The phrases “not I but the Lord” and “I, not the Lord” (vs. 10, 12) have led some scholars into the error of thinking Paul is saying that some of his writing is based on revelation from God and some isn’t. They then argue that what is only from Paul is of a lower level of authority. This translation of the passage yields a very different result.

In vs. 10 and 11 Paul gives a paraphrase of Matt 19:4–9 or Mark 10:5–12 which is very loose, yet cuts to the heart of what Jesus is saying: a husband and wife are not to divorce, but if they do they are not to remarry. Whether or not Paul had access to the Gospels, he had access to this saying of Jesus, and he understood it much better than we have.²⁴ Based on that understanding, he says, “Let her not remarry.”

When he says, “I, not the Lord,” he is simply adding his commentary on the implications of what the Lord has said decades earlier. He will now explain

²⁴ See R. H. Stein’s comments on this in his article on “Divorce,” 192.

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that while adultery may be grounds for divorce, it is not *mandatory* that adultery lead to divorce. There is a better way, and it is in harmony with the teachings of Jesus on forgiveness and reconciliation. “I, not the Lord” does not indicate a lower level of inspiration, but merely a change in attribution.

Be Reconciled. Jesus has said a man may divorce an adulterous wife, but He has also said, “be reconciled with your brother” (Matt 5:24), “love your enemies” (v. 44), and “if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you” (6:14). God used Hosea’s search for and forgiveness of his prostitute-wife Gomer to reveal God’s own love for idolatrous Israel, and other prophets have sung this refrain, as well.

Paul draws on this rich heritage of forgiveness in counseling that a Christian husband or wife should forgive an unfaithful spouse, rather than seeking a divorce.²⁵ He seems to recognize that in some circumstances the adulterous affair continues or the unfaithful spouse may want to leave, even if the affair does not continue. Paul allows this separation, for marriage is a covenant, but not meant to be slavery for either party. He also recognizes that an intact family is better for the children.

Is Separation Divorce? When Jesus talks about divorce, the word used in the Greek New Testament is a form of the word *apoluo*, which literally means “to loose from,” meaning “to set free” or “to dismiss.” This was the usual word for divorce in New Testament times. However, Paul does not use this word. Instead, he uses a form of *aphiēmi*, literally “leave,” but with such synonyms as “let go,” “permit,” and “forsake”; or a form of *chōrizō*, meaning “separate,” or “put apart.” (This is the word the KJV translates as “put asunder” in Mark 10:9: “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.”) Both can arguably be seen as synonyms of divorce, even though not the usual words for divorce. However, their primary meanings of “leave” and “separate” should be kept in mind.

In v. 15, “But if the unfaithful one separates, let him be separated—the brother or the sister in the matter has not been enslaved,” the phrase “has not been enslaved,” *dedoulōtai*, makes more sense if we bear in mind that the word *apoluo*, which Paul does not use in this passage, means “to set free.” This setting free is possible because the marriage covenant is a vow before God to love, not a vow to perpetual slavery.²⁶ The sin comes less in the divorce than in the

²⁵ This is in line with the policy set forth in the *Church Manual*, even though it is not based on this reading of 1 Cor 7:10–16.

²⁶ It is true that 1 Cor 7:39 reads, “The wife is bound [*dedetai*, from *deō*, “bind,” also found in v. 27, but not the word used in v. 15] by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord” KJV. However, though that binding is the equivalent of the marriage covenant, the unbinding by *death* is not the equivalent of *divorce*. The fact that the death of the husband frees a woman to lawfully remarry does not clearly mean that after a woman is divorced by her unfaithful husband she also may then lawfully remarry. If this were so it would contradict the teaching of both Jesus and Paul. It is also true that the audiences of both Jesus and Paul would have assumed that remarriage after divorce is accept-

breaking of the covenant by ceasing to love, because the divorce comes only *after* that covenant has been broken. Divorce is a legal matter, and emphasis on divorce as the sin, rather than on the true sin being the unfaithful heart which forsakes the covenant long before there is a divorce, is legalism of a sort much loved by the Pharisees. However, again, while the word for “divorce” does not appear in the passage, Paul’s readers would understand his words to include divorce, even though they also can include a separation which is not permanent.

To understand “Since then [if you separate] your children are unclean, but now [if you reconcile] they are holy,” it helps to look again at Mal 2:14–16, where it says, of God, “He hates divorce,” and gives, as a reason for His hating divorce, “He seeks godly offspring.” “Holy” children are “godly offspring.” By forgiving the adulterous spouse and saving the marriage, it becomes more likely that the children will grow up to be “holy.” If they grow up in an “unclean” environment with a father or mother who is a social pariah, it is less likely they will ever be the “godly offspring” God seeks.

New Testament Evidence. Is “unfaithful” a recognized translation for *apistos*? Yes, it is. The *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* gives “unfaithful” or “unreliable” as meaning “b.” in its survey of classical Greek sources (6:176).²⁷ Meaning “3.b.” for the noun *pistis* in the Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich *Greek Lexicon* is “solemn promise, oath, troth.” The marriage vow, of course, fits this definition perfectly.

The authors cite 1 Tim 5:11–12, which deals with young widows: “But refuse the younger widows, for when they have begun to grow wanton against Christ, they desire to marry, having condemnation because they have cast off their first faith [*pistin*].”²⁸ Paul is not saying these young widows give up their faith in Christ by marrying. Rather, by “growing wanton against Christ” through giving up their single-minded dedication to prayer (v. 5), they give up the essence of their faithfulness to the heavenly Bridegroom.

In the LXX Old Testament, we find *apistos* as “unfaithfulness” in Prov 17:6. Sir Lancelot Charles Lee Brenton translates this verse, “Children’s children are the crown of old men; and their fathers are the glory of children. The faithful [*pistou*] has the whole world full of wealth; but the faithless [*apistou*, lit., according to the parallel, “unfaithful”] not even a farthing.”²⁹

able. However, given that Jesus and Paul specifically say it is not acceptable, the presumptions of the audience or culture are not valid arguments in favor of remarriage. Today as well most people consider remarriage after divorce to be perfectly natural, but their thinking doesn’t make it so.

²⁷ Among others, Euripides, in his play *Medea*, written centuries before Christ, refers to a husband who is faithful *pistin* to his wife (line 511).

²⁸ Bultmann refers specifically to this text as one which should be translated as “faithfulness” rather than “faith” (TDNT, 6:205).

²⁹ *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English* (n.p.: Hendrickson, [1851] 1986). Note that English versions based on the Hebrew do not have the second sentence, though it must have been in the Hebrew manuscript used by the Septuagint translators. My point is merely to establish that *apistos* can in fact be used to mean “unfaithful” in the Old Testament. Generally, the Old

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Unfaithfulness vs. *Porneia*. It is important to note that in translating *apistos* as “unfaithfulness,” I am *not* equating it with *porneia*, “fornication.” It is *porneia* that Jesus gives as a reason for divorce, not unfaithfulness. The NIV translates this, for some reason, with the euphemism “marital unfaithfulness.” Today we understand the phrase, but in the 17th century of King James it might have puzzled readers. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first clear use of the euphemism “unfaithful” for “adulterous” was in Thackeray’s novel *Vanity Fair*, published in 1848.

I do think Paul meant to include *porneia*, as used by Jesus, as *evidence* of “unfaithfulness,” but the *BAG* definition of *pistis* as “solemn promise, oath, troth” leads me to believe that in 1 Cor 7, the spouses are *unfaithful* to their *pledge of faithfulness*, whether by adultery or some other means. If Paul had meant only *porneia*—even though it is probably his primary intent—he could have used the term, but I think he meant more, and as noted, “unfaithfulness” simply wasn’t a simple synonym for fornication in Paul’s day.

A few verses away from where Jesus speaks of divorce in the Sermon on the Mount, He speaks of the commandment against adultery. He expands the commandment in a spiritual sense to include not only the action but the fantasy. I suggest that Paul is again drawing from the Sermon itself in Matthew or the sayings in his choice of *apistos* rather than *porneia*. In considering Matt 5:32, on divorce, in the light of Matt 5:28, on adultery, he is drawing from Christ’s words the idea that the heart of adultery is not the physical act, the *porneia*, but spiritual unfaithfulness to the marriage covenant. The covenant, the oath, is sacred, and if it is damaged in *any* way there is a breach which leads to misery unless there is reconciliation.

The implications of this idea are startling, indeed troubling. If a woman’s love for a boorish husband slips away and she remains with him, serves him, but without affection, she is unfaithful to her covenant to love him. If a husband’s real love is sports, his pals, or his career, he is unfaithful to his marriage oath. If a woman submits to nightly sexual intercourse but without joy, without a giving of herself, or while fantasizing about some other person, she is unfaithful. If a man abuses the wife he has promised to love, he is unfaithful. We find thus a much higher level of faithfulness required by God than merely avoiding physical adultery. I do not mean to imply that such unfaithfulness *constitutes*

Testament does not use “unfaithful” as an antonym of “faithful,” but a word such as “treachery.” This is a synonym of “unfaithfulness,” of course, but it is not a word which the LXX translates as *apistos*. Paul, much concerned with rhetorical effect, seems to use *apistos* as the antonym of *pistos* not only because it was a possible usage, but because it balanced beautifully.

Lael Caesar has pointed out to me, in an e-mail, that in Wisdom 14:25, part of the Apocrypha, *apistia* is generally understood as “unfaithfulness.” He adds that in 4 Macc 12:4, also part of the Apocrypha in the Greek versions, the Alexandrinus MS has the word *apeitheian*, “disobedience” or obstinate rejection, whereas the Vaticanus [B] and Sinaiticus [S] MSS use *apistian*, “unfaithfulness.” This suggests that several centuries after Paul’s day, obstinate rejection and unfaithfulness could be seen as synonymns.

adultery. It is, however, a sin against the marriage vow. It is not only after fornication that husband and wife may need to be reconciled.

Observe that we have gone beyond the black and white of Jesus' "except for fornication" and entered the realm of marriage counseling! Should we then see Paul as a proto-counselor, urging reconciliation—a true reconciliation based on mutual forgiveness and repentance and change? Evidently!

I find myself much moved by the way my translation reveals Paul's compassionate advice that unfaithfulness needn't lead to divorce, but should be followed by reconciliation if possible, for the sake of all involved. Is it harder to forgive your husband than to love your enemy? How can it be, when at worst they are one and the same?

Some will be saying, at this point, that what I've actually done is to present "alienation of affection" as a synonym of adultery, which means "I just don't love her anymore" is now a valid biblical reason for divorce.³⁰ Again, no, "alienation of affection" is *not* a synonym of adultery, but a synonym of unfaithfulness. Adultery is a kind of unfaithfulness which certainly can lead to "alienation of affection" and sometimes springs from it, but they are not synonyms. This unfaithfulness or "alienation of affection" is a sin against the marriage covenant which may lead to divorce, but God's desire and Paul's teaching, I believe, is that husband and wife should be reconciled. If the unfaithful spouse leaves, the one remaining is not "bound" to the person, but God's desire is reconciliation, just as He longs to be reconciled with His unfaithful people.

I suspect many divorces would never happen (indeed, as the disciples pointed out, many marriages!) were remarriage following divorce clearly presented not as a sin-free option for Christians, but as a choice which always begins with the sin of adultery.

More New Testament Support. Let's look at a few other New Testament verses where *pistos* or *piston* is translated as "faithful."

2 Tim 2:13 reads, "If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself." The KJV actually reads, "If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful," a possibility, but missing the point. I suggest that the best literal translation is, "If we are *unfaithful* [*apistoumen*], that one [Christ] remains *faithful* [*pistos*]." This reveals the parallel better: we unfaithful and He faithful. Again we are left with the need for reconciliation following unfaithfulness. My point, though, is that here *pistos*, the opposite of *apistos*, is translated as "faithful."

The relevant phrase in Heb 2:17 reads, "that He might be a merciful and faithful [*pistos*] high priest." Hebrews 3:2 speaks of Christ, "who was faithful

³⁰ G. F. Hawthorne writes, in the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), "Is it possible to extrapolate from this that other such marital travesties, although not identical to these (e.g., cruelty, desertion, physical abuse, the systematic psychological destruction of one's marriage partner, and the like), might also have been included as exceptions to the ideal had only authoritative responses to such abuses been written down and preserved by the church?" (599).

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[*piston*] to Him who appointed Him.” Hebrews 3:12 reads, “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief [*apistias*] in departing [*apostemai*] from the living God.”³¹ If *apistias* were translated “unfaithfulness” here, it would better reveal the unfaithfulness to the covenant which is at issue.

Of the word *apistias*, Bultmann writes, “This means ‘unfaithfulness’ in R. 3:3, 2 Tm. 2:13” (TDNT, 6:205). We’ve already examined the latter text. Romans 3:3 reads, “For what if some did not believe? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect?” My own translation is in line with Bultmann’s comment. “What if some were unfaithful [*ēpistēsan*]? Will their unfaithfulness [*apistia*] nullify God’s faithfulness [*pistin*]?” The balance between unfaithfulness and faithfulness here flows naturally. If the translation should actually read “did not believe” or “unbelief,” then why shouldn’t God’s “faithfulness” also be translated as “belief”? This is translation based on theology at the expense of linguistics, yet without a sound reason for it.

Conclusions

Ron du Preez would say there is no moral dilemma here, and he is essentially correct. What is right and what is wrong are clear. Jesus says don’t divorce, but if you do, don’t remarry, because you can’t do it in God’s eyes without committing adultery. Paul advises reconciliation with unfaithful spouses. These answers may be difficult to bear, but do these things and you will not have sinned. It’s that easy. No dilemmas.

The difficulty lies in what to do with those who *have* sinned, who have broken their vows of faithfulness in thought or action, in emotional unfaithfulness or the unfaithfulness of physical abuse or the more obvious sexual unfaithfulness. What to do with those who have brought suffering on themselves and their families? What to do with those who have dishonored God and His church and perhaps by that dishonor given someone another reason to say no to God’s call to salvation, refusing to join with a church full of sinners and hypocrites? What to do with those who cause dissension as they see these problems permeating the church they love?

Examples. With secret sins there can be secret repentance and secret forgiveness. If a man is led into an adulterous fantasy by something he sees, Jesus says he has become an adulterer. Would we say, then, that as an adulterer he must resign his pastoral credentials? No, we would say he must repent in secret and be forgiven. If a woman flirts with a handsome colleague, perhaps she commits adultery in her heart, and worse, perhaps she causes her colleague to lust for her, as well. Here she has led someone else into temptation and sin! Would we say that her husband can now divorce her as an adulteress? (If we take

³¹ It is interesting that in the LXX reading of the sentence in Jer 3:8, “I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce” (NIV), the Greek for “certificate of divorce” is “*biblion apostasiou*,” tying together in these two verses divorce and apostasy.

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Matt 5:28 seriously, then the answer, of course, is yes.) Or would we say she should repent, perhaps apologizing to her colleague, and seek forgiveness.

I know of a middle-aged woman who began giving a man Bible studies and ended up in his bed. For a year she continued this affair, while continuing to be active in the church. Eventually she broke off the affair and confessed her sin to her husband, and like God with His bride, there was reconciliation. No one else in the church knew of this. Then, in retaliation, the jilted lover sent copies of her love letters to everyone in the church directory. Now it was public! What to do? But the next day was the Sabbath, and the husband insisted that his wife brave it out and accompany him to church. During the testimony period he stood and thanked God for his wonderful blessings and his wonderful family. What an advocate! The church has taken no action against the woman, in light of the public reconciliation, such a powerful type of the love of Christ for His church. Was this correct?

I know of a prominent church official who committed adultery. In remorse, before anyone else knew, he confessed to his union president and resigned. His wife also forgave him, and they were reconciled. His credentials were not removed, but he was removed from administration and assigned to a dying church. That church is now bursting at the seams. This man understands forgiveness and grace firsthand. Was this solution correct?

There is a case (1 Cor 5:1–5) of Paul ordering that a conspicuous adulterer be expelled from the church until he cease his sin, which was intercourse with his step-mother (probably after his father died). If 2 Cor 2:2–7 is also talking about this man after his punishment “inflicted by the majority” (v. 6), then we do well to note v. 7: “you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow.” In 1 Cor 7, Paul’s counsel is not that unfaithful spouses be expelled, but that they be forgiven and reconciled if possible, but allowed to separate themselves and go their way if they insist. We must not accept divorce and remarriage as sin-free, yet we must also recognize that our tendency to shun those guilty of this sin often drives them away from the church and even from God and His forgiveness.

Different Sins: Divorce and Adultery. There is also an ambiguity in the parenthetical comment in 1 Cor 7:11—“(but *if* indeed she *is* separated, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband).” Some commentators believe Paul was recognizing that there were already separated couples in the church, so he was giving them extra instruction. This is probably correct. It is also possible, however, that Paul is assuming some will separate despite the Lord’s command, and so providing additional guidance—as shown above, based strictly on Christ’s own teaching: reconcile or remain single.³²

³² Hawthorne writes, “Paul, while holding to the ideal situation—“no divorce”—nevertheless concedes (as did Jesus) that it is possible that a divorce will take place in spite of any command against it. What then? Once more Paul advocates the same standard that was set forth by Jesus under similar circumstances; if divorce does take place (is permitted) then there is to be no re-

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Both Jesus and Paul take a high view of marriage as a sacred, life-long covenant. Though realizing marital discord may occur in a sinful world, neither offers remarriage as a sin-free option for believers if the spouse is alive (whether literally or symbolically following persistent *porneia* and refusal to be reconciled). If their marriage becomes bondage, they may be free of it, they may live apart, and perhaps they will be reconciled, but they may not re-enter that bondage with another without sin.

Thus, both divorce and remarriage after divorce needs to be treated as sin, but they are different sins—either the sin of unfaithfulness to the covenant or the sin of adultery. Forsaken sin can be repented of and forgiven. However, with remarriage, should it be treated as a single sin or group of sins, as a single instance of adultery followed by a new covenant to a new partner? Or should it be seen as continual sinning, continuing until those who have remarried separate? Bear in mind that if it is continual and cherished sinning, then so long as it continues this couple cannot fully surrender to the Holy Spirit and so cannot be born again. Thus, they stand outside of salvation and should not be baptized or admitted to church membership. Likewise, as evidence of this state, we will not find in them a burning desire to serve God and bring the lost to Christ. Is this in fact the case? Do we ever find the divorced and remarried filled with the Spirit? In fact, sometimes we do!

Perhaps we can find in the compassion of Christ and in the stories cited above sufficient license to welcome home the divorced and remarried and work with them, bringing them back to fellowship with church and Saviour. I'm not comfortable with basing *doctrine* on stories, hints, and hopes. Perhaps, though, these might be adequate as guides to *policy*.

Learning from Suzereignty Covenants. We might do well to consider the nature of a contract or covenant, especially the sacred covenant of marriage. Explicit in the marriage covenant is a term limit: “till death do us part.” When a man dies, leaving his wife a widow, he has not broken his covenant with her, but successfully fulfilled it and concluded it. This entails no sin for either party. Thus, the widow can remarry without sin.

If in Old Testament times a vassal was unfaithful in his heart to his suzerain without being discovered, he could return quietly to faithfulness. If he were discovered, he might have to pay a penalty. If his unfaithfulness were common knowledge, that penalty might be severe, lest other vassals be encouraged to rebel. But if both parties decided they wanted the covenant to continue, even though one had been unfaithful to it, then it remained in effect. This was the

marriage (so as to avoid committing adultery, cf. Mk 10:11–12; Mt 5:31; 19:9; Lk 16:18). The divorced person must remain unmarried. And if this state of affairs cannot be endured, then the apostolic authoritative command is for the parties to be reconciled, she to her husband and he to his wife (1 Cor 7:11). This then is the goal for marriage set out by Jesus (preserved for us in Mark's Gospel) and toward which Paul emphatically encouraged all Christians to strive: No divorce, but if divorce occurs, then no remarriage to a different partner” (598).

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situation between God and Abraham. Abraham was unfaithful to the covenant in his dealings with Hagar, Pharaoh, and Abimelech, but he reaffirmed his desire to continue in the covenant by his obedience in offering up his son, Isaac.³³ Israel was repeatedly unfaithful to the covenant and paid a steep price for that disobedience, but the covenant remained for them because God was faithful. However, it was certainly possible for vassals or suzerains to renounce or break or sever the covenant between them. Perhaps sometimes this was done peaceably. Often, however, it led to war.

Similarly, if a man is unfaithful to his marriage covenant in his heart through committing adultery by lustful fantasies, the covenant continues. It is not broken or dissolved. But he has been unfaithful to it. If he repents and returns to faithfulness, the covenant continues. If a man is physically unfaithful with another person, the covenant may also continue, but reconciliation is required, and there may be great pain involved. The covenant is not broken in that it is severed or revoked, but it is greatly sinned against.

The nature of the marriage covenant is "till death." If a husband and wife separate without remarrying, whether or not this is called divorce, in effect the covenant continues, even if not in spirit, for they may reconcile. If there is remarriage, however, the previous covenant is completely severed because a superceding covenant has been made with another, and this severing is also adultery, as Jesus says.

However, if a vassal severed a covenant with one suzerain by forming a covenant with another, did the first covenant continue? No, for "no man can serve two masters." Generally, it was the secret forming and implementing of a new alliance that *constituted* the severance of the old covenant, rather than a notice of intent served to the suzerain.

By analogy, remarriage constitutes a single act of unfaithfulness combined with a final severing of ties, rather than the beginning of a state of continual adultery. One stops being unfaithful to one and begins being faithful to another.

Jesus could not recommend or condone adultery, and neither could Paul, for adultery is sin. Thus, neither can the church, nor can we. But they could forgive those who were repentant, and so should we. Hard hearts can be softened. Mistakes can be patched up, though not without pain and suffering. We long for a land where all will be faithful forever. Until then, may we make all possible efforts toward reconciliation.

³³ See Angel Manuel Rodriguez, "The Ultimate Test," *Adventist Review*, 11 March 1999: 16 [312].