

Marriage, Divorce, and Building a Biblical Theology

Commentary by

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Introduction

Genesis 1:1, **In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.** As the story of creation continues to unfold in Genesis, God proclaims everything that He creates as good except for one thing. God said that for man to be alone was not good, so he created woman. Immediately after this, God establishes the relationship he intends for men and women when He says, *"Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh."* (Genesis 2:24) This God-ordained relationship is taught by Jesus in Matthew 19:5-6, and in Mark 10:4-6. It is the normal relationship between a man and a woman which, in the English language, we call marriage.

Marriage is a gift God gave to enrich the lives of men and women. To a Christian, a marriage ceremony is considered a holy and solemn occasion. Historically, however, marriage existed for centuries before Christianity, and was not considered to be a religious function or a church ceremony. The Greek and Roman cultures considered marriage a family affair often arranged by the fathers of the families involved. One of the primary functions of these arranged marriages was to ensure the continuation of families and clans by providing for the orderly transfer of land and other assets to future generations. Marriages were also arranged to help keep the peace between two rival clans or even nations, assuming that families would be less likely to go to war against their own offspring.

Although people were free to incorporate religious rites into the ceremony, no religious component was required and no religious leader

was required to officiate. As long as the parties consented (first the fathers, then, in later years, the bride and groom) the marriage ceremony was generally considered valid, regardless of the exact marriage customs employed, and even this consent was not considered binding for life. The early church, and society in general, accepted as valid the marriages undertaken under the laws and customs of the various peoples they encountered. Later, as the Roman government began to exert more central control over its empire, it passed various laws concerning marriage for Roman citizens. Divorce was generally permitted without any particular rules or conditions and was achieved by a simple withdrawal from each other by the parties. No written contract of marriage was required, and often, no verbal words of contract were included. It was not until around the sixth century that rules governing marriage began to be common, primarily because of disputed claims to the wealth, property and titles of the aristocratic families of Europe.

This acknowledgement of whatever ceremony and/or agreement the parties chose for their marriage was accepted by the church for well over one thousand years. By around the 12th century, bishops in various areas began to try and get secular weddings to include a blessing by a priest and be held in or near church grounds; but, up until The Council of Trent in the 16th century, no requirement for a religious component nor participation by a priest was required for a marriage to be valid. The decrees of The Council of Trent were, in large part, a reaction to the views of the Reformationists. The reformers felt that the church had begun to insert itself too much into the issue of marriage, particularly as it related to the increasing number of marriages being nullified, when the party seeking it was rich and influential. The Reformationists wanted marriage returned to the status of a secular, legal and moral issue, as it had been during biblical times. Conversely, the Catholic church began to insist even more strongly that both marriage and divorce were officially under the control of the church.

Although the notion that the church has the right to say, "*You are not married until and unless we say you are; and, you are not divorced until and unless we say you are*" had its roots in Catholic doctrine, it is a position that has been employed in our day by Protestant churches as well. Often it is justified by some variation of the phrase, "in the eyes of God" you are not really married, or divorced, or, etc. The truth is, no mere men, in the church or otherwise, have the right to legislate away what God has graciously given to His creation from the beginning.

In this article, we will explore some ways that one might use to develop a biblical doctrine on a sensitive issue, like marriage and divorce, while trying to avoid falling into the common trap of inadvertently substituting the teachings of men, no matter how honest and well-meaning, for the revealed word of God. It is believed that the following principles can assist a serious student in formulating a biblical doctrine on virtually any subject. After introducing the suggested principles, this article will seek to illustrate how they can be applied to the issue of marriage and divorce in the bible.

Part One: Starting Points for Developing a Biblical Doctrine

I. Go to the Scriptures as if studying this topic, subject, or issue, for the very first time.

II. See if God has spoken directly on the subject; God knows His creation better than we do.

III. See if Jesus has spoken directly on the subject; Jesus knows the will of The Father.

IV. See if the writings of the apostles include examples of how to apply these biblical truths.

V. Avoid unscriptural terminology or categories to describe people and/or relationships.

VI. The doctrine of God starts and ends with grace and forgiveness. (Make sure yours does, too!)

Part Two: Applying these principles to Marriage and Divorce

I. Go to the Scriptures as if studying this topic, subject, or issue, for the very first time.

A. Put yourself in the place of a student who has never heard teaching on this subject.

B. Using a standard translation with a bible concordance, or other reference helps, use key words to try and identify all the scriptures on the topic and then read them.

C. Remember: It is difficult, if not impossible, to learn anything new from God's word if we have already decided what a passage of scripture means before we have studied it in context.

D. The bible is full of examples of people who did not accept the message of Jesus because it was different from what their beloved and respected teachers had taught them previously.

E. All over the world, as we try and take the gospel of Jesus Christ to people, we ask them to be reconciled to God. In doing so, we are often asking them to change their lives drastically, giving up many of their long held beliefs and practices. How can we ethically and reasonably ask this of other people, unless we demonstrate that we are willing to change any doctrine or position that we have held, if it is shown to be contrary to scripture.

F. It is often a hard thing for educated, successful adults to admit having been wrong and to accept that they must change their long established opinions or views on an important topic. What we know (or think we know) can become such a part of our self-image that we may fight to defend our doctrinal positions as if we were under personal attack. This is especially true of those of us who teach because we think of all those we may have inadvertently mislead in the past.

G. Obviously, a teacher needs a degree of confidence in the material he presents and the positions he advocates. Nevertheless, for a true student of the scriptures, openness is not an option. The teacher should present his current understanding of the scriptures based on his own diligent study. This study is never really finished. If continued study leads the teacher to a clearer or different understanding of the text, he should give his students the benefit of that changed perspective. Proof-texting, or coming to the scriptures only to find support for what we have already decided, is a relic of the past which must be discarded. Always ask yourself: *If I had never heard of this doctrine before, would scripture lead me to this conclusion?* The word of God still speaks, let us all have ears to hear.

II. See if God has spoken directly on the subject; God knows His creation better than we do.

As the story of creation unfolds in Genesis, we see God pronouncing His creation good except for one thing. In Genesis 2:18 The Lord God declared that it was not good for man to be alone. After determining that nothing else He had created was a suitable companion for man, God created woman. He then created the marriage relationship by declaring in 2:24,

*For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother
and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.*

Chapter 1, verse 27, tells us that God made man and woman, male and female, that is, sexual. God looked at what He had created and pronounced it "very good." Men and women were, quite literally, made for each other. The sexual nature that God created in men and women was to find its expression in God's gift of marriage.

Unfortunately, man soon began to misuse God's gracious gifts, including marriage. Divorce or "putting away" one's wife had become a common practice by the time Moses delivers his sermons on the law, in the plains of Moab, to all of Israel. These instructions from God are recorded in the book of **Deuteronomy**. In chapter **24:1-4**, we see that when a man writes his wife a bill of divorcement and sends her away, if she marries another, her previous husband cannot take her again to be his wife, even if she is divorced from her subsequent husband, or even if she is widowed. This restriction against a former husband interfering with the life of a wife he has divorced shows us at least three things: 1) the bill of divorcement does end the marriage; 2) the man who divorces his wife has no future claim or rights over her, and 3) the wife's subsequent marriage is now the relationship God protects against interference.

Marriage is good. God created it and it is his will for man. Divorce is the problem.

*For I hate divorce, says the Lord the God of Israel,
and covering one's garment with violence. Malachi 2:16*

So far then, our doctrine of marriage and divorce should include: 1) It is not good for man to be alone. Men and women were created to be together. 2) Marriage is good: Divorce is bad. Divorce frustrates God's will for us and He hates it.

III. See if Jesus has spoken directly on the subject; Jesus knows the will of The Father.

A. Matthew and Mark (*see previous lesson: "Concerning Marriage and Divorce," which discusses several scriptural references in more detail*) record that, after hearing Jesus' teachings on the importance of honoring marriage, the Pharisees, who were hoping to trap Jesus, seemed shocked that Jesus' answers ignored the long-standing debate between the two great rabbinic schools as to the proper grounds for divorce, and instead, directed them back to Genesis where God created marriage and graciously gave it to men and women to enjoy as a life-long relationship.

B. Jesus' own disciples, hearing Jesus speak about the permanency of commitment God intended for marriage, suggested that celibacy (being alone) would be better for a man. Jesus replied that celibacy would not work for people because that is not how God created them (God made them male and female, i.e., sexual). Jesus said that only those with the gift of celibacy could attempt to live alone, and that, since most people did not have it, it should not be thought of as the solution to problems with marriage.

C. Ironically, in the teachings of men, celibacy has been traditionally required of those who have sinned against their marriage by divorce. Of course, one who has already been married probably does not have the gift of celibacy, but traditional teaching ignores this completely and advises (or even requires) celibacy and singleness for the divorced. The fact that Jesus told his disciples such a plan would not work, for most people, has not seemed to matter to many Christian teachers and counselors.

IV. See if the writings of the apostles include examples of how to apply biblical truths.

A. The apostle Paul, in First Corinthians, chapter seven, addresses several issues related to marriage and divorce (see previous lesson: "Concerning Marriage and Divorce," which discusses several scriptural references in more detail). Since Paul's letters are real, written correspondence, they often provide answers to questions which the Christians have asked. Since they already know what they have asked, Paul often does not devote a lot of time in his epistles to restating the questions, but rather proceeds to provide his answers. Since we are, in effect, reading someone else's mail, we are sort of like a person hearing one side of a telephone conversation. We often need to try and figure out, as best we can from Paul's answer, what the question was, before we can properly apply the teaching to our own situation.

B. In First Corinthians, after discussing the sin of sexual immorality at the end of chapter 6, Paul begins chapter 7 by addressing a question seemingly about celibacy versus marriage which was apparently very similar to the one asked of Jesus by his disciples (Matthew 19:10). Paul replies that it is perfectly acceptable for a man who is able to do so, to live celibate (*not to touch a woman*); but, since sexual immorality is likely to result from widespread attempts to remain unmarried (and thus, celibate) Paul issues the general rule (using the imperative in Greek, which is the structure for giving a command) that each man is to have his own wife and each woman is to have her own husband (7:2) and they are to fulfill their marital duties to each other (7:3). Paul says that this marital duty comes from the fact that married persons have surrendered their own bodies, each to the other (7:4). Paul then makes the somewhat surprising statement that this physical husband-wife relationship is so vital to people's ability to avoid Satan's temptations that it is not to be discontinued, even to devote yourselves to prayer, unless both parties have agreed in advance, and even then, only if they keep the separation short and come back together quickly (7:5). Furthermore, so that the Corinthians

do not think Paul is advising them to practice such separations, Paul says that this part is not a command, but merely a concession to those couples who both want to do so, as long as they can keep it short and then get back together quickly (7:6).

C. It is hard to imagine what more it would take for men to abandon celibacy as a teaching than the rejection of it by both Jesus and Paul, who, although they apparently had the gift and were not married* knew that this was not the answer for most people, and plainly said so.

NOTE: If Acts 26:10 means that Saul/Paul was a voting member of the Sanhedrin (rather than just their main enforcer) then he was married at some time in the past, but was unmarried, possibly widowed, by the time he wrote I Corinthians.

D. Paul said that he wished all men had the gift, like he did; but, for whatever reason, God chose that it be otherwise (7:7). He wrote that it is fine for the "unmarried" (v.11 shows that this term includes the divorced) and the widows to remain like Paul (single and celibate) but that if they are not able to exercise this kind of self control (do not have the gift) then they are to get married (imperative – command form). Paul tells the married that the Lord says that they are to stay together; and, if they have already separated, they are to reconcile (7:10-11).

E. In 7:12-16, Paul says *"to the rest"* (apparently he is now going to talk about marriages where only one party is a believer; if so, then the previous instructions may have been for situations where all parties were Christians) that although he does not have a direct word from the Lord on the matter, Paul directs believers not to leave their unbelieving spouses who want to stay together, because their union is still holy. However, if the unbeliever (a person who will not subject himself to instruction by God anyway) leaves the believer, Paul tells the abandoned spouse that he or she is not enslaved (no longer owes the marital duty) in such a case, because

God has called people to a life of peace. (This seems to imply that the unbeliever has chosen to leave because the spouse has become a Christian; God will not allow His gift of marriage to be used as a weapon to punish people who come to faith after they have married).

F. Paul re-emphasizes that it is God who determines which gifts each person is given, and we must live accordingly and be thankful. Thus, it serves no useful purpose to try and appropriate celibacy or any other gift for yourself (7:17). *Note: See I Corinthians, chapters 12–14 for a fuller discussion of the problems which come from men's attempts to live as if they have a gift which God did not choose to give them.*

G. Because of something he calls "the present distress" Paul says that, although he has no direct command from the Lord on the matter, it is Paul's judgment that those who have not yet been married would be better off to stay as they are (7:25-26). Our ability to know exactly what distress Paul is referring to, will, of necessity, limit our ability to know if and when we are in a similar enough situation to give anyone the same advice. Whatever the "distress" was, it is clear from the first part of the chapter that Paul knows that marriage is the normal relationship created by God for men and women. Paul's advice to the never married, then, relates to something temporarily "present" in Corinth at that time, and should not, in any way, be regarded as teaching that the single life is to be preferred for a Christian.

H. Paul goes on to say that the preferred response for the Corinthians to this "present distress" would be for everyone to try and avoid major life changing decisions while under such stress. *(This good advice is virtually a standard used, up until this very day, by counseling professionals all over the world).*

I. Paul says, my advice is, if you are married, do not seek a divorce; if you are divorced, do not go out looking for a wife (7:27).

J. Paul continues, if you do get married again anyway, you have not sinned; and, if you marry a girl who has never been married, she has not sinned either. I am just hoping to spare you from the trouble which you will have, given this present situation (7:28 – 35).

K. But, if any man decides that, in his case, the circumstances are such that it would not be proper to deny marriage to a certain woman (regardless of the present distress) Paul says that the man should do what he feels is right, and marry her (7:36).

L. On the other hand, if the circumstances are such that there is nothing pressing that might require an immediate marriage, Paul suggests that they do not marry at this time (7:37).

M. So, Paul summarizes, the man who decides, for good reason, to marry now, does well, but the man who decides, for good reason, to wait, for now, will do better (7:38).

N. Paul ends by saying, in my opinion, as one who thinks he has the spirit of God: A widow is always free to marry, "only in the Lord" (*only to another Christian?*) but right now, she would be better off to remain as she is (7:39 – 40).

V. Avoid unscriptural terminology or categories to describe people and/or relationships.

A. The use of such terminology is often a fairly good indication that we may be relying on the teachings of men. Often, we may have assimilated these teachings over time, to the point that we

may not even be aware of how or when we first encountered the terms.

B. In discussing the doctrine of marriage and divorce there are several terms which are often used without giving them much thought.

1. "*Remarried*" or "*remarriage*." These unscriptural terms are often used negatively to describe a married person, or a marriage which is not the party's first.

2. "*Still married in the eyes of God*" or "*Not really married in the eyes of God*". Unscriptural phrases like these are often used to imply some special understanding on our part of the mind of God, such that we can substitute some men's requirements, for what the scriptures actually say about people who have been previously divorced.

3. "*Living in sin*" This is a hurtful term used by some men to describe God's gift of marriage, in cases where such men are not satisfied with events surrounding a previous marriage of one or both of the parties. The scriptures warn men against treating God's gracious gifts with contempt, or trying to prevent men from receiving them.

4. Substituting "doing penance" (something we can judge) with biblical "repentance" (a matter of the heart, which only God can judge). Note: Non-Catholic groups would probably not actually call it "doing penance" but rather, "making up for what you have done," or something similar.

5. In general, men have misapplied their own logic to this issue and have, in effect, taught that if something should not be done, then it is impossible to do it. In other words, it

would be like saying, *Divorce without proper grounds is a sin, thus, it cannot be done; therefore, God acts like it never happened. Since God does not recognize it, the divorce never happened and the parties are still married to each other. As a result, God will not recognize any attempt by either or both of them to marry another person.*

This is a fundamental error of logic which men would never accept in normal, everyday life. Just because something cannot be done without sin, does not mean that it cannot be done at all. If that were true, none of us could do anything which involved a sin on our part. The scriptures do not support this notion. The Apostle John says, **If we say we do not sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us.** This amounts to calling God a liar. (**I John 1:8-10**). This would also mean that we are accepted or rejected by God based on our own performance, and so, Christ died for nothing. **Galatians 2:21.**

VI. The doctrine of God starts and ends with grace and forgiveness. (Make sure yours does, too!)

A. Never confuse repentance (sorrow for sin and a change of heart) with doing penance (performing tasks to make atonement for your sins). If we could make up for our sins, the death of Christ was unnecessary. It is at worst, an insult to God (**Galatians 2:21**) and at best, alienation from Christ, and a falling away from grace (**Galatians 5:4**). We can never "fix" the sins we have committed; what we can do is repent and strive not to do them in the future.

B. In the Gospel according to Luke, chapter 15, in the parable we have called, The Prodigal Son (but which would be better called, The Waiting Father) Jesus gives a wonderful example of the difference between God's attitude toward sinners, and the attitude that some Christians often take.

In this parable, Jesus said that a certain father had two sons. The youngest son demanded his inheritance and then took all of the things the father gave him and wasted them on sinful living. When he finally "came to himself" he was hungry, homeless and destitute. He wanted to go back to the father, but he knew that he had nothing to bring to the father to try and make up for what he had done. All the son knew to try was to offer to forever give up his former place in the family, and become a second class member of the household: no longer a son, but only a servant to those who were still worthy to be in the real family.

Apparently, this seems like a fair and reasonable solution to many Christians. After all, having wasted his share of the father's inheritance, why should the younger son be entitled to get any more from the father? All that the father has left to give should be given only to the good son shouldn't it, the older brother who had not sinned like the father's younger son?

Surprisingly (to us) Jesus said that the father would not even consider such an arrangement. Apparently, ever since the younger son had left him, the father had spent his time looking down the road, waiting for the chance to have his child back with the family, so that the father could get back to blessing his life. This was unbelievably wonderful for the younger son -- he was not going to get what he deserved (Grace is often dismissed as being too easy on people). The father demonstrated, in no uncertain terms, that the younger son was not going to be living a second class life with new rules and conditions for his participation in the family. He was forgiven by the father before he could even get the words of repentance out, and was restored to the family with great rejoicing and celebration, all based on the father's love and mercy. But there was a problem with all this grace and forgiveness being handed out to this younger son who had sinned – not from the father who gave the blessing, but from the "good" older brother who found out what the father had done. The older brother was angry and would not go in to receive his brother back, even after the father entreated him to do so.

The older brother felt that it was an insult to him, for the father to bring this sinner of a brother back into the family on an equal footing with one (himself) who had never sinned against the father like "this son of yours" (he wasn't about to call him "my brother" after what he had done). The "good" older brother went on to tell the father that he had never been properly appreciated for staying home, working, and doing what was right, while the younger son went out and sinned. The father replied to his older son by saying: Son, everything I have is yours, and it has been ever since you have been with me. (How could this be – what about everything the younger son took away and spent?) The father went on to say that it is always appropriate to rejoice and celebrate, when one who was lost to us, is found; it is as if your brother was dead, and now he is alive again.

Can this be right? How could everything still belong to the "good" son when so much has already been wasted on the brother who sinned? It is we humans who, when someone else gets something, often feel as if: either we should have gotten it instead; or, at the very least, we are somehow lessened because someone else was rewarded. Sometimes it seems like it is much easier to "weep with those who weep" than to "rejoice with those who rejoice." God the Father's riches are not limited like the estate of a rich relative, where all the heirs are competing against each other. God's unlimited grace and infinite mercy can shower each of us with everything we need – and it has no relation to what we deserve (**Titus 3:3-7**).

Conclusion

Using the foregoing six principles should assist you in developing a biblical doctrine on virtually any subject found in the revealed word of God. Just as some things about the Christian walk cannot be fully understood until a person has spent time trying to live it out in his own life, some things in God's word seem to be fully revealed only to those who want to do God's will, not just know what it is. Jesus said, "**If**

anyone is willing to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God, or whether I am just speaking for my own purposes.(John 7:17). I pray that God may guide and encourage you as you strive to be both student and disciple.

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