

WHAT IS THE REFORMED DOCTRINE OF DIVORCE?

Even the most cursory examination of the statistics concerning divorce in America reveals figures that are nothing short of staggering. In the 60 years between 1920 and 1980 the divorce rate more than tripled. The United States now has the highest divorce rate in the world and at least half of all U.S. marriages will end in divorce. About half of those divorces will involve children, for a total over one million children experiencing the divorce or separation of their parents yearly.¹

What these figures should tell us is that America has become what one author has called a “Divorce Culture,” and as such we can expect divorce to continue to impact every part of our society, including the church. In light of this situation it is imperative that Reformed churches have a coherent policy regarding divorce that accurately reflects the teaching of Scripture. Today most states have passed legislation that allows for what is called a “no fault divorce.” As the name implies, this is a divorce in which neither party is judged to be at fault and the reasons are usually ones of emotional incompatibility, or “irreconcilable differences.” In this kind of divorce neither party must prove that the other has broken the marriage covenant by some act of sin, only that they no longer wish to be married to the other person. Is this a valid divorce by biblical standards? The purpose of this essay is to answer this kind of question by briefly examining the scriptural evidence and the historic Reformed consensus on this issue in an attempt to frame a “doctrine of divorce”.

Reformed theologians have long realized that the general thrust of the teaching of the Bible is against divorce, God himself does not mince words on the subject when in Malachi 2:16 he declares “I hate divorce”. This stems from the fact that marriage in the Bible is intended to be an inviolable covenant bond between one man and one woman for life. Genesis 2:24 frames the creation ordinance of marriage in the following terms “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.” There is no indication that this marriage bond was ever intended to be severed in life and there is every reason to believe that had man continued in an unfallen condition, divorce would never have entered into the world. But as the Bible makes clear, the fall occurred and since that time man’s entire nature is now thoroughly corrupted by sin. Because of this, the Bible makes provision for, and regulates divorce. As Jay Adams puts it, “the concept of divorce is Biblical”². But before we move on to consider how God regulates divorce in his word, we need to consider the fundamental difference between marriage and divorce. Marriage is a creation ordinance and a blessing from God. God declared in Genesis 2:18 that “It is not good for the man to be alone” and therefore he gave man the gift of marriage to correct the situation, that he might continue to declare of his creation that it was “very good” (Gen. 1:31). Divorce, on the other hand, postdates the fall and stems from the hardness of men’s hearts. Nowhere in the Bible is divorce spoken of as a positive institution, although as Adams points out, the Bible does not “always, under all circumstances, for everyone, condemn divorce.”³ But while we can recognize that there are situations in which divorce is *permissible*, we can also see that it is never an unmitigated good. God hates each and every divorce -- and that includes his own divorce of his own sinful people Israel in the Old Testament (cf. Jeremiah 3:8)

In looking for advice therefore on handling this occasionally necessary evil, we should be carefully advised on how to treat divorce by the way it is treated in scripture. The first place we find divorce

¹ Source: William J. Bennett, *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators*, (New York, 1994), 58-59

² Jay Adams, *Marriage Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, (Grand Rapids, 1980), 23

³ *Ibid.*, 23

discussed in Scripture is in the context of the Old Testament laws given to the people of Israel. Deuteronomy 24:1-4 (NIV) states:

“If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD. Do not bring sin upon the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.”

At first glance that would seem to be a comparatively liberal teaching on divorce indeed. A Divorce may be obtained when a man finds “something indecent” about his wife. But why was this law regulating divorce introduced and exactly what does the phrase the NIV translates as “something indecent” mean? Most Reformed commentators on divorce begin to answer these questions by pointing out that this teaching on divorce is what Jay Adams describes as a “*fait accompli*”⁴ In other words, God is not introducing the concept of divorce to his people in these passages, rather, he is bringing regulation to a practice that was already going on. This is clear from the fact that God nowhere has to define divorce for his people, nor does he have to introduce to them fairly complex legal devices such as a *certificate of divorce*. Apparently, both the institution of divorce and the cultural and legal apparatus surrounding it already existed amongst the people of Israel when God spoke on the matter through his servant Moses.

This distinction will be tremendously important, especially in light of the comments Christ makes on this verse in the New Testament, but before we discuss the greater light our Lord sheds on this verse, we should make some comments on it in it’s own context. The phrase “something indecent” was subject to considerable interpretation by the Jewish people. Douma in his commentary on these verses in *The Ten Commandments, Manual for Christian Life* points out that there were two schools of interpretation of these words; one, which placed more emphasis on the word *indecent* and another, which emphasized the word *something*.⁵ While this may seem to be so much quibbling, it was a distinction with tremendous practical implications, because an emphasis on *indecent* would lead to a teaching that divorce was permitted in the case of specifically sexual misconduct while an emphasis on *something* made the instruction potentially far broader and could refer for instance to “a wife’s physical defect or even the fact that she burned her husband’s food while cooking it.”⁶

John Murray, who also notes the difference of opinion amongst rabbinic scholars in his book entitled *Divorce*, believes that both schools of interpretation were wrong. He cogently argues that the statement cannot mean adultery because there were already other laws that covered the sin of adultery (which was a violation of the seventh commandment of the Decalogue: "You shall not commit adultery." Exodus 20:14) and that the punishment for adultery was death. Therefore Murray argues:

the provisions of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 cannot apply to a case of proven adultery on the part of the wife. She and her guilty partner were both put to death.⁷

⁴ Ibid., 27

⁵ J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, (Phillipsburg, 1996), 271-272

⁶ Ibid., 272

⁷ John Murray, *Divorce*, (Philadelphia, 1953), 10

For similar reasons Murray also dismisses the notion that the reason might be adultery that could not be proven, but was suspect none-the-less. As Murray points out, Numbers 5:11-31 covers cases with that particular set of circumstances and at no point is there a place for divorce. The Lord God did not allow for divorce merely upon the *suspicion* of adultery. Either the charge would be proven and the woman in question would be put to death, or the woman would be treated as guiltless. Murray goes on to show that the looser interpretation is equally groundless. So what then was this “something indecent?” Murray cannot answer that question definitively but he does believe that we “may conclude that [something indecent] means some indecency or impropriety of behavior; it might be in the category of defect or omission.” Therefore Murray counsels us that it is necessary to “strike a balance between the the rigid interpretation... and the loose... We must suppose something shameful and offensive that gives to the husband some legitimate ground for displeasure and complaint.”⁸

We may never know then, exactly what this “something indecent” was, but we can assume with Douma that it is “shameful behavior of a serious nature.”⁹ This means that the defect that allowed for divorce was at the very least some objective moral failing on the part of the wife, and not merely *something* about the wife that the husband objected to. Therefore, divorce was not grounded on the whimsy of husbands which, as we shall see, had become the practice of many Jews by the time of Christ.

We should also notice that Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is not a command to be divorced. The repeated use of the word “if” in the passage indicates to us that these were regulations designed to cover divorce *if* it took place. Therefore we see divorce being suffered but not commanded. The commandment is effectively designed to prevent the sin of a wife remarrying her original husband, after marrying and divorcing another man, when a permissible divorce had occurred. The important thing to remember is, that this passage in no way sets a loose criterion for divorce that is conditioned upon the fickle whimsy of a husband. This kind of exegesis is not only unsupportable within this passage, it runs headlong against other teachings on divorce – particularly those within the book of Malachi:

Another thing you do: You flood the LORD's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, "Why?" It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not [the LORD] made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. "I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment," says the LORD Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.

These verses indicate the strong displeasure, even *hatred* of the Lord for the loose practice of divorce that had become common in post-exilic Israel. These easy divorces were often wrongly founded on poor exegesis of the very verses we have been covering. But even if we did not have Malachi to confirm that Deuteronomy 24:1-4 does not allow for a loose practice of divorce, the teaching of our Lord on these verses would seal the argument.

⁸ Ibid., 12

⁹ Douma, 272

In Matthew 19, we see the following exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees taking place:

Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator `made them male and female,' and said, `For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate." "Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery." [Matthew 19:1-9 (NIV)]

In the exchange we see the Pharisees setting before Christ a question probably intended to put him at odds with one of the two schools of Rabbinical interpretation. If he were to answer affirmatively, those who had taken a strict view of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 would be offended, while if he answered no, the party of loose interpretation would take offense. In the answer that Christ gives, he immediately appeals back to the teaching of scripture and points out that this is not primarily a question about divorce but rather it is a question about the nature of marriage and the sinfulness of men's hearts. Christ begins by pointing out that God gave marriage as a creation ordinance and that in turn it was never intended to be put asunder. The Pharisees then ask why if that was the case did Moses *command* that a man give his wife a bill of divorcement and send her away? This is an important turn of phrase. As we have seen, Deuteronomy 24:1-4 does not contain a *command* to obtain a divorce, it regulates divorces *if* they occur. Christ points this out, by telling them that "Moses permitted you to divorce..." *not* commanded. Jesus then goes on to explain why this was permitted – "because your hearts were hard". In other words, because after the fall men were prone to sin and because of this sin divorces *would* occur, but not that they *should* occur. He drives this point home, that it was not so from the beginning. Had not the fall occurred, sin would not have entered in and marriages would have remained indissoluble. Christ goes even further in showing under what circumstance sin makes divorce possible, namely *marital unfaithfulness*. He then prohibits divorce under other circumstances by saying that all divorces for other reasons are illegitimate, and thus if a spouse remarries following such an illegitimate divorce, they are guilty of adultery, for the original covenant bond of marriage had not been severed in this case.

The word translated in the above verse by the NIV as *marital unfaithfulness* is the Greek word *porneia*, which is usually rendered *fornication*. Here again the Lord's choice of words is important, for if Christ had wanted to say "except for *adultery*" he could have done so. The Greek word for adultery is *moikeia*. His reasons for not using *moikeia* have been an issue for debate even within the reformed community. Some have inferred that by not using the word for adultery (which would mean sexual sin within the marriage covenant) Christ was indicating circumstances in which that marriage covenant had not yet come into being, (i.e. sexual sin during the engagement period). This thesis however is doubtful. Dr. J. G. Vos offers the following explanation for the choice of words:

In Matthew 19:9 it is possible to hold that Christ uses the word *porneia* not in contradistinction to *mokeia*, but rather in it's wider sense, as including sin *either before or after marriage*. Suppose that Jesus had used the word *moikeia* (adultery) instead of *porneia* (fornication) in Matthew 19:9. Then the verse would read in English, 'Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for *adultery*, and shall marry another,

commiteth adultery...’ Now this would rule out sin committed before marriage. But the word *porneia* can have the wider meaning of ‘general unchastity.’ Therefore taking *porneia* in this sense, as practically all admit is possible, we may paraphrase the verse thus: ‘Whosoever shall put away his wife except it be for unchastity whether committed before or after marriage, and shall marry another, commits adultery....’ This explains the use of the two different Greek words, *porneia* and *moikeia*, in Matthew 19:9 and by no means requires us to take *porneia* in the sense of ‘premarital impurity’.¹⁰

What *porneia* does refer to then is sexual sin of any and all sorts, by both married and unmarried people, therefore fornication is given as a reason for the dissolution of an engagement *and* divorce. Also, the scope of sexual sin is expanded outside of just intercourse with a third party during marriage to include all sexual relations outside of the marriage covenant.

Once again, it is worth noting that Christ does not frame his admonishment in terms of a command to divorce. It is clear that he is outlining the only grounds under which it is acceptable to divorce, not commanding that if the grounds in which a divorce may take place are fulfilled, that a divorce *must* take place. As Murray says: “It does not intimate... that the man is *obligated* to divorce his wife in the event of adultery on her part. It simply accords the right or liberty.”¹¹ Again we see that there is no positive command (especially in the way in which the Pharisees framed their question) to divorce. This reinforces the teaching that we see again and again in the bible, that divorce is something that has come about because of sin. To quote Jay Adams, “God did not originate the concept as part of His order for society. Divorce, then, is a human innovation.”¹² Because it has happened, God has set forth regulations that restrain the circumstances in which divorce *may* occur, but we grievously err if we assume that we are ever presented with a positive command to divorce.

This is not the only passage in the gospels where Jesus discusses divorce. Discussions of divorce also occur in Mark 10:11-12, Luke 16:18, and Matthew 5:31-32. In all cases the teaching of our Lord regarding divorce is consistent – with one critical difference. Only the passages in the gospel according to Matthew contain the exceptive clause “except for marital unfaithfulness (*porneia*).” Both Mark and Luke simply say that everyone who puts away his wife and marries another commits adultery. Some Reformed exegetes (such as John Murray) have attempted to answer this discrepancy through textual analysis that would eliminate the possibility of remarriage after divorce (cf. Murray, *Divorce*, p.48) Other Reformed exegetes (such as Jay Adams) have simply avoided the issue altogether by focusing on the passages in Matthew and admitting that any other course would force them into speculation. The preferred course is always to ignore the lack of the exception clause in other texts altogether. Since I believe it would be intellectually dishonest to ignore the omission at this juncture, I will readily admit that I find the explanation given by Loraine Boettner to be the simplest and most plausible:

The Gospels do not always give our Lord’s teaching in full, and in this instance as in numerous others Matthew simply gives a more complete account. Compare, for instance, the fullness with which Matthew reports the Sermon on the Mount, three full chapters, 5, 6, 7, and Luke’s abbreviated account given in thirty verses (6:20-49). The accounts concerning the baptism of Jesus, the crucifixion, the inscription on the cross, and the resurrection, are given in greater detail by Matthew than by Mark or Luke. Most

¹⁰ Loraine Boettner, *Divorce* (Maryville, 1960), 10

¹¹ Murray, 35

¹² Adams, 27

commentators take the view that there is no conflict between Matthew and Mark and Luke, but that Matthew has simply given a fuller report.¹³

If we assume, and it seems likely, that Matthew simply gave us more detail as to what Christ actually said, the practice of zeroing in on Matthew when examining the Lord's teaching on divorce is extremely wise.

So we see therefore that Christ again reiterates the fact that divorce is the result of sin, is never good or commanded, but is permissible in the case of adultery. We are also clearly instructed that remarriage after a divorce for unbiblical reasons is adultery (and presumably bigamy). This leaves us with the question, is remarriage after a divorce identified by Christ as *legitimate* permissible? On this question the church has historically been divided. Roman Catholicism clearly answers "no" to this question, but the Roman Catholic church also regards marriage as "*absolutely* indissoluble"¹⁴ and tends to either ignore the exception clause present in the verses in Matthew or to regard the exception clause as applying only to "divorces his wife" in verse 9 of Matthew 19, but not to "marries another woman". In all fairness, this was also the solution adopted by Augustine, so it is not entirely without ecclesiastical pedigree. This interpretation maintains that separation for adultery is permissible, but does not allow for the remarriage of either party. Most Reformed commentators feel that this position is untenable for three major reasons. First, there is no support in the Greek for restricting the exceptive clause to the divorce and not extending it to the remarriage. Second, Christ here is not merely discussing divorce, he is also discussing remarriage. Indeed in the sentence it is *assumed* that the party obtaining a divorce will remarry. Thirdly, and most importantly, Christ is not here attempting to say that the teaching of Moses regarding divorce was wrong, but rather that the loose interpretation of it as being allowed for any and every reason was wrong. Therefore, as Murray points out "Jesus does not in any way suggest any alteration in the nature and the effect of divorce." Divorce in Mosaic Law was considered to be a dissolving of the marriage bond, therefore if the Marriage Bond was legitimately dissolved by the fornication of one member, then remarriage cannot be forbidden as this would introduce a concept entirely "alien" to scripture:

It is surely reasonable to assume that if the man may legitimately put away his wife for adultery the marriage bond is judged to be dissolved. On the other supposition the woman who has committed adultery and who has been put away is still in reality the man's wife and is one flesh with him. To take action that relieves of the obligations of matrimony while the marital tie is inviolable hardly seems compatible with marital ethics as taught in the Scripture itself. It is true that Paul distinctly contemplates the possibility of separation without dissolution and propounds what the law is in such a contingency (1 Cor. 7:10-11). But to provide for and sanction permanent separation while the marriage tie remains inviolate is something that is alien to the whole tenor of Scripture teaching in regard to the obligations that inhere in and are inseparable from the marital bond.¹⁵

Another issue that must be taken into consideration is the fact that to view Jesus as teaching in the Gospel that remarriage after divorce on the grounds of marital infidelity is impermissible opens the possibility of setting his teaching at odds with that of Paul in his letter to the Corinthians. Paul there writes:

¹³ Boettner, 15

¹⁴ Douma, 274

¹⁵ Quoted in Boettner. 19

Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you marry, you have not sinned (1 Cor. 7:27-28a NASB)

Here commentators such as Jay Adams, believe that Paul is giving clear instruction that remarriage after divorce is permissible, but not recommended. His criteria for doing so is that the word translated in the NASB “released” in both circumstances is *luo* or loosed. Clearly released can only mean divorced, and it would seem clear that for the second instance of “released” to make sense, it must mean the same as thing as in the first case. Therefore, to be remarried after a (we would presume legitimate) divorce is not to sin.

It should be admitted however that this is view is not necessarily shared by all commentators. Here the *New International Version* of the Bible makes a clear exegetical decision in its translation that contradicts the above construction:

Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned (1 Cor. 7:27-28a NIV)

The choice of the word “unmarried” to translate *luo* in the second instance changes the entire sense of the passage. Unmarried in English has the sense of “not married” or possibly even “never married” and certainly does not convey the idea of divorced. Therefore the clear sense of the passage in English becomes “it is best not to change your marital status” and it no longer makes any comment on whether marriage after divorce is sinful or not. This is probably not the best translation in light of the double use of the word *luo* and no other major translation other than the NIV follows this pattern.

So then we see that while it is not explicitly stated, the evidence would strongly suggest that remarriage after a divorce for legitimate reasons is permissible. But this leaves us to question, is fornication the only reason for which a divorce may be lawfully granted?

In his letter to the Corinthian church, Paul indicates to us that there is one other circumstance under which divorce may legally occur – the desertion of a believer by an unbeliever:

To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife. To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. (1 Cor. 7: 10 - 15)

Paul also includes a notable appeal to the providential workings of God in the following verse (16):

How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

This is undoubtedly given as an added reason for a believer not to leave the unbeliever to whom they are unequally yoked.

Before addressing the teaching of this passage in general it is important that we examine what Paul meant by the parenthetical expressions in verses 10 and 12 (i.e. “not I, but the Lord” and “I, not the Lord”). Do these parentheses break the teaching of Paul in these verses into two groups? The first being instruction from the Lord and the second being godly personal advice?

Both Reformed doctrine and the Bible that it is based on tell us there is no such thing as “uninspired” scripture:

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16)

“Scripture is the Word of God. Again, the selfsame apostle to the Thessalonians: When, says he, you received the Word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it, not as the word of men but as what it really is, the Word of God, etc. (1 Thess. 2:13.) For the Lord himself has said in the Gospel, It is not you who speak, but the Spirit of my Father speaking through you; therefore he who hears you hears me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me (Matt. 10:20; Luke 10:16; John 13:20).”¹⁶

The distinction that Paul is making in verses 10 and 11, is between what Christ specifically taught in his earthly ministry and what Paul is now teaching. Verse 10 and 11 are, therefore, a recapitulation of the teaching of Christ in his earthly ministry. Verse 11 indicates the beginning of Paul’s specific teaching on issues concerning divorce that have arisen amongst the gentile Christians of the Corinthian congregation. These were not issues during the ministry of Christ so they were not addressed. Here it is important to note that in these sections of Corinthians Paul is probably addressing specific questions that were sent to him by the congregation.

Paul gives several important commands to believers in the context of verses 10 – 15

1) In verses 10 – 11 Paul again re-emphasizes the sanctity of marriage, and also indirectly instructs all believers that becoming a Christian does not, and should not affect their marital status. As we will see this rule applies even if they are currently married to non-believers.

In keeping with the teaching of Christ, Paul also teaches that if a wife divorces her husband (presumably for some reason other than the *porneia* mentioned by Christ) then she must not remarry lest she become an adulteress as Christ warns would be the case in Matthew 19:9. He does however leave open the possibility of reconciliation and remarriage to her spouse.

While Paul uses the example of a wife in this example (possibly because the Corinthian question had been about wives) one could see how this teaching would also be true for husbands, the same inter-applicability between wives and husbands is also true of the teaching of Christ regarding divorce.

2) In verses 12 – 14 Paul gives believers specific instruction *not* to leave their unbelieving spouses if those spouses will consent to remain married.

¹⁶ *The Second Helvetic Confession* - Chapter I

3) In verse 14 Paul mentions what many Reformed exegetes throughout the ages have regarded as a second reason for a legitimate divorce – desertion. Under this view, if an unbeliever deserts his believing spouse, the marriage bond is dissolved, and the believer is free to marry again. This is the position taken, for instance, by the *Westminster Confession of Faith*:

... nothing but adultery, or such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the church, or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage: wherein, a public and orderly course of proceeding is to be observed; and the persons concerned in it not left to their own wills, and discretion, in their own case.¹⁷

1 Corinthians 7:15, the passage in question, is cited as a proof text for this conclusion.

Others, however, have historically disagreed saying that it is the duty of the believer to permit the unbelieving spouse who wishes to do so to go, but they are not subsequently free to remarry as the marriage contract has not in fact been dissolved regardless of the absence of the spouse. To remarry under these circumstances, they say, would be to commit adultery. This is the view taken, for instance, by Donald L. Norbie in his booklet entitled *Divorce and the Bible*.

Rather than quoting at length the Reformed exegetes who support the view that the desertion spoken of in 1 Corinthians 7:15 constitutes grounds for legitimate divorce and remarriage, I will simply list some of the most prominent supporters of this view, they include Jay Adams (*Marriage Divorce and Remarriage*, chapter 9), William Ames (*Conscience with the Power and Cases thereof*), J. Douma (*The Ten Commandments*, Chap. 7), Theodore Beza (*De repudiis et divortiiis*), Charles Hodge (*Systematic Theology*, Vol. III), John Murray (*Divorce*, Chapter 3), William Perkins (*Christian Oeconomie*, Vol. 3).

It should go without saying that this desertion is one of the unbeliever deserting the believer in 1 Corinthians. The Apostle has already given instruction to believers *not* to leave their unbelieving spouses if at all possible, and if they sinfully do so, they must not compound this disobedience by adding to it the sin of adultery.

With Paul's addition of desertion in 1 Corinthians 7 to fornication in Matthew 19, we are at an end of biblical criteria for the dissolution of marriage. With the exception of death, no other reason is given in Scripture for which a marriage may be terminated and a valid divorce may be obtained. As a result, we have arrived at the Reformed doctrine of divorce, for in this issue as Reformed believers we cannot go further in allowing divorce beyond that which the Bible permits, lest we fall into the error of allowing divorces that God does not condone and which would result in a state of adultery were a remarriage to occur.

Consequently, we can conclude that the “no fault divorces” spoken of in the beginning of this essay cannot constitute biblical divorces, and should not be named amongst believers. Similarly, emotional incompatibility is not legitimate grounds for divorce any more than a simple desire to be rid of the individual one is married to.

¹⁷ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 24, section 6

In recent years much debate as to whether spousal abuse, verbal or physical, might not constitute a form of desertion that might justify divorce. To do this is to engage in speculation, and ultimately any conclusion that we may come to will not be directly informed by Scripture, which should always be our primary objective. We may safely say, however, that spousal abuse can and should be addressed with church discipline, and in the case of abuse that is physical or where threats against life and limb are made, the civil magistrate should intervene to insure the safety of the threatened spouse. While it is outside the scope of this essay, one can speculate that in order to prevent physical harm, separation, but not divorce would certainly be an appropriate measure. Nowhere in the bible are we informed that a spouse *must* remain in a situation in which they are likely to be physically harmed, even though this still does not constitute a biblical criteria for divorce.

While the above conclusions may seem too restrictive to some, I have endeavored to present the doctrine of divorce as presented in the Bible and affirmed by both Reformed exegetes and Creedal formulations, such as the one to which I myself subscribe – the Westminster Confession. We need to heed the warning of the Westminster Confession that “the corruption of man be such as is apt to study arguments unduly to put asunder those whom God hath joined together”¹⁸ and be ever guided by the principle that marriages are intended to be a lifelong union of one male and one female in which the two together become one flesh and thus are a model of the beautiful and indissoluble union between Christ and his bride, the Church (Eph. 5:22-33).

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¹⁸ Ibid.