

A Question About Divorce and Remarriage

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"If a man divorced his wife without cause and married another, would the wife, being innocent party, be free to marry if her former husband and not she obtained the divorce?" I answered, "Yes".

A brother writes, "I disagree with your answer as Matthew 19:9 says, 'And I say unto you, whosoever shall put away his wife, except for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery; and he that marrieth her when she is put away committeth adultery.'" And, to this the brother added: "The above scripture teaches me that the person who marries the woman that was divorced even though she was innocent would commit adultery."

He has grossly misapprehended the teaching of our Lord in this passage. (1) He has ignored the exception which the Lord put into the verse. He strikes out the words, "except for fornication," in order to deny what the Lord, by implication, affirmed. It should read, in his view, "Whosoever shall put away his wife even in the case of fornication and marries another, commits adultery and he who marries her thus put away commits adultery." (2) He disregards the grammar of the passage which makes the exception clause, except for fornication, modify the entire statement including the final clause, "He that marrieth her when she is put away committeth adultery." (3) He rules out any occasion when an innocent party may properly and scripturally remarry. He is therefore in grave error in the conclusion drawn.

To put the matter in proper perspective let us assume the following instance: Jane and John, both single, neither having been previously wedded, marry. John, of weak character, soon tires of Jane and abandons her though she is a good wife, and a faithful Christian woman. As soon as he can conveniently do so, he contracts another marriage. Not free to remarry, his relationship with the second woman, though legal, is adulterous. Jane, meantime, has remained free of marital relationship, and would have received John back at any time prior to the adulterous marriage into which he entered. Being a Christian woman, she does not recognize the state's legal grounds for divorce, willing only to accept the Lord's ground—fornication. By unscripturally contracting marriage with the second woman John is now guilty of the act constituting the exception clause of Matthew 19. Jane meets Bill, a fine Christian man never before married. May she scripturally marry him? Of course she may. To deny to her this is presumptuously to pass judgment on the validity of the Lord's edict and take from her what the Lord granted. Jesus said, "Whosoever shall put away his wife, except for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery and he that marrieth her when she is put away committeth adultery." This statement, put negatively, is just as true as it is in its affirmative form: "Whosoever shall put away his wife (or husband) when he or she has been guilty of fornication and shall marry another does not commit adultery and he or she that marrieth her or him when he or she is put away does not commit adultery."

If to this the objection is raised that Jane did not divorce John but John (the guilty party) divorced Jane, it should be remembered that divorce is a civil, legal action having nothing whatsoever to do with determining the moral and religious principles involved. It is the Lord's edict, not man's, that governs. "But," it may further be objected, "Jane and John were not living together at the time when the fornication occurred." Who said they had to

be? To inject this condition into the exception clause is to speak where the Lord has not spoken, is to legislate for him! Suppose, for example, that Jane, while married to John, had suffered mental illness and required residence and treatment in a mental hospital for five years. During this interval John cohabited with another woman. Would Jane, because she was not living under the same roof as John, be denied the right to put him away "for fornication"? He who so affirms has abandoned reason, revelation and

The implications of scripture touching marriage and divorce are crystal clear. The New Testament teaches that when one of the parties of the marriage bond becomes guilty of fornication the other (the innocent one, not the guilty) may scripturally put away the offending party and remarry. Luke 16:18 does not countermand Matthew 19:9, it simply supplements it.

(Guy N. Woods, Associate Editor, Gospel Advocate, December 7, 1978).