

THE MEANING OF ADULTERY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The common definition of adultery as “sexual intercourse of a married person with someone other than his or her spouse” does not do justice to the total biblical evidence. Scripture consistently portrays adultery as covenant oriented. The emphasis is not so much on “sexual intercourse” as it is on “the covenant of marriage.” This study postulates a broader definition of adultery based on a close reading of several New Testament and a few Old Testament texts.¹ Adultery, on the basis of New Testament evidence, is simply “the violation of the covenant of marriage,” and this violation can occur by any of various means, for example, “the lustful look” (Matthew 5.28), illicit sexual intercourse, or divorce and remarriage (Matthew 19.9). This broader definition will allow each biblical text to speak for itself concerning the specifics of “adultery” and will prohibit the imposition of unbiblical distinctions on the text. All scripture references are the author’s own translation unless otherwise indicated.

I. What Adultery Is Not

The question of adultery is not the question of God’s original intent for male and female in marriage. God’s desire for permanency in the husband/wife union is revealed plainly (see Genesis 2.24). Neither is the question of adultery the question of whether or not God’s original intent has changed. According to Jesus in Matthew 19.4-6, it has not changed. The one man/one woman union corresponds to mankind’s created nature as male and female.²

¹The Greek word for “adultery” is *moicheia* and the Hebrew word is *na’aph*.

²Marriage from its very nature and from its divine sanction is *ideally* indissoluble. It should not be a contract or a union of temporary convenience that is entered into or ended at the whim or fancy of the parties involved. But to say marriage should not be dissolved is different from saying that marriage *cannot* be dissolved (see below).

The question of adultery is a question of sin—sin that springs forth from a sinful and unregenerate heart. “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders; these are the things which defile the man” (Matthew 15.19-20; NASB). Since the question of adultery is a question of sin, it involves what God recognizes as true of man (i.e., he is a sinner) but does not condone as lawful or right by man (i.e., God hates sin).

II. A Common Definition Challenged

What constitutes adultery? More specifically, what makes the divorcing and remarrying of Matthew 19.9 adultery? It is extremely important to define adultery properly in order to be able to determine the fruit of repentance from adultery.

A common answer suggests that, in the situation of Matthew 19.9, adultery exists because a man who has divorced his spouse and married another is “still married to the first spouse in the eyes of God, though not in the eyes of man,” and adultery is “the voluntary sexual intercourse between a married person and someone other than their spouse.”³ This understanding, however, fails for two basic reasons.

Argument number one. The expression “married in the eyes of God, though not in the eyes of man” is unbiblical and erroneous. Marriage is a covenant (see Malachi 2.14); it is a contract or agreement entered into by a man and a woman; it is an oath containing legal, moral,

³See David Freeman, “Adultery,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Volume One, A-D, general editor, Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 58-59; J. Theodore Mueller, “Adultery,” *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Everett F. Harrison (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1960), 27-28; Herbert Waddams, “Adultery,” *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, edited by James F. Childress and John Macquarrie (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 10-11.

and spiritual stipulations. Man can either keep or break the covenant of marriage. If man keeps the covenant of marriage, God recognizes this and approves. If man breaks the covenant of marriage, God recognizes this and disapproves (“I hate divorce,” Malachi 2.16). God grants and recognizes the making and/or the breaking of covenants by man. Otherwise, it is difficult to see how sin could be imputed by God in such matters, that is, if God did not acknowledge the breaking of covenants by man. A divorced individual, therefore, is unmarried in the eyes of God and in the eyes of man.

Scriptural evidence. 1 Corinthians 7.11. Note carefully that Paul speaks “to the married” (verse 10). Paul implores, “Let not a wife separate herself from a husband.” The question to be answered is this: Separated in what way or how? The Greek word translated “separate herself” is *choristhenai* (aorist middle infinitive of *choridzo*).⁴ It implies a complete, though not irreversible, separation. That such a complete separation is indicated by Paul is verified by verse 11. Here further stipulation is given by Paul in view of a possible violation of his command in verse 10. He writes, “If she separates herself, let her remain unmarried or let her be reconciled to the husband.” The Greek word translated “unmarried” is *agamos* and occurs only four times in the New Testament (verses 8, 11, 32, and 34 of 1 Corinthians 7). It means “not married.” The only two possible ways for an individual to become *agamos* or “not married” when married are: (1) the death of a spouse (see Romans 7.2-3); or (2) divorce from a spouse. Paul is not talking about death; he is talking about “separation.” So *choridzo* or “separate” in 1 Corinthians 7

⁴On the passive (or middle) form of *choridzo*, compare Acts 1.4; 18.1; Philemon 15; and Hebrews 7.27.

means “to separate by means of divorce” or simply “to divorce.”⁵ This is the only possible understanding of *choridzo* or “separate” in this context, because by the “separation” in question one who is married becomes *agamos* (“unmarried” or “not married”).

So, according to Paul in 1 Corinthians 7.11, the believer who divorces his or her spouse (regardless of the cause) is not married or unmarried. This, however, is not to say that the believer who divorces a believing spouse is at liberty to remarry. Paul charges, “Remain unmarried or be reconciled.” For believers in Christ, remarriage is not a valid option. But the reason for remaining unmarried cannot be that they still are married in the sight of God. The evidence is contrary to that. Paul says that they are unmarried. Rather, they are to remain unmarried because of God’s desire for permanency in the covenant of marriage. To marry another would be to commit sin further—the mixing or mingling of covenants, or adultery.

John 4.17-18. Here Jesus tells a Samaritan woman to call her husband. The woman replied, “I have no husband.” Jesus agrees that she had spoken truthfully (“you are right when you say you have no husband”; NIV). In other words, both the woman and Jesus affirm that she is unmarried. What was her previous and present marital experience? In verse 18, Jesus tells her, “You have had five husbands, and now the one you have is not your husband; you spoke truthfully.” This woman evidently had been involved in the making and severing of covenant unions with five men. She had been married and divorced five times. At the time Jesus talks with her, she is unmarried. She has no covenant of marriage with the man living with her. He is

⁵Paul uses *choridzo* in 1 Corinthians, chapter 7, as a technical term for “divorce.” See James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources* (1930; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963), 696.

not her husband. Note what Jesus does not say. Jesus does not say, “You are still married to your first husband in the eyes of God.” Jesus recognizes (because God recognizes) the fact that each of the five covenants of marriage had been severed by divorce. It is impossible for the Samaritan woman still to be married to her first husband in the sight of God. Had that been true, she would have had only one husband and five non-marital unions. But Jesus tells her, “You have had five husbands.” According to Jesus, she had five marriages and one non-marital union. In the eyes of Jesus, she was unmarried.

In John 4.17-18, as in 1 Corinthians 7.11, divorce severs the covenant of marriage in the eyes of God. Granted, the argument from John 4 is invalid given the remote possibility that all of the woman’s husbands died before she remarried, but this is highly unlikely. Note, though, that this passage says nothing regarding the woman’s right to remarry.

Matthew 19.6; Mark 10.9. “Therefore, what God has joined together, do not let man separate.” Jesus did not say “man cannot separate.” Jesus said “do not let man separate” (Greek, *anthropos me choridzeto*; cf. 1 Corinthians 7.10). This is a prohibition. It is a demand to desist or abstain from a particular action—that action here being separating or divorcing what God has joined together in the covenant of marriage. But the fact that this is a prohibition implies the possibility of doing that which is prohibited. If the possibility of separation by divorce in the eyes of God were not possible, why did Jesus give the command anyway? The nature of this command as a prohibition renders it impossible to regard divorced individuals as still married in God’s sight.

Deuteronomy 24.1-4. The case in this passage involves a bill of divorce given for inadequate reasons. Yet, when the wife leaves her first husband, she “becomes the wife of

another” who is called “her husband” (verses 2, 3). If she is the wife of another, she is no longer the first man’s wife. In fact, the passage states very plainly that the first man may not ever again take her “to be his wife” (verse 4). These statements prove as false the view that all along she was his wife anyway. To the contrary, she is forbidden to become his wife again. After the divorce, she is no longer the wife of the first man.

The biblical evidence conclusively is against the notion that one can still be married in the sight of God but divorced in the sight of man. What is biblical is that God recognizes (although he might not approve) the covenants made and severed by man.⁶

Objection. Under the old covenant God recognized divorce; now, under the new covenant he no longer recognizes it.

Answer. The arguments from 1 Corinthians 7.11 and Matthew 19.6 still hold true. In fact, in Matthew 19.9, Jesus recognizes divorce when he says, “Whoever divorces his wife and married another commits adultery.” How can one “marry another” if he or she still is married to a former spouse? Furthermore, if one says that the remarriage is “only in the eyes of man,” then is the adultery committed “only in the eyes of man” also? Adultery, Jesus says, is the divorcing and remarrying. To whatever extent one limits the remarrying he also limits the adultery resulting from it. If one is “in the eyes of man only,” so is the other. Such a view seems impossible; it denies any imputation of the sin of adultery to man by God.

⁶The notion that the bond of marriage cannot be dissolved does not come from the Bible. It is a product of Western canon law of the Roman Catholic Church that believes marriage to be sacramental in nature and therefore something that humans cannot change (e.g., inviolable).

Objection. What about the statement of Paul in Romans 7.3, “So then if, while her husband is living, she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress” (NASB). Does not this scripture draw the distinction that commonly is affirmed?

Answer. The translation of the Greek text in most of the standard English translations is inaccurate and misleading (see ASV, ESV, KJV, NEB, NKJV, NRSV, RSV, NIV). In this entire passage, the expression “her husband” never appears in the Greek text. The Greek word translated “husband” and “man” is the same Greek word (*aner*).⁷ Only a few English translations render the Greek word for “man” consistently. For instance, the Geneva Bible of 1560 translates the passage accurately:

For the woman which is in subiection to a man, is bounde by the law to the man, while he liueth: but if the man be dead, she is deliuered from the law of the man. So then, if while the man liueth, she take another man, she shal be called an adulteresse: but if the man be dead, she is fre from the Law, so that she is not an adulteresse, thogh she take another man (verses 2, 3).⁸

Also, the New Testament translated by William Tyndale in 1534 gets it right. It reads:

For the woman which is in subiection to a man, is bound by the law to the man, as long as he liveth. If the man be dead, she is loosed from the law of the man. So then if while the man liveth she couple herself with another man, she shall be counted a wedlock-breaker. But if the man be dead, she is free from the law: so that she is no wedlock-breaker, though she couple herself with another man (verses 2, 3).⁹

⁷J. D. Douglas, editor, *The New Greek-English Interlinear New Testament*, translated by Robert K. Brown and Philip W. Comfort (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1990), 549.

⁸*The Geneva Bible*, a fascimile of the 1560 edition (1560; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007).

⁹William Tyndale, translator, *Tyndale's New Testament: The Ploughboy's Edition*, modern-spelling edition by David Daniell (1534; reprint, New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1989).

And compare Alexander Campbell's "Living Oracles" of 1826 that translates:

For the married woman is bound, by law, to her husband as long as he lives; but if the husband be dead, she is released from the law of her husband. If, then, indeed, while her husband lives, she be married to another, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is free from the law; so that she is not an adulteress, though married to another husband (verses 2, 3).¹⁰

Each of these translate the Greek word consistently (e.g., "the man . . . another man"; "her husband . . . another husband"). So the distinction commonly affirmed is not substantiated by the Greek text. In fact, the action of the woman, whether "the man" (that is, her first husband) is living or dead, is the same. Note the Greek phrases in 3a and 3b, *genetai andri hetero . . . genomenen andri hetero* (i.e., "she take another man . . . she take another man," Geneva Bible; "she couple herself with another man . . . she couple herself with another man," Tyndale's New Testament; "she be married to another . . . though married to another husband," Campbell's Sacred Writings). Why is there no distinction in the action of the woman if in the first case (when "the man" is living) she becomes the wife to another man "only in the eyes of man, but not in the eyes of God"? The distinction is not there; the action is the same. It is only the lack of distinction that renders intelligible the different verdicts of Paul (and of God). In one case ("the man" is living), the action of marrying another (both in the eyes of God and man) causes adultery. In the other case ("the man" is dead), the action of marrying another (both in the eyes of God and man) causes no adultery (because *eleuthera estin apo tou nomou*, "she is free from the law").

¹⁰Campbell, Alexander, editor, *The Sacred Writings of the Apostles and Evangelists of Jesus Christ, Commonly Styled the New Testament*, translated by George Campbell, James Macknight, and Philip Doddridge (1826; reprint, Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate, 1954).

Argument number two. The defining of adultery as “the voluntary sexual intercourse between a married person and someone other than their spouse” is misleading, because such is too restrictive for all biblical usages of the word. Adultery is not sexual intercourse per se, although sexual intercourse may be involved. Nor is adultery extramarital sexual intercourse per se, although extramarital sexual intercourse may be involved. In fact, adultery could possibly occur without any sexual intercourse at all. Adultery, in its basic sense, is the violation of the covenant of marriage.

Scriptural evidence. Deuteronomy 22.22-29. The Hebrew term for adultery is not used in these case laws. These statutes, though, will serve to show what is “the evil” (*hara'*; verses 22, 24; cf. verse 21) to be purged from Israel by capital punishment.¹¹ Note carefully the following summary of these case laws. In the first case, a man has sexual intercourse (the meaning of the Hebrew *shakhabh*) with a married woman (*'ishah be'ulath ba'al*). Both are executed. In the second case, a man has sexual intercourse with a virgin betrothed or engaged to a man (*na'ara bethulah me'orasah le'ish*). If they are found in the city, both are executed. If they are found in the field, only the man is executed (equivalent to rape). In the third case, a man has sexual intercourse with a virgin not betrothed to any man (*na'ara bethulah 'asher lo' 'orasah*). The violator must pay the girl's father fifty shekels of silver; he must marry the girl; and he cannot divorce her (cf. Exodus 22.16). The point of these case laws for our study is clear. “The evil” to be purged from Israel by capital punishment is not illicit sexual intercourse.

¹¹See the brief treatment by J. A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, general editor, D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1974), 235-237.

Rather, “the evil” is the violation of the covenant of marriage (which, in these cases, happens to be by means of illicit sexual intercourse). The crime involves covenant per se, not coitus per se.

Matthew 19.9; Mark 10.11, 12; Luke 16.18. Nowhere is sexual intercourse mentioned in these scriptures as a condition for adultery. In fact, “sexual immorality” (Greek *porneia*) in Matthew 19.9 is an exception to adultery rather than a condition for it. In all of these scriptures, divorce and remarriage are affirmed explicitly as conditions for adultery. “Whoever divorces [the meaning of the Greek *apoloio*; see Appendix B] his wife . . . and marries another commits adultery.” Jesus defines adultery as divorcing and remarrying. So, if a man divorces his woman and marries another woman, he commits adultery (regardless of whether or not he has sexual intercourse with his new woman). By divorcing and remarrying he has violated the covenant of marriage; he has committed adultery.¹²

Why does Jesus define adultery in this way? In the Old Testament the word translated “commit adultery” is *na'aph*. A strong connection between sexual intercourse and *na'aph* does exist.¹³ Leviticus 20.10 prohibits every extramarital sexual union of a man with a married woman and every extramarital sexual union of a married woman. But a married man might engage in sexual intercourse with a woman neither married nor engaged, and he and she would

¹²This brief discussion takes a straightforward, grammatical approach to Matthew 19.9. But the full passage (i.e., verses 3-12) is challenging due to so many nuances of interpretation. See D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Volume 8, general editor, Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 410-419; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 462-472; and R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg, 1943), 726-740.

¹³See, for instance, Proverbs 6.32; 30.20; Jeremiah 3.8, 9; 5.7; 29.23; Ezekiel 23.45; and Hosea 2.2.

not be guilty of adultery.¹⁴ Polygamy and the power of divorce was permitted for the man but not for the woman (e.g., Deuteronomy 24.1-4). In Old Testament times, adultery was female-oriented. The male never could violate his covenant of marriage by illicit sexual intercourse; it was always a violation of the woman's covenant of marriage that involved him in adultery. To the contrary, the female always would violate her covenant of marriage by illicit sexual intercourse. In New Testament times, adultery is broadened in meaning to include both male and female equally (see Mark 10.11, 12).¹⁵

Another important distinction between *na'aph* (i.e., adultery in the Old Testament) and *moicheia* (i.e., adultery in the New Testament) will answer the question about the definition of adultery by Jesus. In Matthew 19, the Pharisees were discussing divorce and remarriage (as per Deuteronomy 24). Jesus calls this divorcing and remarrying adultery. If the Old Testament and New Testament definitions are the same, why were the disciples so upset (verse 10)? The disciples were upset because Jesus extends the meaning of adultery to include what is called "the Mosaic permission." What Moses allowed, Jesus puts in the realm of adultery. This divorcing and remarrying, allowed by Moses, was no less than the sin of adultery; it violated God's original

¹⁴See Genesis 16.1-4; 30.1-4; 38.15ff.; Leviticus 19.20ff.; and Deuteronomy 22.28f.

¹⁵Roman Law, however, generally recognized adultery only by the wife. See Adolf Berger, "Adultery," *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, edited by N. G. L. Hammond and H. H. Scullard, Second Edition (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1970), 10-11. John Poucher, "Crimes and Punishments," *A Dictionary of the Bible*, Volume I, edited by James Hastings (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898), 520-521, observes, "More specifically in Israelite as well as Roman law, the term ["adultery"] was confined to illicit intercourse of a married or betrothed woman with any other man than her husband."

intent for marriage. No wonder the disciples were troubled. This to them was like a new pronouncement.¹⁶

Matthew 5.32. As in the scriptures above, adultery occurs when divorce and remarriage occur. “Everyone divorcing his wife . . . causes her to commit adultery” (that is, if she remarries, she commits adultery; see the last clause of the verse).

Romans 7.2, 3. The divorce and remarriage are implied in the expression “if she be joined to another man” (*ean genetai andri hetero*; verse 3). Note as before that the action of the woman is the same whether “the man” (her first spouse) is living or dead. If while “the man” is living, she divorces and remarries, she is called an adulteress (*moichalis chrematisei*).

Objection. Does not Matthew 5.28 imply that adultery is primarily sexual intercourse?

Answer. It might help to broaden some definitions. Any covenant involves devotion to the sanctity of that covenant. The heart’s desire must be to uphold and honor any solemn vow such as marriage. Any deviation from this singleness of devotion to the covenant is a mingling of the heart’s desire or adultery within one’s heart. Rather than proving adultery to be on a purely physical level, Matthew 5.28 proves that adultery begins in the heart (*en te kardia*). Those who heard Jesus would have understood his reference to Exodus 20.14/Deuteronomy 5.18 (*ou moicheuseis*; verse 27) to mean a violation of the covenant of marriage by means of illicit sexual intercourse. The involvement of covenant in the Old Testament understanding of adultery has been discussed already. Jesus points out the proper and deeper significance of the decalogue

¹⁶Henlee H. Barnette, *Introducing Christian Ethics* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1961), 116, notes, “As for remarriage, Jesus does not make this clear. Contention for remarriage after divorce can only be by an argument from silence and inference.” Lenski, *Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* (noted above), likewise sees the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 19 focused on the problem of divorce.

prohibition (cf. Exodus 20.17, “you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife”; NASB) by indicating to his hearers that the covenant of marriage is violated even when a man looks at a woman “to lust for her” (*pros to epithumesai auten*). By such a desirous, hungry, and self-satisfying gaze, a man commits adultery in his heart. Adultery has taken place without any fleshly contact. The man’s vow to be devoted singly to his covenant of marriage has been violated by a desire that intends to break that vow if he has the opportunity (i.e., the “right” set of circumstances) to do so.

Objection. The definition proposed seems to deny the continuous nature (e.g., “living in adultery”) of the present indicative verb in Matthew 19.9.

Answer. Given the definition of adultery as “sexual intercourse,” adultery even then is only an act limited in duration, unless one postulates a perpetual sexual interlude and calls that “living in adultery.” Coitus occurs for only as long as the two individuals are involved in their sexual encounter and no longer.

To focus in on the grammar of Matthew 19.9, consider the following statements. Whoever takes property that does not belong to him steals. Whoever takes the life of a human being without proper judicial authority murders. Whoever puts away their spouse and marries another commits adultery. Whoever deliberately falsifies lies.

The statement of Jesus in Matthew 19.9 is a present general supposition (*hos an* with an aorist subjunctive in the protasis; a present indicative in the apodosis). Burton notes that this type of “supposition refers to any occurrence of an act of a certain class in the (general) present, and the apodosis states what is wont to take place in any instance of an act of the class referred to

in the protasis.”¹⁷ Furthermore, the grammar of Matthew 19.9 is unique. It is the only *hos an* protasis in the Greek New Testament that has two aorist subjunctives connected by *kai* (“and”). A good parallel to Matthew 19.9, though not an exact parallel, is Luke 9.48. It is also a present general supposition. It reads, “Whoever receives this child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me” (NASB). In this passage, the receiving of Jesus is only as continuous as the receiving of the little child. The receiving of the Father is only as continuous as the receiving of the Son. In Matthew 19.9, the adultery (*moichatai*) is only as continuous as the divorcing (*apoluse*) and the remarrying (*gamese*). To wrest “commit adultery” from the syntax of the verse is to be guilty of the worst kind of grammatical divorce.

One might ask, however, is the sin of adultery in Matthew 19.9 inherent in the union itself (e.g., the marriage)? Or is the sin of adultery the way in which that union came about (e.g., the divorcing and remarrying)? According to the grammar of the verse, the latter must be the case. What is defined as sinful by Jesus are those acts of divorce and remarriage.

III. Implications Of Adultery As Covenant Violation

1. Adultery is not divorce alone, although such makes one liable to adultery (see 1 Corinthians 7.11; Matthew 5.32).
2. Adultery is not remarriage alone (1 Corinthians 7.39; Romans 7.3; 1 Timothy 5.14).
3. Adultery is not sexual intercourse alone.
4. Adultery is the violation of the covenant of marriage by: (a) lustful intent (“in the heart”; Matthew 5.28); (b) illicit sexual intercourse; or (c) divorce and remarriage. If by (a), then

¹⁷Ernest De Witt Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek* (1900; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1976), 107.

repentance demands a turning away from evil desires. If by (b), then repentance demands a turning away from “fooling around with” the husband or the wife of someone else. If by (c), then repentance demands a turning away from divorcing and remarrying. However, once a new marriage is formed, the situation may be irreversible (see Deuteronomy 24). A marriage has been “murdered” (rather than a spouse “stolen”). There possibly can be no return to a former spouse. Such would constitute further divorce and remarriage, further adultery. After divorce, as long as no remarriage takes place, a reconciliation may be possible. Even though the covenant is broken, it is not totally irreversible. But once remarriage has occurred, the reconciliation may be impossible. The breach may be complete and final. Adultery has been committed. Any further breach of covenant would mean further adultery. As God calls sinners to repentance and faith in Jesus, he calls them to remain (1 Corinthians 7.20) in the state or condition experienced at the time of the calling (as long as such is not inherently sinful). In the case of those who have committed adultery by divorcing and remarrying, God forgives the adultery and the covenant of marriage remains.

APPENDIX A: CHORIDZO AND AGAMOS

The active voice of *choridzo* means simply “to divide” or “to separate.” New Testament examples of the active voice are as follows. Who shall “separate” (*chorisei*) us from Christ’s love? (Romans 8.35). Nothing is able “to separate” (*chorisai*) us from God’s love (Romans 8.39). What God has joined together, “let not man divide” (*anthropos me choridzeto*; Matthew 19.6; Mark 10.9).

The remaining occurrences of *choridzo* in the Greek New Testament are passive (or middle) in form. The basic meaning is “be separated” or “separate oneself,” and action flows toward the subject. Thus, Paul mentions that Onesimus “was separated” (*echoristhe*) from Philemon (Philemon 15). Christians have a high priest “separated” (*kechorismenos*) from sinners (Hebrews 7.26). The apostles were not “to separate themselves” (*choridzesthai*) from Jerusalem (Acts 1.4). Paul “separated himself” (*choristheis*) from Athens and went to Corinth (Acts 18.1; cf. verse 2).

Relevant to the heated controversy concerning divorce are the occurrences of *choridzo* in 1 Corinthians 7. Note carefully that Paul speaks “to the married” (*tois gegamekosin*; verse 10). Paul implores, “Let not a wife separate herself from a husband” (*gunaika apo andros me choristhenai*). The question to be answered is this: Separated in what way or how? In the previous New Testament occurrences of *choridzo*, nothing but a complete, though not irreversible, separation is implied. That Paul indicates the same in this context is verified by verse 11. Here further stipulation is given by Paul in view of a possible violation of his command in verse 10. He writes, “If she separates herself, let her remain unmarried or let her be reconciled to the husband.” The word translated “unmarried” is *agamos*. It occurs only four

times in the Greek New Testament (verses 8, 11, 32, and 34 of 1 Corinthians 7). It means “not married.” The only two possible ways for an individual to become *agamos* when married are: (1) the death of a spouse (see Romans 7.2-3); or (2) divorce from a spouse. Paul is not talking about death; he is talking about “separation.” So *choridzo* in 1 Corinthians 7 means “to separate by means of divorce” or “to divorce.” This is the only possible understanding of *choridzo* in this context, because by the “separation” in question one who is married becomes *agamos*. Paul uses *choridzo* in this passage as a technical term for “divorce” which is consistent in extra-biblical uses of the word in the non-literary papyri.

This indicates that the expression—“unmarried in the eyes of man, but still married in the eyes of God”—is incorrect. According to the apostle, the believer who divorces his or her spouse, regardless of the cause, is *agamos* or unmarried.¹⁸ This is not to say that the believer who divorces a believing spouse is at liberty to remarry. Paul says, “Remain unmarried or be reconciled.” For believers in Christ, remarriage is not a valid option (i.e., without sin).

Paul also addresses the problem of believers married to unbelievers in verse 15. He recognizes the impossibility of forcing unbelievers to remain married to believers and says, “If the unbeliever separates himself by means of divorce, let him separate himself [by means of divorce].” In such cases, Paul indicates, the believer is unmarried and “not under bondage.” To allow anything less is to bind where God has not bound.

¹⁸Compare John 4.17-18 where Jesus agrees with the Samaritan woman’s statement, “I have no husband.” She previously had been married to five different men, but at the time she spoke to Jesus she was unmarried.

APPENDIX B: USE OF *APOLUO* AND *GAMEO* IN KEY SCRIPTURES [From ESV]

- Matthew 19.9 “Whoever **divorces** [*apoluse*] his wife,
except for sexual immorality,
 and marries another [*kai gamese allen*]
 commits adultery [*moichatai*].”
- Mark 10.11, 12 “Whoever **divorces** [*apoluse*] his wife
 and marries another [*kai gamese allen*]
 commits adultery against her [*moichatai ep' auten*],

and **if she divorces** [*aute apolusasa*] her husband
 and **marries another** [*gamese allon*]
 she commits adultery [*moichatai*].”
- Luke 16.18 “Everyone **who divorces** [*apoluon*] his wife
 and marries another [*kai gamon heteran*]
 commits adultery [*moicheuei*],

and he **who marries** [*gamon*] a woman
 divorced from her husband [*ho apolelumenen apo andros*]
 commits adultery [*moicheuei*].”
- Matthew 5.32 “Everyone **who divorces** [*apoluon*] his wife,
except on the ground of sexual immorality,
 makes her commit adultery [*poiei auten moicheuthenai*],

and **whoever marries** [*gamese*]
 a divorced [*apolelumenen*] woman
 commits adultery [*moichatai*].”

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