

Maurice Barnett / Patrick Donahue Exchange – Divorce Only, Not For Fornication – 1993
Article 1 – Barnett

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1 Corinthians 7:10-11

By Maurice Barnett

"But unto the married I give charge, ye not I, but the Lord, That the wife depart not from her husband (but should she depart, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband); and that the husband leave not his wife." (I Corinthians 7:10-11, ASV)

On any subject, there are two very real dangers we must avoid. *First*, we cannot interpret scripture to approve the acts of people when *God does not allow* such acts. We cannot set aside scripture just to make things easier for people to do whatever they want. *Second*, we must not interpret scripture so as to insert rules that are not found there. We are not law makers but law followers. Both courses are equally wrong, going beyond the word of God.

Some people claim verse eleven allows one to leave a spouse for any reason, such as "I just don't want to be married any longer." They assume that it's all right as long as they "remain unmarried." No, this passage is not a loophole to evade marital duties (I Corinthians 7:2-3). Profligate shirking of responsibilities for personal and selfish reasons is not authorized here nor anywhere else in the Bible.

Some have even tried to use this passage for the "waiting game." They think that this passage allows them to leave their spouse for any reason. The process is: One can craftily leave his spouse without getting a civil dissolution of the marriage contract at the court house. He waits, perhaps for years, for the spouse to weaken and sin. *Then* a civil dissolution of the contract is obtained "*because of fornication*." He can then marry another without sin for he has now "put away" his spouse for fornication. Another version of the same thing is to get the dissolution of the civil contract, and then wait for the other party to commit fornication, perhaps twenty years later. He then can mentally say, "I am now putting you away for fornication," which frees him to remarry without sin. No, that abuses Matthew 19:9; their definition of "put away" is in error. "Put away" refers to the physical breakup of the relationship. The cause for the physical breakup must be for fornication. This means the fornication must precede the physical breakup of the relationship, the putting away, not some mental repudiation occurring twenty years afterward. I Corinthians 7:10-11 certainly doesn't authorize anything like that; to the contrary.

Others interpret verse 10 ("depart not in such a way as to deny verse 11. It thus insisted that no one can "depart" under any circumstance except fornication.

Yet others claim that non-Christians are not obligated to obey what Jesus said in Matthew 19:3-12 on marriage, divorce and remarriage; they say that such marriage laws apply only to Christians. They interpret I Corinthians 7:10-15 in a way that they think will prove their conclusion. Or, they will agree that Matthew 19:9 applies, but insist I Corinthians 7:15 is another exception that allows the Christian to marry another. Though we will touch on some areas of this issue, the purpose of this article is focused primarily on verses 10-11.

Basic Rules, And Exceptions

We all know that God gives us specific rules that apply in all circumstances. He, also, may give some exception, or exceptions, to such rules. However, *God is the only one* who can make the exceptions and

any *exceptions must be specified in His word*. We don't have the authority, ourselves, to make any exceptions to

God's laws, though some have always *tried to do so*. Let's look at some instances of exceptions to laws that God put in His word.

(1) The Old Testament required that no work be done on the Sabbath, Deuteronomy 5:12-15, Exodus 16:29, 35:3. Implying servile work and business, the law said that the Jews *were to work and labor* for six days. The Sabbath was a rest from such labors. (One man was stoned to death for picking up sticks on the Sabbath, Numbers 15:32-36.) *Within the Law of Moses*, there are two exceptions to the basic rule that the Jews overlooked. The first exception relates to sacrifices offered in the temple on the Sabbath, Numbers 28:9-10. Referring to this, Jesus said in Matthew 12:5 that the priests *profane the Sabbath* and are guiltless. The God that gave the Sabbath law also gave the law of sacrifices. God had the right to make any exception that set aside the basic rule. The second exception relates to the law of circumcision in Leviticus 12:3. All male babies were to be circumcised on the eighth day, even if that day was the Sabbath. Jesus referred to this in John 7:22-23, that "the law of Moses be not broken." One law modified the other.

(2) I Peter 2:13 tells us to "be subject to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake." Along with other like passages, we understand this is universal in nature, the basic law. However, this rule is set aside when there is a conflict with what God wants us to do, Acts 4:19-20.

(3) Luke 16:18 states the basic law that whoever puts away his wife and marries another commits adultery. There is one exception given, fornication, which will allow the remarriage of the *innocent* party without sin, Matthew 19:9. The exception sets aside the basic rule. However, an unbeliever leaving a Christian, I Corinthians 7:15, is not another exception to Matthew 19:9. (See my booklet, *Alien Sinner And The Law of Christ*.)

The basic law in I Corinthians 7:10-11 is: "I give charge ... the wife depart not from her husband ... and the husband leave not his wife." This expresses a *command*, as suggested by the word "charge" (*paragello*) and other terms. However, "let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband" also contains commands. Both "let her remain" and "be reconciled" are *imperatives*. The first is a present imperative and the latter an aorist imperative. She is commanded as much to remain unmarried as she is to be reconciled; and she is commanded as much to remain unmarried as she is not to depart in the first place.

Some have questioned this by saying that verse 11 *couldn't* contain an *exception* to law and yet *be law at the same time*. There are two things amiss with that objection. First, any *exception* to the basic law of "depart not" isn't in verse 11; it only identifies that there is an exception. Second, it expresses a misunderstanding of *contingency legislation*, a common form in the Bible. Such laws come into effect *only* if a particular course is taken. Otherwise, they are not activate It is "if ... then" legislation, found in verse 11 and other passages in I Corinthians 7.

The Parenthesis

A parenthesis is "a qualifying or explanatory word, phrase, clause, sentence, or other sequence of forms which interrupts the syntactic construction without otherwise affecting it, having often a characteristic intonation, and shown in writing by commas, parentheses, or dashes;" *American College Dictionary*. The syntactic construction of verses 10-11 is: "But unto the married I give charge, yea not I, but the Lord, That the wife depart not from her husband ... and that the husband leave not his wife." The parenthesis appears between "depart" (*choristhenai*) and "leave" (*aphienai*), two infinitives acting as indirect commands. The parenthesis is an aside, an interruption, an explanation of something involved in the main line of thought.

The parenthesis says: "but should she depart, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband." "Or else" comes from a disjunctive conjunction, a particle that means *or, or else*. For example, Matthew 6:24 says: "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other, *or else* he will hold to one, and despise the other." Thayer says it means "to distinguish things or thoughts which either mutually exclude each other, or one of which can take the place of the other," p. 275. Clearly, there is an either/or choice given in the parenthesis.

"Let her remain," is from a single word in Greek, *meno*. The word means to remain, to stay where you are, to abide, to remain in the state in which you find yourself, *Bauer Greek Lexicon*, pp. 503-504. Other authorities agree with this. The *grammatical form* of the word, *meno*, in "Let her remain" is *meneto*, third person, singular, present imperative. Besides the definition of the word *meno*, the *present imperative* shows it is a command to do something constantly, to continue to do it. The grammatical form joins perfectly with the definition of the word. To support that understanding further, let's look at some other passages that use the *same form of meno*, (*meneto*) as in I Corinthians 7:11.

I Corinthians 7:20 says, "Let each man *abide* in that calling wherein he was called." It's evident that the man is expected to remain in that calling. Verse 24 says, "Brethren, *let* each man, wherein he was called, therein *abide* with God." It is "Let each man abide;" in both passages, just like "let her remain" in verse 11, (*meneto*). Hebrews 13:1 says, "Let love of the brethren *continue*." I John 2:24 says, "*let* that *abide* in you which ye heard from the beginning." These passages are very clear in their meaning.

Likewise, *meneto* in I Corinthians 7:11 tells the woman to *abide, continue to live* in an unmarried condition, *or else* be reconciled to her- husband. Here is the point, so please take note: whatever the circumstances of why she departed and became "unmarried," she does not sin in the "departing" of this context.

Others have said that "let her remain unmarried" means unmarried *only* in regard to *men other than the husband*. They say that she cannot remain unmarried to her husband but rather must be reconciled to the husband to be saved. In that event, we would have to reword the parenthesis to say "she must not marry another man but rather must return to the husband." Compare that with "let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband." Those two versions are not even close to one another.

Some have tried to establish a parallel between I Corinthians 7:10-11 and I John 2:1. The latter verse says, "My little children, these things write I unto you that ye may not sin. And if any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous." This "parallel" is supposed to go this way: It is always wrong to sin; we are commanded not to sin. But, if any man does sin, he must return to God or be lost. Likewise, Paul commands the woman not to depart from her husband and she will sin if she departs. So, her only recourse to escape sin is to be reconciled to her husband.

I agree that no one can remain in sin. However to claim that I John 2:1 parallels I Corinthians 7:10-11 is so obviously false that I'm surprised at the attempt to use it. The passages are not parallel in either grammatical form or instruction. To make it parallel, we would have to rewrite I John 2:1 to read, "don't sin, but if any man does sin, let him remain in sin, or else be reconciled to God." However, there is no either/or, no term like *meno*, nor the present imperative in I John 2:1.

Let's just assume for the sake of argument that I John 2:1 is a sinful condition that exactly parallels I Corinthians 7:10-11. In that event, the woman who does depart is *always in a sinful condition regardless of circumstances* as long as she remains apart! One writer said, "Neither passage both prohibits and permits at the same time!" Yet, *the very ones who say this* tell us that if the husband *won't* take her back, *then* she is to remain unmarried, apparently without sin. Now, I John 2:1, in keeping with other scriptures, teaches that a person who is in sin is eternally lost unless he **returns to God**. If that is a "parallel" to I

Corinthians 7:10-11, the woman who leaves her husband remains in sin as long as the separation lasts, *regardless of whether he will take her back or not!* Again, we would have to reword the passage: "If she departs she must quickly be reconciled to her husband in order to escape sin, but if he won't take her back, *then* she is to remain unmarried and is sinless in doing so." Now, try to make *that* a parallel to I John 2:1!

I Corinthians 7:5 says: "Defraud ye not one the other, except it be by consent for a season, that ye may give yourselves unto prayer, and may be together again, that Satan tempt you not because of your *incontinency*." The word "defraud" is a present, active imperative in this sentence and with the negative (*me*) creates a prohibition *command*, "defraud not." It is as much a command as "depart not" in verse 10. So, why would it not be *in all circumstances* sinful for a person to "defraud" his mate? Since it is a command, would not the person be in sin as long as he was not "together" with his spouse and fulfilling all marital duties? Why *not make this passage a parallel with I John 2:1* ? You see, Paul commanded not to defraud your mate. If you do, you are in sin and will be lost unless you "reconcile" with the mate and resume your duties; this is "parallel" to the "parallel" some make with I John 2:1. Well, the reason it is not sinful under all circumstances to "defraud" your mate is because of the exception given. The exception temporarily sets aside the command. The passage both prohibits and permits at the same time.

In the same way, to say that I Corinthians 7:10-11 "does not prohibit and permit at the same time" is to say it contrary to even a casual reading of the passages. Even those who claim it doesn't prohibit and permit at the same time wind up saying that it does!

Depart And Leave

The terms for "depart," *chorizo*, and "leave," *aphiemi*, are used as synonyms in I Corinthians 7. According to verse 12, if the unbeliever is "content to dwell" with him, the believer is "not to leave" her, (*aphiemi*). The same is true about the believing woman in verse 13, "let her not leave," (*aphiemi*), the unbelieving husband. However, the instruction in verse 15 is that if the unbeliever "departs," (*chorizo*), "let him depart," (*chorizo*).

In verse 10, the wife is not to "depart," (*chorizo*), from the husband. In verse 11, she "departs;" (*chorizo*), etc. - the husband is not to "leave," (*aphiemi*), his wife. So, she's not to depart (*chorizo*), and he's not to leave (*aphiemi*). It's evident that *chorizo* and *aphiemi* are used as synonyms.

Both terms, primarily, mean just to separate oneself, to leave, depart, etc. However, *whatever the words* (*chorizo*, *aphiemi*) *mean*, (just a separation and/or a dissolution of the civil contract at the court house), the question is "how does verse 11 fit into the picture?"

"Not I, but the Lord" ...

"I say, not the Lord"

The Corinthians had sent to Paul some questions on several subjects: "Now *concerning the things* whereof ye wrote," verse 1. It's apparent from the whole Corinthian letter that the church was confused and divided on a number of items. Many things Paul had taught them when he was there now had been discarded, twisted, or had simply become matters of confusion and division (see 11:2, 23).

Answering one of their questions, verse 10, Paul says "I give charge, yea *not I, but the Lord*." The reader is thus referred to something specific Jesus had already said.

In Matthew 19:3-12, Jesus presents God's law that had been in effect since the creation of man. *Because He made them male and female "from the beginning,"* God said that a man will leave father and mother and cleave to his wife and the two will become one flesh. The rules governing marriage are found in the sex distinction of male and female, *rooted in the whole human race, not just a part of it*. The "cleaving" and becoming "one flesh" refer to the *physical relationship* established. Jesus adds: "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder," (*chorizo*). The Jews' question, in verse 3, was about

"putting away," referring to the *physical* separation of the man and wife. Though man *does have* the ability to divide (*chorizo*) that physical relationship, Jesus said *don't do it*. Later, when Paul said that the wife was not to depart (*chorizo*) from the husband, he was referring to what Jesus Himself had said, Matthew 19:6. *Keep this point in mind!* Paul was not pointing back to Matthew 19:9 but rather to the statement of Matthew 19:6!

The Corinthians had written Paul specific questions about how to handle the *relationship* when one is a believer and the other an unbeliever, I Corinthians 7:12-16. Paul begins his comments in verse 12 with "I say, not the Lord." This means that, while on earth, Jesus did not say anything *specifically* about all of the problems of a believer /unbeliever relationship. But, neither did the Lord say anything specifically about the unmarried and widows, as Paul does in verses 8-9. Paul introduces those verses with "But I say," as he does in verse 12. In verse 25, he says: "Now concerning virgins I have no commandment of the Lord: but I give my judgment..." In answering the question of the Corinthians, Paul says that not only did Jesus not say anything about this, but he had no revelation by the Holy Spirit about it either. The answer to the question involved a matter of judgment about what was most expedient, so, Paul gave them his best opinion and identifies it as such.

Because of the statement "But I say, not the Lord," some have immediately concluded that the believer/unbeliever marriage is not under the same rules as a marriage of two believers and so none of Matthew 19 applies. However, *that's a mistake the Corinthians also made!* They obviously thought that just - because their spouse was an unbeliever that they could, or should, leave them. Paul said in both verses, 12 and 13, "don't leave!" *That's just what* he said in verses 10-11, *which is what Jesus said in Matthew 19:6*. From that standpoint, the instructions are the same. The marriage laws of leaving and cleaving and not putting asunder, that are set from the beginning, apply to the believer and unbeliever alike whether they recognize it or not. Some of what Paul says about the believer/unbeliever relationship is not found in what Jesus said, but *some of it is!*

An unbeliever might not want to stay with a believer because of the believer's faith. The unbeliever would not feel obligated to follow the teachings of Jesus as the Christian would. Paul said don't leave if the unbeliever is "content to dwell" with you. The word "content" is from *suneudokeo* which Thayer, page 604, says means *"to be pleased together with, to approve together (with others) ... to be pleased at the same time with, consent, agree to."* It refers to a joint agreement (*sun*) between the believer and the unbeliever that they will maintain an amicable and amiable relationship. (In this sense, there is a similarity to the mutual consent and approval of verse 5. The believer could "defraud" the unbeliever with the unbeliever's approval in order to engage in spiritual activity, and then be together with him again.) The ideal amiability of this "agreement" is also seen in verse 14. First, the unbeliever is "sanctified" in the believer. Second, if the believer leaves because she thought there was something wrong with being married to an unbeliever, it would, in effect, be charging that her children are "unclean."

Paul says that if the unbeliever is content to dwell with the believer, the Christian is not to leave. *That implies* that if the unbeliever is not content to dwell with the Christian, then the Christian *can* leave. (It may be that, though not agreeing on an amiable relationship with the believer, the unbeliever decides to stay in the house to try to destroy the Christians' faith, or generally make things miserable for the believer.) If the believer departs, *at that point* verse 11 comes into effect. That means she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to the husband. The believer and unbeliever are married, are they not? That's just what verses 10-11 are talking about: those who are married. The difference is that verses 12-13 deal with married people where one is an unbeliever. So, the Christian is told not to depart in verses 12-13 *just like* he is told not to depart in verses 10-11. (On the other hand, it's useless to tell unbelievers not to depart because if they cared anything about what God said they wouldn't be unbelievers.)

Let's carry that one step further. If the Christian can leave the unbeliever in order to retain her faith and

full service to God, but must remain unmarried, why should we conclude that if the *unbeliever leaves* because of the faith of the Christian, then the Christian can marry someone else? (For a full discussion of I Corinthians 7:15, see my booklet, before mentioned.)

Exception For Verse 11

We know that Jesus said something directly relating to I Corinthians 7:10. Now the question is: Did *the Lord* say *anything* that directly relates to verse 11 as well? The answer is, yes!

Luke 18:29-30: "And he said unto them, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or wife, or brethren, or parents, or children, for the kingdom of God's sake, who shall not receive manifold more in this time, and in the world to come eternal life." The word "left" in this passage is *aphiemi*, as in I Corinthians 7:11 which says the husband is not to leave (*aphiemi*) his wife. Jesus said that if a man "left" his wife for the Kingdom of God's sake, he would receive blessings in this life and eternal life to come. Why is it that Paul commands that a husband is not to leave his wife, but Jesus said that if he does he will be blessed? Is there a contradiction? No!

Jesus had chosen his apostles and personally called each of them to follow Him. To obey that call, they had to abandon things and relationships. Luke 18:28 records, "And Peter said, Lo, we have left (*aphiemi*) our own, and followed thee." That prompted the response of Jesus in verses 29-30. They had to do whatever was necessary to obey what Jesus commanded. If it meant leaving everything they had and dropping all relationships, then that's what had to be done. Paul had that attitude, Philippians 3:7-8. Keep in mind that the apostles had a *specific* call by the Lord for a *specific work*. However, the *principle* remains the same for all disciples.

In Luke 9:57-62, Jesus deals with excuses of others than the apostles when He said to them, "Follow me." One wanted to first go bury his father. Jesus said "Leave (*aphiemi*) the dead to bury their own dead; but go thou and publish abroad the kingdom of God." Another wanted to "bid farewell to them that are at my house." Jesus considered a person like that as not "fit for the kingdom of God." That reminds us of Luke 18:28-30. If one "leaves" everything, including "wife" for "*the kingdom of God's sake*," he will be blessed. If there is anything or anyone standing in our way of doing what God commands us to do, then we must abandon it, or them, as Jesus insisted.

I Corinthians 7:5 shows the same principle: "Defraud ye not one the other, except it be by consent for a season, that ye may give yourselves unto prayer, and may be together again, that Satan tempt you not because of your incontinency." This views a couple who mutually agree to temporarily set aside marital duties for spiritual reasons. If we can understand such a setting aside of marital duties in verse 5, we can also see it in verse 11 and Luke 18. Verse 11 deals with a more serious aspect of the same thing when it is necessary to unilaterally leave a spouse and remain apart for spiritual reasons.

The basic law is that one is not to leave his spouse whether he is married to a believer or unbeliever. However, the *exception* to that basic law is that God comes before a wife or husband *just like* any other relationship. Any departure *must be* "for the kingdom of God's sake." Mark 10:2, a parallel passage, says "for my sake and for the gospel's sake." Jesus said that some make themselves *eunuchs* "for the kingdom of heaven's sake," Matthew 19:12.

We all have lamented when some person allowed a parent, son or daughter, wife or husband, or another relative to stop them from obeying the gospel. We have pointed out to them that Matthew 10:34-38 says we are to love Him more than we do father, mother, children, etc., that *we must put Him first above all relationships*. It's said again in Luke 14:26: "If any man cometh unto me, and hateth not his own father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. "

Is anyone ready to say that *relationships come first in our lives and God must take second place*? Apparently, there are some who do think that way. Objection is made to the position I have presented here, saying something like: "Are we to abandon our parents for the kingdom of heaven's sake? Are we to abandon our children for the kingdom of heaven's sake?" The wording and thrust of the questions show that the objector means by "abandon" what Webster defines as: "a yielding to natural impulses ...carefree ease or freedom often with disregard for consequences." Implied in such emotionally charged wording is the vision of three small children, all under five years old, being "abandoned" to some terrible fate by a parent intent on "serving God." My, how hardhearted and shameful! (We have faced this same approach for decades, though worded as a charge that "you people believe in abandoning poor starving orphans!") I know of no possible situation in serving God that would require kicking a three year old out into the street to fend for himself, nor turning out one's poor old mother with nothing but her rocking chair "for the kingdom of heaven's sake."

However, there may come to pass some situation in regard to *any* relationship that requires a separation in order to serve God, as in the above passages. Peter says they had left all to follow Jesus. Whatever was contained in "all," Peter says they had left it. Jesus then follows that confession of Peter by saying that anyone who "leaves" any relationship or material things for His sake, the gospel's sake, the kingdom of heaven's sake will be blessed in this life and the one to come. Jesus understood that there might be some circumstance when it would be necessary to leave even children," or "parents" for the kingdom of heaven's sake. Did Jesus speak truth, or not? Someone may not like that, but he will have to argue with the Lord about it.

Let's look at I Corinthians 7:12-14. It's obvious that the conflict between the believer and unbeliever in these passages is because of the believer's faith, as seen in the following points. (1) The Corinthians had written questions to Paul about such a relationship and whether they should remain with an unbelieving spouse. (2) The repeated point about believer/ unbeliever. (3) The unbeliever being "sanctified" in the believer emphasizes the spiritual atmosphere furnished by the believer. The believer is told to remain with the unbeliever. They are rightly married with all attendant responsibilities; it is as much an acceptable marriage as if they were two believers. If the Christian left *just because* the spouse was an unbeliever, it would violate her responsibilities to the other, and would, in effect, declare the relationship unlawful and the children illegitimate.

However, Paul presents another contingency statement here. It is "If any brother hath an unbelieving wife, and she is content to dwell with him, let him not leave her." This implies that if she is not content to dwell with him, that he can leave. The point of conflict between them is the faith of the believer. The unbeliever is not willing to live with that and is, in effect, driving the believer away. Any separation is because of spiritual matters.

Conflict resulting from marriage is a common subject in I Corinthians 7. Even in verse 11, the word "reconcile" (*katallasso*) implies some kind of conflict that prompted the departing. (This contrasts with the union and agreement between the two in the *temporary* "separation" of verse 5.) In verses 12-13, if the unbeliever is "content to dwell" with the believer, then the believer is "not to leave." However, in verse fifteen, the believer is told that "if the unbelieving departeth, let him depart," adding that "God hath called us in peace."

There will always be tension and stress in any relationship. That's quite normal. We can't approve of two people who are constantly bickering because both are contentious and *neither is* trying to follow God's will. We are looking at a situation where one of the parties is wanting to, trying to, serve God and is, in some way, being kept from it by the other person. Conflict that keeps us from serving God must be resolved in favor of God!

Proverbs 21:19 gives the wisdom that "it is better to dwell in the wilderness, than with a contentious and

an angry woman." Or, verse nine, "It is better to dwell in a corner of the housetop, than with a brawling woman in a wide house." However, in the Lord's instruction, the only way besides fornication that one can leave his spouse is when that spouse stands in the way of his or her mate serving God. We cannot forsake God to please our mates. If, in *order to serve God*, anyone must separate from the husband or wife, then it is exactly what he should do! *That is what 1 Corinthians 7:11 is about, based on what the Lord said in Like 18:29-30, and other passages.*