

Is Divorce (Not For Fornication) O.K., As Long As There Is No Remarriage?

This article is a reply to some of the content of Maurice Barnett's article "I Corinthians 7:10-11" in the February 1993 issue of The Gospel Anchor. Although I agree with much of the article (like the parts about Bales' doctrine, and about the "mental divorce" position), the point that I take issue with is that I Cor 7:10-11 allows one to "depart" from their spouse for a reason other than fornication, as long as they don't remarry. In discussing some false understandings of I Cor 7:10-11, Mr. Barnett says, "Others interpret verse 10 ('depart not') in such a way as to deny verse 11. It is thus insisted that no one can 'depart' under any circumstance except fornication." Since I am one of those "that insist that no one can 'depart' under any circumstance except fornication," I intend to explain why I believe so, especially in view of Mr. Barnett's arguments to the contrary.

Contingency Legislation, Not An Exception

The passage under consideration, I Cor 7:10-11, reads as follows: "And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband: But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife." Mr. Barnett correctly points out that I Cor 7:11 expresses "contingency legislation," but then incorrectly says that it "identifies that there is an exception" (to verse 10). Contingency legislation is not the same as expressing an exception. Contingency legislation ("if ... then' legislation") gives instructions about what to do if something occurs, but does NOT necessarily give approval to that something that has occurred. And this is how I Cor 7:10-11 is parallel to I Jn 2:1. The two passages are not parallel in every respect (no one ever claimed that I Jn 2:1 gives two options as I Cor 7:11 does), but they are parallel in that both passages follow a command with contingency legislation -> what do I do if I violate the command stated previous? Neither passage gives an exception to the command expressed; contingency legislation does not imply exception.

But even if the I Jn 2:1 illustration were not parallel, the principle is still true (an illustration doesn't prove anyway, it only illustrates). Contingency legislation does not condone action that the instruction is contingent upon. Verse 11 then does not provide an exception to verse 10, it only provides contingency legislation. The only exception to verse 10 is found in Mt 5:32; it is wrong to separate/divorce from your spouse for any reason other than fornication, even if you don't remarry.

Galatians 5:15 and James 3:14

"Here is the point, so please take note: whatever the circumstances of why she departed and became 'unmarried,' she" DOES "sin in the 'departing' of this context" (unless the departing was for fornication). Saying that I Cor 7:11 shows that it is not a sin for you to depart as long as you don't remarry, is about like saying that it would not be a sin for you to "bite and devour one another," as long as you "take heed that ye be not consumed one of another" (Gal 5:15). It would be about like saying that it would not be a sin for you to "have bitter envying and strife in your hearts," as long as you "glory not, and lie not against the truth" (James 3:14).

Two Options, But Are They Equal?

Some say that it is wrong to leave, but that if you do, I Cor 7:11 shows that it is o.k. to remain apart. Besides flying in the face of what repentance means, this understanding is not born out by verse 11. Just because I Cor 7:11 gives two options about what to do if someone departs (sins), it does not mean that

these two options are on equal footing in all respects. Let me give you a parallel verse that illustrates this true principle (that two options are not necessarily "equal"). The parallel is Rev 3:15: "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot." I raise the question, "did the Laodiceans have the 'option' to be cold?" If not, why not (since two options are given)? The truth is, God wants a person to be hot, but if he won't be hot, he would rather him be cold than lukewarm. Now this verse is not parallel in every respect (for example, it is a sin to be cold, but not a sin to remain unmarried if your spouse won't take you back), but it is parallel in that both passages give two options where one is preferable over the other.

But let me repeat, even if this verse were not parallel to I Cor 7:11, it wouldn't make the principle untrue. The principle is true that two options can be given, with one being preferred over the other. In our passage, verse 11 could mean that the person who departed is to be reconciled if possible, but if reconciliation is not possible (suppose their spouse won't take them back), then they are to remain unmarried, they are not to commit the additional sin of adultery in remarriage. The fact that verse 11 could mean this, means that verse 11 can not be used as proof that either divorce, or a refusal to return, is not sin. As a matter of fact, not only could verse 11 mean this, but it must mean this considering what verse 10 says!

Mr. Barnett argues that if I Jn 2:1 is parallel to I Cor 7:10-11, "the woman who does depart is always in a sinful condition regardless of circumstances as long as she remains apart!" First of all, remember that no one said that I Jn 2:1 is parallel to I Cor 7:10-11 in every respect, but only in the respect that shows that I Cor 7:11 is contingency legislation (and not an exception), and therefore does not allow divorce. Secondly, one reason that we know that a woman is not in sin if she tries to go back to her spouse (but is refused by him) is because -> that is what Paul is saying by the phrase "remain unmarried": remain unmarried if you can't be reconciled (any other explanation for verse 11 would contradict verse 10).

Is I Corinthians 7:5 Parallel?

Mr. Barnett argues that I Cor 7:5 ("Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time ...") is parallel to I Cor 7:10-11, thereby showing that verse 11 is providing an exception to verse 10. But they are not parallel in the very respect Mr. Barnett is stating that they are! I Cor 7:5 does give an exception (notice the word "except" is even used); but it does not say what to do if you do defraud (contingency legislation). I Cor 7:11, on the other hand, does not give an exception to the general rule given in verse 10; instead it tells what to do if the instruction found in verse 10 is not followed (contingency legislation).

Does I Corinthians 7:12-13 Allow Departing?

Then Mr. Barnett says that because "Paul says that if the unbeliever is content to dwell with the believer, the Christian is not to leave" (from verses 12-13), that "implies that if the unbeliever is not content to dwell with the Christian, then the Christian can leave." But verses 12-13 don't imply what Mr. Barnett says they do. The "if" construction does not necessarily imply that it is o.k. to leave a spouse who is "not agreeing on an amiable relationship." Notice a parallel passage, I Cor 7:28, "... and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned." According to Mr. Barnett's reasoning, this verse would imply that "if a virgin does not marry she hath sinned." Notice also Matthew 11:14, "And, if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come." According to Mr. Barnett's reasoning, this verse would imply that "if ye will not receive it, this is not Elias, which was for to come." Notice also that in I Cor 7:12 we have a conclusion based upon two conditions: (1) "If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and" (2) if "she be pleased to dwell with him." If it is valid to take the converse of the conclusion if the second condition is not met (but the first is met), why would it not be valid to take the converse of the conclusion if the first condition is not met (but the second is met). Therefore, by Mr. Barnett's reasoning this verse would also teach that "If any brother hath a wife that does believe, and she is pleased to dwell with him," "then the Christian can leave."

When I Cor 7:12-13 talks about the unbeliever being pleased to dwell with the believer, it is the same as saying that they do dwell with them. If the unbeliever does not depart (verse 15), then they are pleased to dwell with the believer, even if they are pleased to dwell with the believer unamiably. The converse of verses 12 and 13 is found in verse 15, "If they are not pleased to dwell with you (verse 12), then let them depart (verse 15) (not ... then leave them yourself, or put them away). Let's let the Bible interpret itself!

Does Luke 18:29-30 Allow For Departing?

The last of Mr. Barnett's arguments that I would like to deal with is from Lk 18:29-30 which reads, "And he said unto them, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or parents, or brethren, or wife, or children, for the kingdom of God's sake, Who shall not receive manifold more in this present time, and in the world to come life everlasting." Mr. Barnett teaches that this verse allows for a cause for divorce ("for the kingdom of God's sake" -> who knows what this could include) in addition to the cause of fornication. But I would ask Mr. Barnett, "have you ever mentioned this passage (along with others) when asked where the Bible ever tells a man to leave his wife (in the case of what you consider an unscriptural marriage)?" The point is that this passage does not prove another cause for divorce, it could just be talking about a man leaving his wife because they were in an unscriptural marriage (indeed, in the light of other passages, it would have this case under consideration, but not Mr. Barnett's case).

Matthew 19:3-9

Although the main purpose of this article was to deal with Mr. Barnett's arguments, I would like to make a couple of affirmative arguments against his position. Contrary to popular belief, Mt 19:3-9 does not only condemn divorce and remarriage; it also condemns divorce all by itself. The initial question raised by the Pharisees in verse 3 pertains to divorce and not necessarily also to remarriage. And Jesus answers the question of verse 3 ("Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?") with a resounding NO ("what therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder") in verse 6. Jesus then gives an additional thought ("And") in verse 9, when he states that if you divorce for a reason other than fornication, and you remarry, you commit adultery. Obviously, Jesus provides the general rule that divorce is wrong in verse 6, and then gives the only exception to that general rule in verse 9.

Matthew 5:32

If this is not clear to you, the argument can be made even stronger from Mt 5:32, because this verse does not mention the remarriage of the person doing the divorcing (as Mt 19:9 does). Mt 5:32 reads, "But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery." This verse teaches the rule that it is wrong for a man to divorce his wife (not mentioning the remarriage of the man), and gives the only exception to the rule, fornication. Put another way, if a man divorces his wife (unless it is for fornication), he sins by putting her into an undeserved position of temptation ("causeth her to commit adultery"), regardless of whether or not that man remarries. Anybody that can see that because Mt 19:9 gives the one and only cause for "divorce and remarriage" by using the word "except," and therefore rules out James Bales' interpretation of I Cor 7:15, ought to be able to see that because Mt 5:32 gives the one and only cause for divorce period by using the word "saving" (in the sense of "except"), and therefore rules out Mr. Barnett's interpretation of I Cor 7:11, I Cor 7:12-13, and Lk 18:29-30.

Yes, God "hateth putting away" (Mal 2:16), even if no remarriage follows. God expects husbands to "dwell" with their wives according to knowledge. The Lord commands, "Let not the wife depart from her husband" (I Cor 7:10).

Patrick T. Donahue