

40 civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage.” First, we consider the
41 expression, “willful desertion.”

42

43 A. “*Wilful Desertion*”

44 From *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1971 edition). We note that the OED studies data from
45 published English language materials going back well before the 17th century. As such its authors
46 intend for it to be useable to determine possible senses for the key terms, not only in the late 20th
47 and early 21st century, but also during the 17th century.

48

49 s.v. ‘desertion’

50 “2. *Law* ... Also, willful abandonment of the conjugal society, without reasonable cause,
51 on the part of a husband or wife”

52

53 s.v. ‘willful’ – two possible definitions:

54 “†4. Proceeding from the will; done, undertaken, assumed, or undergone of one’s own free
55 will or choice; not compulsory or enforced”

56 “5. Done on purpose or wittingly; purposed, deliberate, intentional; not accidental or casual.
57 Chiefly, now always in a bad sense”

58

59 ‘abandonment’

60 “The action or process of abandoning”

61

62 ‘abandon’

63 “6. To forsake, leave, or desert (a place, person, or cause)”

64

65 ‘society’

66 “2. The state or condition of living in association, company, or intercourse with others of
67 the same species”

68

69 We take def. 2 for ‘desertion’, together with def. 6 for abandon, removing the word ‘desert’ as
70 tautological. Our partial definition becomes,

71

72 “Wilful forsaking or leaving the state of living in conjugal association with one’s spouse,
73 without reasonable cause”

74

75 Which definition of ‘willful’ pertains is perhaps the most difficult question, but it is important. The
76 fact that this adjective is both construed with ‘desertion’ by the Westminster Assembly (WA) and
77 is also included in the definition of ‘desertion’ by the OED suggests that in the WCF it is, rigorously
78 speaking, redundant; hence, its inclusion by the WA is emphatic. Despite being considered obsolete
79 (today), def. 4 of ‘willful’ fits best in this context. Especially when one considers that in the context

80 of the sole passage cited by the WA as its proof text, 1 Cor 7:15, the separation/divorce by the
81 unbeliever which frees the believer from the marriage (v 15b; see below for its exegesis) stands
82 over against the *willingness* of that unbeliever to dwell together with the believer (“if ... he/she is
83 willing ...”; vv 12-13, NIV). The exercise of the (free) will (def. 4; vs. compulsion, etc.) rather
84 than intentionality (def. 5 vs. accident, etc.) is the crux. Therefore, we judge def. 4 is intended by
85 the WA.

86
87 Our provisional definition, based strictly on general English language usage described by the OED,
88 becomes:

89
90 “Wilful desertion” constitutes forsaking or leaving the state of living in conjugal (= marital)
91 association with one’s spouse, by one’s own free will, without external compulsion or
92 reasonable cause.

93
94 B. ***“Such ... as Can No Way be Remedied by the Church, or Civil Magistrate.”***

95
96 In context, the term, “willful desertion,” is modified by the clause, “such ... as can no way be
97 remedied by the Church, or civil magistrate.” This clause further specifies (limits) just when a
98 spouse’s willful forsaking or leaving the state of living in association with [his] spouse can be
99 reckoned a sufficient ground for the deserted party to seek dissolution of the marriage bond. In
100 other words, not all willful desertion constitutes a ground for legitimate divorce. The implication
101 of, “can no way be remedied,” is that it is only after the church and the appropriate governmental
102 officials have exhausted all means available to bring the deserter to repentance, but to no avail, that
103 the deserter’s willful desertion may justly be appealed to as the ground for the other spouse to seek
104 legal dissolution of the marriage.

105
106 With respect to the civil magistrate, the means available will depend upon local civil and criminal
107 law and the willingness of the appropriate officials to enforce that law. On this matter, the church
108 can only require that the innocent party in good faith utilizes every means available under law to
109 seek to compel the abandoning spouse to return.

110
111 With respect to the church, willful desertion “such ... as can no way be remedied by the Church”
112 means the church must fully bring to bear all possible biblical church power upon the deserter,
113 before allowing the deserted (church member) spouse to seek a divorce, or before granting an
114 ecclesiastical divorce.

115
116 What sort of power might that include? The WA offers an implicit answer to this vital question.
117 Since WLC 139 declares desertion to be sin under the seventh commandment, one may assume that
118 the WA has in mind the church treating the one willfully forsaking the living in association with
119 his spouse to be guilty of a sin under the rubric of the seventh commandment. In fact, since desertion

120 stands alongside of adultery (a capital offense in the OT) both in the list of sins in WLC 139, and
121 as one of only two sins that justify divorce in WCF 24.6, one may infer that the WA considers
122 desertion to be a *very serious sin*. In a case of such serious sin, the WCF declares, “Church censures
123 are necessary, for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren,” so that in seeking to bring a
124 member found guilty of desertion to repent and return to his spouse, “the officers of the Church are
125 to proceed by admonition; suspension from the sacrament of the Lord's Supper for a season; and by
126 excommunication from the Church.” (30.3, 4). One must conclude then, that until these available
127 censures have been exhausted (but have been ineffective), the threshold requirement of 24.6 (“such
128 ... as can no way be remedied by the Church”) has not been met. Accordingly, the willful desertion
129 in view cannot (yet) be recognized as a ground for a lawful divorce – according to the WA.
130

131 In conclusion, the import of this clause in WCF 24.6, read in its context within the entirety of the
132 three Westminster Standards, is that the officers of the church or churches where a Christian married
133 couple are members and where one party is guilty of willfully forsaking or leaving the state of living
134 in association with the other may not permit that deserted spouse to divorce the deserter until that
135 deserter has been excommunicated from membership in the visible church since until that has
136 happened, it cannot be said that there remains no possible way for the church to seek to remedy the
137 estrangement.
138

139 **(2) Historical study of the background of the doctrine, particularly during the period of**
140 **church history leading up to the formulation of the confession's teaching and study of the**
141 **Westminster Assembly itself**

142
143 **Willful Desertion Historical Survey¹**
144

145 None of the previous Reformed confessions in the British Isles including the Scots Confession (1560)
146 the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England (CoE, 1563) and the Irish Articles of Religion (1615)
147 - included a statement on divorce, and the articles on marriage in the latter two documents focused
148 narrowly on the question of a celibate clergy. Surveying earlier continental confessions as well, there
149 is only one reference; it is found in the First Helvetic confession (1536). It states,
150

151 We contend that marriage has been instituted and prescribed by God for all men who are
152 qualified and fit for it and who have not otherwise been called by God to live a chaste life
153 outside marriage. No order or state is so holy and honorable that marriage would be opposed
154 to it and should be forbidden. Since such marriages should be confirmed in the presence of
155 the Church by a public exhortation and vow in keeping with its dignity, the government
156 should also respect it and see to it that a marriage is legally and decently entered into and

¹The Committee acknowledges that the outline of the historical section of its report was borrowed from a paper by the Rev. Dr. Mark Garcia.

157 given legal and honorable recognition, and is not lightly dissolved without serious and
158 legitimate grounds.
159

160 In this sense there was no confessional precedent in Reformed churches that speaks deliberately,
161 directly, and extensively to the question of divorce as does the Westminster Confession 24:6.² The
162 reason for this development is probably related to the controversy during the Assembly related to the
163 publication of a book on divorce by John Milton (1608-1674), who used material from Martin Bucer
164 (1491-1551) in order to widen the grounds of divorce very broadly.
165

166 The WA took up the question of marriage and divorce in 1646, the year the Confession was
167 completed (apart from the proof texts requested by Parliament). The minutes record the following
168 actions. The committee assignment was made February 23. The report on marriage was presented
169 June 17 and debated August 3-4. The report on divorce was presented August 10 and debated
170 September 10-11. The proposed chapter “Of Marriage and Divorce” as a whole was debated
171 November 9, and the section on willful desertion was recommitted. The committee reported back
172 the next day, and, following further debate on willful desertion, the Assembly on November 11
173 adopted the chapter "Of Marriage and Divorce" as we now know it.³
174

175 **The Language**

176 The language the divines used when speaking about divorce reflects a development or change from
177 the language used in the western church prior to the Reformation.⁴ The pre-Reformation language
178 of Western Canon Law for divorce differs from our own, which reflects a change in ecclesiastical
179 posture toward divorce, prompted in part by the ways the Westminster Assembly (WA) and other
180 bodies rejected this tradition. As part of this older tradition on divorce, the Roman Catholic Church
181 (RCC) taught that there were two kinds of marriage: one that is sacramental and the other which is
182 not sacramental. The possibility of dissolving a marriage depended on the kind of marriage in view.
183 A non-sacramental marriage, which was between two people who were not baptized, could be
184 dissolved under certain circumstances.⁵ A sacramental marriage that had been consummated, in

² This doesn't mean that the issue had not arisen in the England, Scotland, and Ireland. For instance, the Scottish Parliament had enacted legislation which allowed for divorce on the grounds of desertion in 1573.

³ Here and throughout we have freely borrowed from the PCA's "Report of the Ad-Interim Committee on Divorce and Remarriage to the 20th General Assembly," although conclusions are our own.

⁴ In our culture today when we use the word 'divorce' it refers to the legal, official dissolution of a marriage and when we use the word 'separation' it refers to the suspension or termination of the cohabitation of spouses, either legally according to a civil standard or unofficially. In western legal tradition these two ideas were sometimes referred to as divorce *a vinculo*, which is a *dissolution* of the marriage bond, and divorce *a mensa et thoro*, which we would refer to as legal separation. For a detailed history for the transition from the Roman Catholic to the Protestant views see Roderick Phillips, *Putting Asunder: A History of Divorce in Western Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 1-133; for an abridged treatment see Phillips' *Untying the Knot: A Short History of Divorce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1-46.

⁵ In contrast to the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Church followed the civil legislation that the emperor Justinian instituted which allowed (and still allows) for divorce on a wide number of grounds, which is related to the fact that

185 theory, could be dissolved only through death.⁶ Yet, the Papal Courts and lower canonical courts
186 could remove such impediments, through various procedures. In one fifteenth century case in the
187 Bishopric of Constance, for example, the courts granted Agnes Schürcherin a divorce from two
188 different men, one on the grounds that she was involved sexually with another man, and the second
189 because that man desired to become a priest to fulfill a purported wish of his father.⁷ In another
190 case, a couple who had been married for 15 years and had eight children were separated due to the
191 impediment of spiritual relationship, i.e. “double case of god parenthood.”⁸ These are just two cases
192 among many that demonstrate that the courts were regularly used to circumvent the sacramental
193 understanding of marriage.

194
195 The two kinds of marriage taught by the RCC (Western Canon Law) influenced the thinking of the
196 CoE. This in turn was the principal environment and setting (culturally, if not theologically) for the
197 gathering of the WA in the 1640s. Western canon law traditionally forbid divorce in the case of
198 sacramental marriages, i.e. between a baptized man and woman. In non-sacramental marriages, i.e.
199 between an unbaptized man and woman, western canon law permitted divorce for grave causes, the
200 *chief* (not the only) cause of which was adultery.⁹ This divorce in fact amounts to a permanent
201 separation which, *because it is understood in those terms*, did not (and still for the RCC, officially,
202 does not) include the freedom of either party to remarry. The so called “Pauline Privilege” to
203 lawfully remarry after a Christian has been deserted by an unbaptized spouse, based upon 1 Cor
204 7:12-15, did, however, eventually become established in canon law.¹⁰

they did not recognize the notion of two different kinds of marriage.

⁶To circumvent “divorce” or dissolution the Roman Catholic Church used a procedure called annulment for sacramental marriage. It was precisely this kind of annulment that Henry VIII of England sought in to end his marriage with Catherine of Aragon. G.W. Bernard, *The King’s Reformation: Henry VIII and the Remaking of the Church of England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 1-224. See for example, Ludwig Schmugge, *Marriage on Trial: Late Medieval German Couples at the Papal Court* (trans. Atria A. Larson; Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012); for an account of the role of canon law and its interplay with common law regarding the issue of divorce and remarriage in the period from Henry’s split from the Papacy until well past the Westminster Assembly see R. H. Helmholz, *Roman Canon Law in Reformation England* (1990, reprint; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁷Schmugge, *Marriage on Trial*, 104-6.

⁸Schmugge, *Marriage on Trial*, 113.

⁹By the 12th Century, the marriage of an unbeliever to a believer was invalid. The marriage would be dissolved on the grounds of fraud. Other impediments that would dissolve marriages included “crime,” i.e. pre-marital coitus between the engaged parties as well as prior and perpetual impotence, Charles J. Reid, *Power Over the Body, Equality in the Family: Rights and Domestic Relations in Medieval Canon Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 140-141.

¹⁰“Pauline Privilege” was the medieval interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:12-15 which provided for the divorce between a Christian and a pagan, though not a heretic, Robert Kingdon, *Adultery and Divorce in Calvin’s Geneva* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 156-57.

RCC Canon Law reads:

Can. 1143 §1. A marriage entered into by two non-baptized persons is dissolved by means of the Pauline privilege in favor of the faith of the party who has received baptism by the very fact that a new marriage is contracted by the same party, provided that the non-baptized party departs.

205
206 With this in mind, we return to the language of WCF 24.6 and we notice the way the divines chose
207 their wording: "...is cause sufficient to dissolve the bond of marriage." Note the following
208 expressions: (1) "cause *sufficient*," which is not the same as cause *necessary*. In other words, the
209 language reminds us that even though a deserted spouse may have a valid ground for divorce he is
210 not *obligated* to divorce.¹¹ This is consistent with the biblical expectation that the decision to
211 divorce ordinarily comes after a period of attempts toward reconciliation (hence "willful" desertion)
212 even after the breach of the marriage covenant has occurred. With the language of a "cause
213 sufficient" but not necessary, the Divines at Westminster also rejected the idea that the sin *itself*
214 automatically dissolves the bond of marriage *per se* or *on its own*. Instead, it is a *cause sufficient* to
215 dissolve the bond of marriage by an act of divorce. The sin violates the covenant and provides valid
216 grounds for divorce, but it is the divorce that dissolves the marriage, not the violation of the
217 covenant itself, which is consistent with a *covenantal* rather than a *sacramental* (RCC and CoE)
218 understanding of the marriage bond.

219
220 Finally, for the WA "to dissolve the bond of marriage" indicates that divorce really terminates a
221 marriage, which set their position over against the traditions of the RCC and the official stance of
222 the CoE during the time of the WA. In summary, one finds no trace in the Westminster Standards
223 (Wstds) of the RCC notion of *two kinds* of marriage.

224
225 Since we have no record in the minutes of what was debated on the floor, we can only consider the
226 wording of the sentence and its literary and historical context. "The problem confronting such a
227 study of what may have been in the thinking of the WA is that the whole question of divorce was
228 in flux in the Reformation era, particularly and prolongedly so in England..."¹²The literature of the
229 period bears this out remarkably, and we will list some examples of this.

230 231 **The Literature from the Reformation to the Assembly**

232 In the medieval RCC "divorce" was already a step or two away from the biblical use of the
233 language. For the medievals, "divorce" was the separation of the adulterous spouse from the
234 innocent spouse, not the definitive dissolution of the marriage bond with the right to remarry. An
235 actual dissolution was instead termed an "annulment." The Reformation rejected the medieval
236 notions of celibacy and also of marriage as sacrament in an attempt to return to a biblical conception
237 of marriage. Yet this was not a simple, unbroken transition, especially since the older (and standing)

§2. The non-baptized party is considered to depart if he or she does not wish to cohabit with the baptized party or to cohabit peacefully without a Vront [*sic*] to the Creator unless the baptized party, after baptism was received, has given the other a just cause for departing.

From the *Code of Canon Law*: http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/_P44.HTM

¹¹When the word spouse is used, the reader may assume it to apply to both husband and wife, the use of the generic 'he' notwithstanding.

¹²PCA Report, p 267; italics added.

238 models of “divorce” were tied to the previously mentioned notions of the two kinds of marriages
239 that were now in question. The transition took place in fits and starts. We hope to outline very
240 succinctly the context of these changes using a few regional practices and then looking briefly at
241 some influential thinkers.

242
243 Historically, the oldest Swiss reformed cities were Zurich and Basel, which provide evidence for
244 movement away from the medieval Roman model. The Reformed churches in Zurich recognized
245 six grounds for divorce (adultery, impotence, willful desertion, grave incompatibility, sexually
246 incapacitating illness, and deception) and six grounds were recognized in Basel (adultery,
247 impotence, willful desertion, capital crimes, leprosy, and a serious threat to life). Both courts were
248 reluctant to grant divorce on the grounds of a threat to life (amazingly common in the sixteenth and
249 seventeenth centuries) yet they *did* do so.¹³

250
251 In Geneva, the church recognized fewer grounds for divorce: adultery and desertion. Geneva did
252 not follow other Reformed Swiss cantons in listing contagion or incurable disease as grounds. In
253 the 1546 Marriage Ordinance, Geneva only permitted marriage for sexually capable persons. The
254 Ordinance, authored in part by Calvin, called for annulment of marriages for sexually incapable
255 persons in unconsummated marriages. Calvin rooted his reasoning in his reading Matthew 19:11-
256 12.¹⁴

257
258 Christ clearly excludes from marriage those men who are frigid, and eunuchs to whom
259 manhood has been denied. Being misled is thoroughly inconsistent with giving one’s
260 consent, and the marriage vow of a woman who thought she was marrying a [real] (sic) man
261 cannot be regarded as binding. This deception completely overturns the nature and purpose
262 of marriage. What is marriage except the joining of a husband and a woman, and why was
263 it instituted except to produce children and to be a remedy for sexual incontinence? A
264 woman who has been deceived should certainly obtain a divorce [technically, an annulment]
265 when her case has been heard and well examined. There is no need to rescind the marriage,
266 because it was null from the beginning. It is enough to state that a man who was not suited
267 for marriage wrongfully and with wicked guile deceived a woman to whom he could not be
268 a husband, and that therefore the contract which could not be kept by both parties was
269 without effect and null.¹⁵

270
271 In his correspondence he did allow a particular wife to flee “if the party should be persecuted to the

¹³Helmholtz, 73-77.

¹⁴John Witte, jr. and Robert M. Kingdom, *Sex, Marriage, and Family in John Calvin’s Geneva: Courtship, Engagement, and Marriage, Volume I* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 272-8.

¹⁵“Calvin’s *Consilium* on Marriage of the Frigid and the Eunuchs,” cited in Witte and Kingdon, *Sex, Marriage, and Family*, 297.

272 extent that she is in danger of denying her faith”¹⁶ or losing her life; thus, Calvin allowed for
273 separation.¹⁷This is an early indication of the relationship between ecclesiastically sanctioned
274 language for grounds and the forms of its possible application. Theodore Beza, Calvin’s successor
275 and the theologian whose views on this question influenced the Puritans, followed Calvin’s views
276 and applications on the question.

277
278 In England, venue of the WA, the situation was peculiar. Unlike other lands, even Scotland,
279 England passed *no* legislation on divorce passed until the mid-19th century. The primary guidelines
280 were those used by the CoE and the RCC tradition, both of which were fundamentally at odds with
281 the WA’s Reformed, covenantal understanding of the nature of the marriage bond. When one
282 contrasts the grounds for divorce allowed by continental Reformed ecclesiastical bodies with the
283 more restricted traditions of the CoE and the RCC that prevailed in seventeenth century, one sees
284 how this created a challenge for the WA when it came to determine the grounds.

285
286 After the Reformation began in England (ironically prompted by Henry VIII’s annulment), the
287 church took up the matter of divorce. In 1543 there was a push to revise English canon law on this
288 matter, and in the 1550s a commission produced *Reformatio Legum Ecclesiasticarum (RLE)*,
289 shaped mainly by Thomas Cranmer and Peter Martyr Vermigli. The *RLE* was not adopted, because
290 Bloody Mary came to the throne returning the Kingdom to Roman Catholicism, but it reflects the
291 ideas of leading English theologians in the mid-16th century. The *RLE* recognized more than two
292 grounds for divorce including at least: as adultery, desertion, persistent “deadly hostility” of a man
293 toward his wife which “the ecclesiastical judge” is unable to stop.

294
295 Should a man be violent to his wife and display excessive harshness of word and deed in
296 dealing towards her, as long as there is any hope of improvement, the ecclesiastical judge
297 is to reason with him, reproving his excessive violence, and if cannot prevail by admonitions
298 and exhortations, he is to compel him by making him give bail or by taking sureties that he
299 will not inflict any violent injury on his wife, *and that he will treat her* (emphasis original)
300 as the intimate union of marriage requires. If, however, the husband cannot be restrained,
301 either by bail or by sureties, and refuses to abandon his cruelty by these means, then he must
302 be considered his wife’s mortal enemy and a danger to her existence. Wherefore she, in her
303 peril, must be helped by the remedy of divorce, no less than if her life had been openly
304 attacked. On the other hand, however, the power given by the law is not abrogated, of
305 restraining wives in whatever ways are necessary, should they be rebellious, obstinate,

¹⁶For an example of desertion as grounds see Kingdon, *Adultery and Divorce*, 143-165. Kingdon notes that “Confessional differences had not yet become that acute. Such differences indeed were involved in a number of divorces in Calvin’s Geneva. But the explicit grounds for most of these divorces seems to have been desertion alone,” *ibid.*, 157. However, with the divorce of Galeazzo Caracciolo, the Pauline Privilege was now expanded to include marriages between Protestants and Catholics.

¹⁷Witte argues that this is a softening in Calvin’s argument, John Witte, jr., *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition* (Louisville: WJK, 2012), 162-63.

306 petulant, scolds, and of evil behavior, provided that the husband does not transgress the
307 limits of moderation and equity. Both in this and in the above-mentioned offenses, it is our
308 will that this principle should be followed, that parties thus set free, if desirous, may contract
309 a fresh marriage, while those convicted of the previous crimes are to be punished by
310 perpetual exile or imprisonment for life.¹⁸

311
312 The *RLE* was a major step away from the medieval, sacramental model of marriage and divorce,
313 and an attempt to apply a reformed model.

314
315 This takes us to a very brief survey of some influential thinkers. First, Heinrich Bullinger (1504-
316 1575), the Reformer whose *Decades* were influential and very well received on the British front,
317 and whose exposition is also important to consider. Bullinger's significance is in how he
318 explained "adultery" itself as an instructive guide rather than as the act itself, considered
319 narrowly. When Bullinger affirmed grounds for divorce other than adultery as an act, he did so by
320 linking them to adultery *in terms of gravity*. He argued that that by revealing adultery as a valid
321 ground for divorce, Jesus understood and *comprehended* in adultery *all other sins which can be*
322 *considered of greater gravity*.¹⁹ The ground of adultery was thus an *inclusive* ground. "For the
323 holy Apostle also did leave infidelity as an occasion of divorce. 1 Cor. vii."²⁰ To support this
324 understanding, he referred to many church fathers who decreed sins other than adultery to be
325 valid grounds for divorce. Bullinger appears to broaden the matter, "Every reasonable man then
326 consider, that God did ordain wedlock for the honesty and wealth of man, and not for his shame
327 and destruction. They therefore that in no case will help the oppressed person, nor in any wise
328 permit divorce to be made, do even as the Pharisees, which by reason of the commandment of the
329 Sabbath after the letter, suffered men to be destroyed and perish." Bullinger is less than clear.

330
331 From Bullinger forward some have thought there was ambiguity, for example, between two
332 writings of one of the most important Reformed ethicists of the period, William Perkins (1558-
333 1602). He affirmed that the departure of the unbeliever from a believer dissolves a marriage, "The
334 malicious or willful departing of the unbeliever does dissolve the marriage, but that is no cause of
335 giving a bill of divorce; only adultery causes that. Here the believer is a mere patient, and the

¹⁸*Reformatio Legum Ecclesiasticarum*, chpt. 11 "The Crime of Ill-treatment, If Prolonged, A Ground for Divorce."
"The RLE dealt with Adultery in chapter 1 - 6, and abandonment in chapters 7-9, while chapters 10 "Deadly Hostility
A Ground for Divorce," chapter 11 "the Crime of Ill-treatment, If Prolonged, A Ground For Divorce," and 12 "Slight
Disagreement, Unless Permanent, No Ground For Divorce."

¹⁹"What the right occasion of divorce is hath Christ mentioned in the gospel and named whoredom or adultery. With
the which no doubt, he hath not excepted like and greater occasions, but understood and comprehended them therein,"
Bullinger, *The Christian State of Matrimonye* (trans. by Miles Coverdale; 1541):lxxvi. "But if for adultery, or some
other matter more heinous that that, necessity forceth to break wedlock, yet in this case the church will do nothing
unadvisedly, Heinrich Bullinger, *The Decades of Henry Bullinger*, (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004),
Fifth Decade, tenth sermon, 511.

²⁰Bullinger, *The Christian State of Matrimonye* (trans. by Miles Coverdale; 1541): lxxvi.

336 divorce is made by the unbeliever, who unjustly forsakes, and so puts away the other.”²¹ Further,
337 in his exegesis of Matthew 5:31-32 he argued that adultery was the only legitimate reason to
338 dissolve a marriage. He defined adultery thus:

339
340 By “Fornication” Christ means not every sin of that kind, but only the sin of *Adultery*, or
341 that which is greater in that kind, namely *Incest*. Adultery is a sin that is committed by two
342 parties, one whereof is either married or espoused, as has been shown before.²²
343

344 In his comments on Paul’s allegory of Hagar and Sarah in Galatians 4:21-31, Perkins tangentially
345 addresses the matters before this committee, which are illustrative of his pastoral skills and
346 understanding of the matters of marriage and divorce. He begins with the divine origin of marriage
347 which therefore precludes mere consent as a ground for marriage and by extension divorce. He then
348 addresses the issue of whether the patriarchs’ polygamy was in fact *porneia* and thus a ground for
349 divorce.

350
351 For if marriage were a mere civil contract, as it is made by the consent of men and women,
352 so it might be dissolved by like consent. But it is more than a civil contract, because in the
353 making of it, beside the consent of the parties, the authority of God is interposed...the
354 polygamy of the fathers is to be placed in the middle between adultery and holy wedlock.
355 They took not wives of a lewd mind for the satisfying of their lust, but of a conscience not
356 rightly informed at this point.²³
357

358 Far from countenancing polygamy, Perkins argues that it was tolerated only because their
359 consciences were not “rightly informed.” Yet, according to Perkins, Jesus’ teaching that marriage
360 was between one man and one woman was the only view of marriage from creation, and thus their
361 polygamy was never approved by God and thus unlawful in the present.²⁴
362

363 Perkins, in his treatise on the Sermon on the Mount, repudiated 1 Corinthians 7:15 as granting
364 willful desertion by one Christian of another as a legitimate ground for divorce.²⁵ In this exposition
365 he explicitly denies divorce even in cases of attempted murder of one’s spouse.
366

367 But Married persons may seek to spill the blood one of another, and therefore it is good to
368 prevent that evil. *Answer* Such enmity may cause a separation for a time, till reconciliation

²¹William Perkins, *Sermon on the Mount: Matthew 5-7* in *Works of William Perkins* (ed. J. Stephen Yuille; Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2014), 1.320. See also p 71, below.

²²Perkins, *Sermon on the Mount*, 1.318.

²³William Perkins, *Commentary on Galatians* in *Works of William Perkins* (ed. Paul M. Smalley; Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2015), 2.298-9.

²⁴Perkins, *Galatians*, 2.298.

²⁵Perkins, *Sermon on the Mount*, 319-20.

369 be made but the bond of marriage must not therefore be broken.²⁶

370
371 In *Christian Oeconomy*, he allows for divorce in a marriage of two believers, but only after
372 Scripture warrants treating the deserter as an unbeliever. Perkins writes, “The faulty person, who
373 is the cause of this desertion, is to be forced by course of civil, and ecclesiastical censure to perform
374 his, or her duty. Upon which proceeding if he remains obstinate and perverse in will; the other
375 must in patience, and earnest prayer unto God, wait the time, until his mind may be changed, and
376 he be made to relent by the order of the Magistrate. But if one of them, by just occasion of fear, be
377 compelled to depart from the other: and cannot return again without apparent danger of life; in this
378 case they are not bound to return; but the delinquent party is to remain solitary, till they be
379 instructed and made willing to do their duties: and in the meanwhile, the party innocent must be
380 resolved that God hath call him or her to a single life.”²⁷ However, the “patient,” i.e. deserted
381 spouse, may, in the case of a long separation after all ecclesiastical and civil censures have been
382 given, have the minister dissolve the marriage, whereby the deserter “is to bee (sic) holden in the
383 same terms with an unbeliever, who departs upon detestation of religion, and the service of
384 God.”²⁸ The PCA Study Committee on Physical Abuse asserted that Perkins “does not say that a
385 sentence of excommunication must precede the pronouncement of dissolution.”²⁹ However,

386
387 Again, be it that the one is resolutely unwilling to dwell with the other, an thereupon flies away
388 without any fault of the other: if the thing after a long space be sufficiently known before-hand,
389 and all probable means have bee used, to reclaim the guilty person; yea, being called he doth
390 not personally appear before the judge, to yield a reason of the fact; after public and solemn
391 declarations made, the Minister upon such desertion may pronounce the marriage to be
392 dissolved. For he that upon malice flieth away from his mate, is to be holden in the same terms
393 as with an unbeliever, who departs upon detestation of religion, and the service of God, I
394 Timothy 5:8.”³⁰

395
396 This assertion in the PCA Report is confusing, for when Perkins says, “The faulty person...is to
397 be forced by course of...ecclesiastical censure to perform his, or her duty,” he implies the censure
398 of excommunication has been utilized. Perkins goes on to say that “malicious dealing” that
399 involves intolerable conditions wherein one does not “regard nor relieve the other,” may entail a
400 situation in which the believing wife may leave for her own safety. Thus read, Perkins’s *Christian*
401 *Oeconomy* is fully consonant with his denial of divorce even for attempted murder, in his *Sermon*
402 *on the Mount*. So Perkins, similar to the *RLE*, recognizes two grounds only—adultery and desertion.

²⁶Perkins, *Sermon on the Mount*, 1.320.

²⁷William Perkins, *Christian Oeconomie: Or, A Short Survey of the Right Manner of Erecting an Ordering a Family According to the Scriptures*; (trans. Thomas Pickering; Cambridge, 1618), III.687-8. This may be the same idea as in WCF XXIV.6, recognizing the role of magistrates in seeking to prevent a divorce.

²⁸*Ibid*, 688.

²⁹*Study Committee of the PCA on Divorce and Remarriage*, 190.

³⁰Perkins, *Oeconomie*, pp 687-688.

403 In the case of desertion, the deserter must be an unbeliever or one who “is to be holden in the same
404 terms as with an unbeliever,” implying church discipline has been utilized.

405
406 Another source is one of Perkins’s students, William Ames (1576-1633), who taught that there was
407 one *primary* ground for divorce: adultery “and the like horrid impurities.” He regarded adultery as
408 the primary cause for divorce but also sees desertion as a valid ground, which seems to be the way
409 WCF 24.6 frames the matter by putting adultery first and then referring to desertion. Ames also
410 explained that cruelty can warrant a separation *but not a divorce*. However, Ames went on later to
411 write “if one party drive away the other with great fiercenesse and cruelty, there is cause of
412 desertion, and hee is to be reputed the deserter. But if hee obstinately neglect, that necessary
413 departure of the other avoiding the eminent danger, hee himselfe in that playeth the deserter.”³¹

414
415 How is one to explain the seeming contradiction: on the one hand he says that there are two grounds
416 for divorce, adultery and desertion, whereas cruelty can warrant separation, but not divorce; on the
417 other hand, he seems to say that cruelty can be considered desertion with the cruel party being taken
418 as the deserter, hence cruelty may be thus being considered grounds for divorce. At least four
419 explanations are possible.

420
421 First, it is possible that Ames is inconsistent with himself. One time he considered cruelty a ground
422 only for separation, explicitly forbidding divorce, the next time he considered it to be desertion,
423 hence a ground for divorce.

424
425 Second, it is possible that Ames self-consciously changed his position. The latter statement was
426 indeed published later, after his death. Earlier in his life he held to a narrow view of desertion, but
427 later he came to consider cruelty to be tantamount to desertion, hence a ground not only for
428 separation but also for divorce.

429
430 The third and fourth possible explanations would harmonize the seeming contradiction without
431 recourse to inconsistency or a change of view. In both cases, the difference in wording between
432 “cruelty” and, “if one party drive away the other with great fiercenesse and cruelty,” would explain
433 why he seems to have two different views of cruelty as a possible ground for identifying desertion,
434 hence divorce.

435
436 The third possible explanation notices the difference in the degree of cruelty: (mere) “cruelty” vs.
437 “great fiercenesse and cruelty.” In other words, extreme cruelty can be considered desertion,
438 justifying full divorce while milder cruelty can only justify separation. By this explanation, Ames
439 is defining “desertion” not only in terms of willful physical departure of the deserter from the other
440 but also in terms of the one driving away the other “with great fierceness and cruelty,” because of
441 the severity of the cruelty.

³¹William Ames, *Conscience with the Power and the Cases Thereof* (London: 1639), n.p.

442
443 Fourth, if the sense of the verb, “drive” in the expression, “if one party drive away the other with
444 great fierceness and cruelty” implies intent on the part of the driver, as in various English
445 translations of Exodus 6:1; 23:28, etc.: “peradventure I shall prevail, that we may smite them, and
446 that I may drive them out of the land” (Num 22:6 KJV), then the difference may be explained as
447 follows: in the first case, he is saying the wife may flee for her safety from a cruel husband, but not
448 divorce him. In the second instance, the husband is, by cruelty, willfully forcing his wife from the
449 house, such that the resultant separation is as much by his will as if he had been the one leaving her.
450 As such even though he did not physically depart, “he shall be reputed the deserter.” The committee
451 was unable to come to a consensus as to which of the above four interpretations of Ames is correct.
452

453 **The Westminster Divines**

454 There was a revision of church law in 1604, but given England’s seventeenth-century (and, to an
455 extent, still ongoing) attachment to the western canon law tradition that distinguished divorce-as-
456 separation and divorce-as-dissolution, and which rejected the latter, that revision did not reflect the
457 *RLE* or these other views within the Reformed churches. This means that by the time of the
458 Assembly, while there was a considerable amount of helpful material from theologians and even
459 from the *RLE*, there still was no formally adopted ecclesiastical model in England that would reflect
460 the application of a covenantal rather than sacramental mindset.
461

462 This leads us to ask what we can find out about what the Divines thought about this, and in particular
463 to ask whether or not they would choose to exclude the views of the Reformed writers listed above.
464 Despite the paucity of information from the *Minutes and Papers*, we are not without any help, and
465 the next step is to examine relevant works by Westminster divines, just as we have already noted
466 those whom they read and cited in their works. At least two Westminster divines published works
467 on marriage: Thomas Gataker (1574-1654) and William Gouge (1575-1673), but only Gouge treats
468 the question of divorce. Gouge, a prominent Westminster divine, sometimes filled the prolocutor’s
469 (moderator’s) chair, and he was the chairman of the subcommittee to treat the topic of divorce.
470 Before the Assembly, as early as the 1620s, Gouge argued that adultery was the only valid ground
471 for divorce.³²The PCA report avers:

472
473 ...it appears remarkable that the Assembly came to adopt its position concerning desertion
474 as a grounds for divorce. Dr. David Jones comments, "One could wish that Gouge had
475 published a post-Assembly volume on *How My Mind Has Changed*" ("The Westminster
476 Confession on Divorce and Remarriage," *Presbyterion XVI*, 26). As Dr. Jones surmises, this
477 was very likely because of the influence of the delegates from Scotland, where since 1573
478 divorce had been allowed by law for willful desertion for four years or more as well as for
479 adultery.³³

³²Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties*, pp 1622.

³³Ad Hoc Committee of the Philadelphia Presbytery (PCA), *The Westminster Divines on Divorce for Physical Abuse*,

480
481 We were unable to confirm that Gouge changed his mind or on what grounds such a change
482 occurred, if indeed it did occur.

483
484 John Selden (1584-1654) was a scholar at the Westminster Assembly, though it appears he left the
485 assembly in March 1644, about two years before it began its work on marriage and divorce.³⁴ He was
486 considered a polymath. He attended the Westminster Assembly in 1643, and theologically he did not
487 agree with the Presbyterians or many of the puritans as it relates to finalized confessional matters, yet
488 he did contribute to its affairs during 1643. Selden studied at Oxford and later studied law at the Inner
489 Temple. Churchmen, noblemen and even kings sought his advice on matters of law and legal tradition.
490 He was an internationally recognized expert on natural law. His most important labor for our present
491 study is the book, *Uxor Ebraica*, (The Hebrew Wife) originally published in 1646. *Uxor* was the
492 culmination of decades of study and research in the area of marriage, divorce and Jewish tradition.

493
494 A thorough analysis of Selden’s studies on marriage and divorce is beyond the scope of this committee’s
495 task. Selden was a legal scholar and thus his work is more of a history of Jewish traditions rather than
496 an exegetical study of specific biblical texts. In Book III, chapter 4 of *Uxor*, Selden presents historical
497 arguments from a variety of sources though primarily from rabbinical sources. Here he references the
498 threefold marital obligations of “her food or nourishment, clothing or her covering...and his conjugal

274.

³⁴The committee’s principle source for Selden, Ziskind, writes: “[Selden] was also a lay delegate to the Westminster Assembly *in 1643*”; *Jewish Marriage Law*, p 1; emphasis added. The assembly did not convene until July 1 of that year. Concerning his departure from the WA, Ziskind also writes “When Selden returned to his scholarly work, the debates in Parliament and Westminster were still very much on his mind. In *1644*, Selden published *De Anno Civili et Calendario Veteris Ecclesiae seu Reipublicae Judaicae*”; *ibid.*, 15; emphasis added. If Ziskind is correct that Selden served in 1643, but in 1644 resumed scholarly research and writing, then Selden would have met with the WA for at most the first year or so of the three and a half years during which it crafted the WCF. At first glance Chad Van Dixhoorn’s work might suggest otherwise. His *Introduction* (vol. 1) to *The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012) lists, “1643-1649 John Selden” (p 175), making it appear that Selden may have participated for about six out of the WA’s ten years. However, Van Dixhoorn’s prefatory explanation to that list clarifies: “The dates of membership recorded are *maximally inclusive*. If an English minister or *member of parliament* appeared at any time in the Westminster assembly...he is deemed an active member until the engagement was required of the assembly on 19 October 1649, unless there is positive evidence to the contrary” (p 172; emphasis added). In other words, all that Van Dixhoorn asserts by his dates is that Selden joined the assembly in its first year. The second date, 1649, is simply the year “the engagement was required.” *The Minutes*, vol. 2 (covering 1643-11 April, 1644) reports Selden’s extensive participation in the assembly debates (on completely different loci) until 14 March, 1644 (appr. 9 months into the assembly and about two years before the initial work on chapter 24), with no record of any participation in the months and years thereafter. (Based upon Van Dixhoorn’s indices, the only mention of Selden at all in the remaining minutes is in a footnote to session 303 (14 Oct. 1644), but it is merely a reference back to a speech he made much earlier [15 Dec., 1643], regarding the diaconate; it does not imply his presence at the WA.) The total silence of the minutes after March, 1644 confirms the portrait painted by Ziskind, to wit, in the spring of 1644 Selden left politics and the assembly to return to his Judaic studies and publishing. We note that *Uxor Hebraica* was published in 1646, the year the WA prepared chapter 24.

499 obligation” from Exodus 21:9, 10.³⁵As he outlines the history of the interpretation of this passage he
500 settles on the question of conjugal obligation in chapter four. Selden says the following, “the so-called
501 conjugal obligation is regarded as the most important obligation in the bond of a husband to his wife.
502 It was the “benevolent obligation” of the apostle Paul.”³⁶ In the subsequent chapter of *Uxor*, Selden
503 uses the same threefold list of Exodus 21:9-10 and argues explicitly saying “when marital affection,
504 food, clothing and conjugal obligation are not furnished as they should be, a wife may proceed against
505 her husband in court in her name.”³⁷At this point it appears that Selden has expanded the scope of
506 willful desertion beyond mere geographical considerations. Selden provides historical sources and
507 arguments that Exodus 21 was a necessary background for understanding willful desertion.
508

509 This demonstrates that a member of the assembly used scriptural texts in arguments relating to the
510 nature of willful desertion not listed among the proof texts for the subject of marriage and divorce in
511 WCF 24. Thus, when one considers the nature of willful desertion, he should not limit himself to the
512 proof texts appended to the Confession several months after the Confession’s completion.³⁸ Rather, a
513 thorough study of the meaning of willful desertion would include a study of Exodus 21:10’s trifold
514 slave-marriage obligations of “food, clothing, and conjugal rights” employing the method of from the
515 lesser to the greater. Selden’s work adds to the English thinkers this report has already quoted who were
516 querying over the nature of physical abuse as it relates to divorce. Selden made the specific connection
517 between such abuse and in case of marital obligations also neglect as outlined in Exodus 21 and Jewish

³⁵Selden, *Uxor*, III, 4, 300-301.

³⁶Selden footnotes Paul’s reference as I Cor. 7:6. See Selden, *Uxor*, III,4, 302.

³⁷Selden, *Uxor*, III, 5, 306.

³⁸It is significant to note that the confession was completed in December 1646 without proof texts. This means that the proof texts were added well after the assembly had already debated the subject of divorce, and after many members of the Assembly were either not in attendance (such as Seldon) or who had died (such as the Scottish delegate, Alexander Henderson). Likewise, these proof texts were added reluctantly at parliament’s requirement and the remaining members of the assembly according to Robert Letham, never intended them to be used as “frigidly logical proof texts.” See Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context* (P& R, 2009), 107. Letham goes on to argue that those who see the proof texts as indicative the assembly’s exclusive approach to using the scriptures to reason their way to a conclusion “misconstrue the nature of the Confession, misread its doctrine of Scripture, and treat its historical context with scant regard.” See Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, p. 137. Another inadequacy of limiting a study of willful desertion to the proof texts is noted in the following: “There was seldom any debate about the truth or falsehood of any article or clause, but rather the manner of expression or the fitness to have it put into the Confession. Whereupon, when there were any texts debated in the Assembly, they were never put to the vote. And therefore every text now to be annexed must be not only debated, but also voted in the Assembly...which is likely to be a work of great length.” Alexander F. Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly: Its History and Standards* (London: James Nisbet, 1883), 367-68). Furthermore, John R. Bower gives three reasons why the Assembly did not want to affix proof texts: 1) It was unprecedented given that the “former Articles of the Church of England have not any;” 2) The affixing of proofs was “at odds with their scriptural hermeneutic, for ‘if the Scriptures should have been alleged with an cleanness to shew where the strength of the proof lyeth, it would have required a Volume;” 3) It would require every text to be debated and voted on, John R. Bower, *The Larger Catechism: A Critical Text and Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 42-43; citing A.F. Mitchell, ed., *Glasgow Assembly Commission Records*, (Edinburgh: T&A Constable, 1896), 2.81-82.

518 traditions and the relationship of such abuse as a ground or grounds for divorce as he thought ancient
519 Jewish thinkers understood it. Also, the language of WCF 24:6 of such as “cannot be remedied” is
520 similar to Selden’s discussion of Exodus 21 regarding how Jewish courts determined the nature of
521 contumaciousness or stubbornness rather than inability as it related to a spouse’s marital obligations.³⁹
522 Selden’s study offers insight into the breadth of what at least some members of the Westminster
523 Assembly must have meant when they employed the phrase “willful desertion.” Selden’s work indicates
524 that any study of the phrase, “willful desertion” as regards the original intention of one of the
525 Assembly’s members needs to include a serious study of desertion not merely as a geographical or
526 spatial matter but one related to the mutual obligations outlined in Exodus 21:10 as the basic marital
527 obligations to which a spouse owed the other and upon which sufficient grounds for willful desertion
528 would have its basis or grounds.

529
530 At the time of the Assembly, John Milton was republishing Martin Bucer’s broad approach to
531 divorce, and the records indicate several Puritan sermons attacking Milton’s book were preached
532 before Parliament around the time of the Assembly.⁴⁰ This suggests, Milton’s loose view on the
533 grounds of divorce may have been a factor leading the Assembly to its narrower stance when
534 compared with the Swiss six-fold list of grounds. And yet, at the same time, the subcommittee still
535 felt obliged to widen the stance beyond not only English canon law (no divorce, only separation)
536 but also beyond other narrow constructions (adultery only).

537
538 **The Westminster Annotations on Scripture**
539 In 1657, about a decade after the WA completed its work on the WCF, including adding proof texts
540 (1646 and 47, respectively), some of its former members, such as Gouge and Gataker, together with
541 other Puritan writers, published a large commentary on the entire Bible. Since this work may provide a
542 window into what was likely the matured exegetical thinking of several key divines *after* the debates
543 on divorce and the selection of proof texts, the work merits consideration. We look first at the
544 *Annotations’* handling of the passages cited by the WA to support 24.6, then at a few other passages
545 which may be of interest. The cited verses are, (1) Matthew 19:8, 9; (2) 1 Corinthians 7:15; (3) Matthew
546 19:6; (4) Deuteronomy 24:1-4. We consider them in their canonical (and historical) order.

547
548 *Comments Passages Cited by the WA for WCF 24.6*
549 *Deuteronomy 24:1-4*
550 The *Annotations* rejects the notion that v 1’s “some uncleanness” could be provable adultery since “she

³⁹See Selden, *Uxor*, III, 7, pp 314-316.

⁴⁰While it is true that Martin Bucer had a broader allowance for divorce and remarriage, it would be erroneous to view this as a liberalizing *tendenz* (theological tendency). Instead for Bucer the creation order of Gen 2:28, as stated in 1 Cor 7:2, that apart from marriage the normal lot of humanity was to descend into fornication led him into an idiosyncratic view, followed by no one, that dissolution, divorce, and remarriage of already broken marriages was necessary to prevent further sin, Martin Greschat, *Martin Bucer: A Reformer and His Times* (Louisville: WJK, 2004), pp 110-11; 263.

551 was to die for it, Lev. 20.10,” or suspected adultery since “she was to be tried by the water of jealousy,
552 Num. 5.”⁴¹Rather, it understands, “some bodily uncleanness, as of leprosie, or some other disease which
553 hindred contentment in her.” It recognizes that by requiring the “bill of divorcement...the husband gives
554 his wife a release of the bands of marriage, and liberty...to marry whom she would.” It interprets the
555 passage to give only the husband the right to “give...a bill of divorce.” It reads the passage as granting
556 this power to divorce to the husband alone, and goes on to note that Josephus reports that the reverse
557 “was not allowed among the Jews.”⁴²It seems to agree with what it believes the Jews held from this
558 passage: under the Law, wives were not permitted to divorce their husbands.

559

560 *Matthew 19:6, 8, 9*

561 By Jesus’ assertion, “God hath joyned together,” the *Annotations* understand that a union is formed
562 both “according to Gods ordinance, and by his providence.” It assumes that v 6’s grammatically
563 comprehensive prohibition, “let no man put asunder,” must be understood to allow for one exception,
564 that arising from v 9: no divorce “on any other termes than God hath appointed. See on chap. 5.32 and
565 here v. 9.”

566

567 The *Annotations* understands Jesus’ explanation of Mosaic toleration of divorce as follows: “Moses
568 winked at it, but gave no law so to do [= to divorce].” He was, “not allowing such divorce, but
569 preventing a greater mischief.” By its interpretation of Jesus’ implicit understanding, “Deut.
570 24.1...[is] not a precept of putting her away, but a prohibition of a future reception and taking her
571 again, for that is abomination before the Lord...he [Moses] never gave a law that the man should
572 therefore put away his wife, for lesse cause than adultery.”

573

574 By saying, “except for fornication,” the *Annotations* understands Jesus to say: “The band of marriage
575 cannot be broken by a divorce, except it be for adultery.” This matches well with WCF 24.5b, to
576 which Matthew 19:9 was attached as a proof text. It goes on to note that such divorces would have
577 been unnecessary, “had they duly executed the law punishing adultery with death.”

578

579 The *Annotations* understand Jesus’ “caution” (v 9) to be intended “to condemn” the “rash judgements,
580 and unwarrantable practices [of those] who divide other causes of annulling marriages...assigning
581 other causes of parting them whom God hath joyned, than God hath ever declared in his word.” By
582 “other” it means, “other than adultery.” Hence God, in his Word, nowhere authorizes divorce for any
583 other ground than adultery, implicating a view such as we saw in Perkins (“The malicious or willful

⁴¹*The Westminster Annotations and Commentary on the Whole Bible: By Some of the Westminster Divines and Other Puritans*, Gouge, Gataker, et al. (1657) Still Waters Revival Books. All citations in this section are taken therefrom, unless otherwise indicated, and original spelling has been retained.

⁴²Regarding Salome, a Jewess who divorced her husband, Josephus reports that “when Salome happened to quarrel with Costobarus; she sent him a bill of divorce and dissolved her marriage with him, though this was not according to the Jewish laws; for with us it is lawful for a husband to do so; but *a wife, if she departs from her husband, cannot of herself be married to another, unless her former husband put her away.* However, *Salome chose to follow not the law of her country, but the law of her authority, and so renounced her wedlock.*” (*Antiquities* 15.259-60; emphasis added).

584 departing of the unbeliever does dissolve the marriage, but that is no cause of giving a bill of divorce;
585 only adultery causes that. Here the believer is a mere patient, and the divorce is made by the
586 unbeliever, who unjustly forsakes, and so puts away the other”).
587

588 The *Annotations*’ interpretation of v 9 would seem to be the likely source for the first clause
589 of WCF 24.6: “Although the corruption of man be such as is apt to study arguments unduly to put
590 asunder those whom God hath joined together in marriage.” In other words, this clause (24.6a) was
591 not primarily what one might think, an observation based upon reflections about society in the 17th
592 century, but rather, in keeping with the sufficiency principle expressed in WCF 1.6a, it, too, was a
593 necessary deduction drawn from Scripture.
594

595 *1 Corinthians 7:10-11, 15*

596 The *Annotations* take v 10’s “not I, but the Lord” to mean “that he spoke not this by peculiar
597 Revelation, as some other things afterwards, but that he had an express command of our Lord for it in
598 Scripture, namely, Matth. 5.32. and Matth. 19.9.”⁴³ In other words, it sees v 10 as expressly referring
599 to the words of the Lord Jesus *in Matthew*. As to its interpretation of Paul’s paraphrase of that
600 command, “let not the wife depart from her husband,” the *Annotations* comments only, “Gr[reek].
601 ‘that the wife be not severed from,’” adding two additional citations to Matthew 5 & 19, Mk 10:11
602 and Luke 16:18.
603

604 The *Annotations* has little to say about the key verse, but, like Perkins, it gives every indication of
605 understanding v 15 to apply only to mixed marriages (i.e., Christian + non-Christian). Commenting
606 on its translation, it says, “‘depart’ or, be severed.” It then expounds, “Lest any man upon pretence of
607 this liberty, should give an occasion to the unfaithful to depart, he giveth to understand that *marriage*
608 *contracted with an Infidel*, ought peaceably to be kept, that if it be possible the Infidel may be won to
609 the faith” (emphasis added).
610

611 *Comments on Other Passages of Possible Interest*

612 *Exodus 21:1-11*

613 The *Annotations* sees this passage as a part of “‘*Judgements*’: That is, judicial Ordinances made for
614 the just and peaceable government of the people, as the Ceremonial serve chiefly for the ordering of
615 their behavior (especially) in duties of devotion towards God” (comment on 21:1). In other words, the
616 ordinance is a part of the “sundry judicial laws” to which the WA refers in WCF 19.4: God “gave
617 sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people, not obliging any other now,
618 further than the general equity thereof may require.”
619

620 The *Annotations* takes v 2 as introducing the whole passage, verses 2-11, including the cases of both

⁴³Although vv 10-11 are not cited by the WA as proof texts, their comments are considered here since the *Annotations* sees Paul as referring to the Jesus’s command in Matthew 19:9, which is cited as a proof text.

621 male and female Hebrew slaves: “‘*If thou buy an Hebrew*’: When he selleth himself, or his son or
622 Daughter.” It goes on, drawing from elsewhere in Scripture, both OT and NT, to describe the
623 circumstances that might result in such enslavement: (1) an offender unable to make restitution or (2)
624 those “taken with captives in war.” Commenting on v 6’s “forever,” which describes the permanency
625 of the servitude of the slave whose ear has been bored, the *Annotations* explicates, “‘*for ever*’: That is,
626 to the year of Jubilee. And at that time **all Hebrew servants were to be set free**, notwithstanding any
627 ingagement of servitude made before, Levit. 25.40” (bold print added).

628
629 At v 7, the *Annotations* asserts the reason for the greater permanency of the enslavement of female to
630 be: “a woman shall not be dismissed with so little care as a man, who is strong and better able to preserve
631 himself from injuries, and harmes:...by this law she must either be continued in the house, and
632 entertained like a daughter, or a secondary wife, or if he part with her, after he hath taken her to his bed,
633 he shall procure an husband for her, by offering a meet price, and convenient apparel to make her the
634 more acceptable and graceful in his sight.”⁴⁴

635
636 The *Annotations* takes v 9’s “he shall deal with her after the manner of daughters” to mean, “he shall
637 give her [a] dowry convenient [= suitable] for a virgin of her condition.” That is to say, if he gives her
638 to his son, he shall provide “the money, goods, or estate that a woman brings to her husband in
639 marriage.”⁴⁵ It understands v 10’s “for him” to be, “for his son, or himself.”

640
641 Finally, on v 11, the *Annotations* expresses certainty as to the meaning of the first two of the three
642 necessary things the owner must provide “If he take him another *wife*”, “food and raiment...(for they
643 are expressed),” but it seems less than certain as to the third, “‘*or duty of marriage*’: By which somewhat
644 is meant besides food and raiment...it may be that which is comprehended under due benevolence [=
645 affection], 1.Cor. 7.3.”⁴⁶ In other words, the *Annotations* is uncertain as to the meaning of the term,
646 `önätäh, but suggests that it “may” refer to conjugal relations, to which Paul also refers in 1 Cor 7:3.

647
648 The *Annotations*’ exposition of both v 11 and this section (vv. 2-11) concludes, “‘these three’: If he
649 remit or refuse to perform any of the three forementioned particulars, vers. 10. Then he shall let her go
650 free, without paying any price for her redemption,” With respect to the concern of our study, notably,
651 the *Annotations* reads verse 11 with language describing the manumission of a female slave.

652 653 *1 Corinthians 7:3*

654 The *Annotations*’ comment on 1 Cor 7:3 reads: “‘*due benevolence*’: By this manner of speech he
655 implieth not onely in a modest phrase, *conjugale debitum* (conjugal obligation), to which the verse

⁴⁴A generation earlier William Perkins had labeled such a wife “uxor usaria” or a wife that “served only for propagation,” Perkins, *Works*, 2. 299, n. 48.

⁴⁵Merriam-Webster, s.v. ‘dowry’

⁴⁶The (now archaic) definition, “personal regard or affection,” must here be understood. (Merriam-Webster, s.v. ‘benevolence’)

656 following hath reference: but as the Greek Scholiast well expoundeth it, mutual love and loyalty;
657 and that sincere and ardent affection which ought to be between husband and wife.”
658

659 Finally, a couple of decades after the Assembly met, Richard Baxter, in his *Christian Economics*
660 (or, *Family Duties*), answers the question whether or not one may depart a marriage if one fears for
661 his or her safety and life. He replies in part, “But in plain danger, which is not otherwise like to be
662 avoided, *I doubt not, but it may be done, and ought. For it is a duty to preserve our own lives as*
663 *well as our neighbours.*” Baxter only allows remarriage when one’s spouse is guilty of “adultery,
664 sodomy, etc.”⁴⁷

665
666 **Summary and Conclusions**
667 Very little is recorded of the WA’s debate surrounding the inclusion of “willful desertion” as a ground
668 to justify the deserted party in divorcing the deserter. That it was contested is clear, but as to what
669 arguments were offered on both sides, the record is silent. We are left, therefore to study the wording
670 of the clause containing the term and its surrounding context (Wstds.): part I, above; and the historical
671 literature of the time, particularly of those divines who wrote about divorce and those preceding them
672 who may have influenced them.

673
674 The western church up to the time of the Reformation viewed a marriage between Christians as a
675 sacramental union, such that a church wedding rite consummated by the conjugal act was, *in principle*,
676 permanent, dissoluble only by the death of a spouse. (See above on annulment.) In practice, however,
677 the courts of the church had developed ways to circumvent the theoretical permanence of Christian
678 marriage, though these ways amounted to permanent separation, since the church recognized no right
679 to remarry. However, based upon 1 Corinthians 7:15, the church did allow for what it referred to as the
680 Pauline Privilege, including the right of the believer to remarry, when, under certain circumstances, he
681 had been deserted by a non-Christian spouse.

682
683 With the Reformation, divorce, like many other theological and ethical matters, was subjected to
684 scrutiny and reformation based upon the Scriptures. During the mid to late 16th century, practice in
685 Reformed churches varied. For example, in Switzerland, its first Reformed (Helvetic) confession
686 permitted divorce, but was vague as to its grounds, simply declaring that marriage “is not lightly
687 dissolved without serious and legitimate grounds.” Swiss reformers varied greatly. Bullinger, though

⁴⁷Richard Baxter, *A Christian Directory in The Practical Works of Richard Baxter* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2000), A. 20, I.447. In the Directory, Baxter addresses many issues. Depending on the circumstances, he gives three responses: 1) ‘you are obligated to stay with a spouse;’ 2) ‘you may separate from your spouse but not divorce;’ and 3) ‘you may divorce and remarry. As noted above, Baxter only permitted this latter position for acts of porneia (i.e. “adultery, sodomy, etc.”). Yet in instances of abuse or religious persecution he on certain instances permitted that a physical removal without the dissolution of the marital bond could be advisable. He also developed a threefold test to determine who the actual deserter was, because he noted that it was not always an easy determination. The committee would commend the casuistry of this section to the reader; Baxter, *A Christian Directory*, “Cases about Divorce and Separation,” 443-449.

688 not altogether clear, recognized Jesus had allowed only adultery as a ground, but rationalized that in
689 doing so, he comprehended in adultery, all other sins which can be considered of greater magnitude,
690 opening the door for human wisdom to determine which sins are worse than adultery. Indeed, some
691 Swiss Reformed Cantons went so far as to allow divorce for a variety of sins, and even for such non-
692 sins as impotence and leprosy. On the other hand, in Calvin's Geneva, the church recognized only
693 adultery and desertion as grounds for divorce. Notwithstanding, Calvin did allow for separation (but
694 not divorce) from one's husband when the wife's life or faith was in jeopardy, and on one occasion,
695 Calvin, based upon 1 Corinthians 7:15, permitted divorce and remarriage to a Reformed convert, whose
696 RC wife, after his published plea, refused to move from Italy to Geneva to live with him.

697
698 During the Reformation in Britain, the RLE was drafted with a view toward revising canon law for the
699 CoE; it would have allowed divorce for both adultery and desertion, but also would have permitted both
700 divorce and remarriage in at least one other case: when the civil magistrate has been unable to restrain
701 a violent husband, and "he must be considered his wife's mortal enemy and a danger to her existence."
702 Meanwhile, it said, the offender ought "to be punished by perpetual exile or imprisonment for life."
703 However, the RLE was never adopted, and the CoE continued to hold that divorce was permitted only
704 for adultery, and even then, the Christian marriage bond is indissoluble, preventing remarriage while
705 one's former spouse lives.

706
707 In 1573, the Scottish parliament added desertion to adultery as a second ground for divorce. Thus, by
708 1600, divorce law in Scotland mirrored that of Geneva, though the law and practice in England remained
709 much closer to that of the RCC.

710
711 Perkins, an early English post-reformation ethicist and key figure prior to the WA, interpreted Christ's
712 ground (fornication: Gk. *porneia*) as including adultery and incest, and allowed *the believer* to divorce
713 only for that, interpreting Paul (1 Cor 7:15) as the case (only) of an *unbelieving* spouse willfully or
714 maliciously separating from the believer, in which case, he said, it is the action of the unbeliever that
715 "does dissolve the marriage." He expressly rejected application of 7:15 to a believer leaving another
716 believer, but did seem to allow that following excommunication of the deserting believer, such that he
717 is to be treated as an unbeliever, 7:15 would apply, and the believer may remarry. Perkins allowed the
718 possibility that an abused wife might, for her own safety, leave "malicious dealing" that involved
719 intolerable conditions, but forbid her to seek a divorce.

720
721 In his first writing on the subject, Ames, Perkins' student, expressed the same view. He permitted
722 divorce only for adultery, or "like horrid impurities," or in the case of desertion. Cruelty might
723 justify separation, but not divorce. On the other hand, Ames' later work added to Perkins'
724 understanding of desertion, to wit, a spouse who with "great fierceness and cruelty" drives the other
725 away ought to be reckoned the deserter, ultimately allowing for remarriage of the victim, just as if
726 the offending spouse had himself departed. The committee considered, but could not choose
727 between, four possible ways to understand what is either a contradiction, a development, or a

728 refinement in Ames' thought: (1) Ames was inconsistent; (2) Ames changed his position; (3) by
729 the later term, "great fierceness and cruelty," Ames implies a magnitude of abuse well beyond the
730 (mere) "cruelty" of the earlier work, thereby justifying divorce, not merely separation; or (4) the
731 nuance of the later work's verb, "drive out," is to be taken as implicating that the husband – by
732 cruelty – is intentionally expelling the wife from the home, making the willfulness of the resultant
733 separation that of the husband. If 1, 2, or 3 is adopted, then Ames' later work has expanded or
734 developed the notion of desertion, at least somewhat. If 4 is adopted, Ames has simply nuanced
735 his earlier position and that of his teacher, Perkins.

736
737 Along with Perkins and Ames, the committee studied the work of one member of the Westminster
738 Assembly, Jon Selden. In particular, the committee reviewed sections of Selden's work, *Uxor Hebraica*
739 (The Hebrew Wife), which until recently had not been translated into English. Here Selden wrote about
740 the connection between Paul's statements regarding marital obligation in I Corinthians 7:6 and the
741 marital obligations recognized by rabbinic Judaism based upon Exodus 21:10. From this passage he
742 noted the threefold marital obligations of "her food or nourishment, clothing or her covering...and his
743 conjugal obligation."⁴⁸ According to Selden, in Rabbinic Judaism the mutual obligations outlined in
744 Exodus 21:10 acted as the basic marital obligations which a husband owed his wife and upon which
745 sufficient grounds for divorce would have its basis. He argued that ancient Jewish rabbis believed that
746 "when marital affection, food, clothing and conjugal obligation are not furnished as they should be, a
747 wife may proceed against her husband in court in her name."⁴⁹ His study offers insight into the breadth
748 of what at least one member of the Westminster Assembly could have meant when he employed the
749 phrase "willful desertion," though he was not at the assembly when chapter 24 was written, debated or
750 adopted.

751
752 About ten years after the WA completed the confession, several former divines and other Puritans
753 produced the *Westminster Annotations on Scripture*. It handles the Scriptures cited by the assembly
754 in support of WCF 24.6 as follows, providing a possible look at the post assembly exegetical
755 thinking of key assemblymen.

756
757 According the *Annotations*, Deuteronomy 24:1-4 allowed a husband (not a wife) to divorce his wife
758 for "some uncleanness," by which it understands not adultery, but "some bodily uncleanness, as of
759 leprosie, or some other disease." The divorce resulting from his issuing her a bill of divorcement
760 permitted the former wife to remarry.

761
762 The *Annotations* argued that according to Matthew 19:6, 8, 9, Jesus, in v 6, banned all divorces
763 except those based upon adultery (v 9). Moses, it says, had "winked at it, but gave no law" to
764 divorce. For in Deuteronomy 24 he was "not allowing such divorce, but preventing a greater
765 mischief." By "except for fornication" (v 9), it understands, "except it be for adultery," matching

⁴⁸Seldon, *Uxor*, III, 4, 300-301.

⁴⁹Seldon, *Uxor*, III, 5, 306.

766 WCF 24.5b’s interpretation. Hence, God, in his Word, nowhere authorizes divorce for any other
767 ground than adultery, implicating a view such as we saw in Perkins. This interpretation of verse 9
768 seems to be the likely source for the first clause of WCF 24.6: “Although the corruption of man be
769 such as is apt to study arguments unduly to put asunder those whom God hath joined together in
770 marriage.”

771
772 Citing “Matth. 5.32 and Matth. 19.9,” the *Annotations* sees Paul, in 1 Corinthians 7:10’s “not I, but
773 the Lord [commands]”, as alluding to the Lord Jesus prohibiting all divorce, save for that based
774 upon adultery (19:9). The *Annotations* has little to say about the key verse cited in support of
775 allowing divorce for desertion (7:15), but, like Perkins, it gives every indication of understanding
776 it to apply only to mixed marriages.

777
778 The Westminster Assembly was breaking new ground as an explicitly Protestant confession thus
779 upending centuries of accepted Roman Catholic teachings that marriage was a sacrament, and also
780 distinguishing itself from Rabbinic teachings as well. The WA marked a decided change from the
781 Roman Catholic sacramental position and yet the assembly also sought to avoid the more open and
782 ambiguous grounds for divorce such as those promoted by John Milton. Avoiding the RC position and
783 Milton’s openness, the WA listed only two grounds: adultery and willful desertion. In so doing they
784 also avoided the multiple grounds that some of the Swiss Reformed churches had allowed. Indeed,
785 using the word “wilfull” helps to distinguish desertion as used in the WCF 24.6, from the infirmities
786 and incapacities allowed in some Swiss Reformed Churches.

787
788 As our study reached the Westminster Assembly itself, we offer only limited comments regarding
789 the meaning of the word ‘desertion.’ The minutes of the WA are not dispositive in formulating a
790 conclusion. From our study of other contemporary sources, the meaning of desertion had
791 noteworthy nuances making it difficult to determine the precise force of the concept.

792
793 The WA used the phrase willful desertion because the divines believed it reflected the teaching of the
794 Scriptures. Because of our uncertainty of the precise meaning of willful desertion from historical
795 sources, we will have to seek clarity through study of the Scriptures themselves, which after all
796 provide the only infallible basis for the determination of the grounds of divorce.

797
798 **(3) Study of the Scriptures which necessarily provide the basis for the confession’s**
799 **formulation of ‘Wilful Desertion’**

800

801 *The Relationship of Scripture and Creed in Exegesis of the WCF*

802 As a church, our understanding of the nature of the WCF as a document is reflected in our
803 second vow for church office, whereby the ordinand “receive[s] and adopt[s] the [Westminster
804 Standards], as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.” This vow is
805 rooted in our corporate conviction that the WCF faithfully, albeit not infallibly (31.4; WLC 3),

806 expresses the teaching of the Scripture on the various topics (theological loci) it takes up –
807 likewise with respect to the Shorter (WSC) and Larger (WLC) Catechisms. To put it in other
808 terms, those so ordained have, before God and man, sworn that the WCF (and catechisms)
809 accurately expresses the “counsel of God” regarding the various topics that it addresses.
810 Moreover, the confession itself declares about that “[whole] counsel of God”:

811
812 “The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's
813 salvation, faith and life, is either *expressly set down in Scripture*, or *by good and*
814 *necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture*: unto which nothing at any time is
815 to be added” (WCF 1.6a; *emph. added*).

816
817 The above indicates the relationship between Scripture and confession; from this
818 hermeneutical principle one may reasonably infer that in creating our secondary standards, the
819 WA believed the sentences it formulated in its three documents met this high standard: the
820 doctrines comprising the confession and catechisms consist wholly either of propositions
821 “expressly set down in Scripture,” or those which “by good and necessary consequence may be
822 deduced from Scripture.” Good and necessary consequence deductions from the Bible implicate
823 propositions which may be proved through careful and faithful exegesis of one or more Scripture
824 passages, including any rigorous logic needed to link them. Judging from the WCF itself, this
825 was clearly the intended methodology of the WA (even if, at times it may have erred: WCF 31.3).
826 The importance of the modifier, “by good and necessary consequence,” cannot be
827 overemphasized. Interpretations which are merely ‘possible’ or ‘suggested’ cannot possibly meet
828 this high standard. Thus, in reading and analyzing the WCF one may reasonably assume that
829 framers of the theological statements therein, which seek to express God’s counsel on the various
830 theological loci, believed that those statements were just so *rigorously* supportable from
831 Scripture.

832 The question naturally arises: on which Scriptures did the WA draw to ground the various
833 doctrinal propositions in the WCF? The recent report of the OPCGA’s “Committee to Study
834 Republication” (p 1815 of the 2016 GA Agenda), quoting Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the*
835 *faith: A Reader’s Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth,
836 2014), xxiv-xxv., is helpful, although it addresses the question with respect to the topic of the
837 Republication of the Covenant of Works in the Mosaic Covenant. Nonetheless, it shows that
838 immediately after drafting the propositions and the chapters they form, the assembly prepared an
839 initial list of proof texts for each proposition or chapter, a list that it later refined and adopted.

840
841 “After each phrase and chapter of the Confession was drafted, the assembly debated and then
842 approved a series of scriptural passages in support of that doctrine. Later, the gathering was
843 required by Parliament to provide references to Scripture alongside the confession. The
844 assembly did so reluctantly as it had no opportunity to explain, by a mere citation of a text, the
845 exegesis of that text. But once the assembly’s members accepted the task, they chose
846 supporting passages of Scripture carefully, refining the list of scriptural passages approved in

847 their earlier debates.” It is a worthwhile endeavor to attempt “to use these biblical texts to
848 understand confessional phrases” in any study. And while “modern editions of the Confession
849 sometimes employ alternative proof-texts which sometimes offer even better biblical support
850 to the assembly’s own doctrines” they “offer no insight into the assembly’s own thinking.” It
851 is for that reason that the historic proof texts are studied in this report.
852

853 Thus, one may conclude (1) the WA’s hesitancy to fulfill parliament’s directive was due to the
854 fact that the proof texting format provided no means to explain its exegesis, or, more precisely,
855 just how the assembly reasoned from the proffered passages to the propositional statements. The
856 reader is left to infer assembly’s logic, either just by his own study of Scripture or by referring to
857 (other) the writings of the individual divines. (2) the selection of proof texts finally adopted by
858 the WA reflect the same kind of careful corporate study that produced the WCF itself: it was a
859 two stage process, a first draft prepared immediately following adoption of each portion of the
860 document, which list was later “carefully refin[ed]” and finalized at the behest of parliament.

861 Accordingly, the proof texts attached by the WA, then, should be understood as the key
862 Scriptures for our consideration. This history of the proof texts, taken together with the principle
863 expressed in WCF 1.6a, means the proof texts either express directly the propositions to which
864 they are attached, or they constitute the Scriptures from which that assembly believed those
865 propositions could be rigorously deduced. Consequently, *as a starting point* for carrying out this
866 aspect of this committee’s mandate to study 24.6, esp. [b], above, we may tentatively anticipate
867 that – to the extent that 24.6 is indeed faithful to “the whole counsel of God” on divorce –
868 accurate exegesis of the proof texts cited for 24.6 (esp. [b]), together with sound, rigorous
869 theological reasoning, will yield (exegetical) results which match the meaning intended by the
870 WA in formulating [b], the willful desertion clause. In short, accurate exegesis of the proof
871 text(s) for 24.6’s “wilful desertion” should match the authorially intended import of that
872 confessional expression (“wilful desertion”) which is our focus, since its authors’ intent was to
873 summarize the fruits of just such faithful, rigorous exegesis of those very Scriptures (or
874 Scripture). Furthermore, since Holy Scripture is, confessionally and biblically speaking, our
875 “*only* rule for faith and obedience” (WLC 3; *emph. added*; 2 Tim 3:16-17), accurate exegesis of
876 the key passage(s) is imperative for godly unity, as well as for fidelity to that lone rule.
877

878 ***Identifying Key Scriptures for Consideration***

879 Judging from the original proof texts – added by the WA less than four months after it
880 adopted chapter 24 – and from the amended proof texts (formally, but not constitutionally)
881 adopted by a general assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church – which, in the case of 24.6,
882 are identical⁵⁰ – there are four passages in Scripture that stand as *important* bases establishing that

⁵⁰ The fact that in 1956 the OPCGA, after careful re-examination of the confession and the Scripture, here (24.6) adopted the very same proof texts tends to belie arguments based on the theory of *animus imponentis*, such as, the OPC intended to adopt WCF 24.6 with a different meaning for “wilful desertion” than that intended by the WA.

883 the wording of 24.6, in its entirety, accurately represents God’s counsel⁵¹ regarding authorization
884 for divorce (and remarriage) in this New Testament (NT) age: (1) Matthew 19:8, 9; (2) 1
885 Corinthians 7:15; (3) Matthew 19:6; (4) Deuteronomy 24:1-4. The last (4) supports the final
886 clauses, “wherein, a public ... their own case,” leaving (1-3) in support of the earlier propositions,
887 attached as they are to 24.6’s final instance of the word ‘marriage’. As such we may conclude
888 that – at least in the eyes of the WA and an OPCGA – the key biblical bases for permitting
889 divorce to a victim of a spouse who has committed adultery or who has willfully deserted his
890 marital partner can be found in the above three verses (1-3), rightly read and understood in their
891 biblical contexts.

892 Further, since (1) and (3) are both a part of a single pericope (literary unit) within
893 Matthew, the main biblical passages for our study reduce to two: *Matthew 19:3-12*, esp. vv 6, 8,
894 *9*,⁵² and *1 Corinthians 7:1-16*, esp. vv 12-16.⁵³

Machen’s own comments on the normativity of the original intent of confessional standards also support continuing to read the Westminster Standards as originally written (allowing of course for amendments made by later constitutional action): “Equivocation, the double use of traditional terminology, subscription to solemn creedal statements in a sense different from the sense originally intended in those statements — these things give a man a poor platform upon which to stand, no matter what it is that he proposes, upon that platform, to do.” — J. G. Machen cited in Darryl G. Hart and John Muether, *Fighting the Good Fight: A Brief History of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia: Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1995) p 205. Some might argue that Machen might possibly be paraphrased, “the sense originally intended by the PCUSA when it adopted the Wstds. in American church history” (delivered orally, 1932; published, 1933), but such a reading is *at best* rather strained. Not only has Machen chosen broad language that puts various denominations into the group and rebukes modernists among each for departure from original intent — so it is very hard to imagine ‘one size fits all’ being appropriate apart from original intent = authorial intent — but the word ‘originally’, with no further specification, hearkens back to the very birth of something, in this case, the birth of “solemn creedal statements” (hence *not* meaning *originally intended by later adopting churches*). Finally, according to the traditional hermeneutic, still very much dominate if not universal among evangelicals (a.k.a. fundamentalists) in that day: “the meaning of a text resides in the author’s intention and the historical background”; Tremper Longman, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation*, Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation vol. 3, M. Silva, ed. (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, Zondervan, 1987) p 24. The notion that Machen and his peers would have read (exegeted) a document, be it the Bible, the US Constitution, or the Westminster Standards, otherwise is anachronistic.

⁵¹ See citation of WCF 1.6a, p 25, above.

⁵² This division of Mat 19 is generally accepted. The evangelicals, Donald Hagner and R.T. France label 19:3-12, “The Question of Divorce (19:3–12),” and “Teaching on divorce and marriage (19:3–12),” respectively; *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 14-28*, WBC (Dallas: Word, Inc., 2002) p 544; *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale NTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985) p 283. The higher critical scholars, W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, give, “The Dialogue (19:3-12),” *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* vol. III, ICC (London: T & T Clark, 2004) p 7. Calvin, however, breaks the pericope into two, vv 3-9 & 10-12.

⁵³ Since all of 1 Cor 7 is responding to that church’s previous communication to Paul (see below), in theory the whole chapter merits study as the context for the key verse, v 15. However, vv 12-16 – which Anthony Thiselton calls, “Christians Already Married to Unbelievers (7:12-16)” – form a subsection within a part of chapter 7, vv 1-16, which address the Corinthians’ question posed, by answering with respect to various types of members within the church to whom Paul urges each to, “remain in the condition in which he was called” (7:17, NASB); *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) p 525. On the nature of the coherence of vv 1-16, see below.

895 Of course by recognizing these two passages as the assembly’s grounds for the
896 confession’s view of lawful divorce, we do not imply that other passages touching on divorce
897 have no relevance and can be ignored. For example, the statute of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is not
898 only the stated ground for the two final clauses of WCF 24.6, but it must be understood if one is
899 to grasp well the key conversation regarding divorce between the Lord and the Pharisees (Mat
900 19:3-9; Mk 10:2-10) and thereby to understand rightly Matthew 19:3-12. Nevertheless, we
901 believe that to comprehend the force of the clause which is the focus of our interest in WCF 24.6,
902 it is unnecessary to treat carefully *all* of the numerous passages of Scripture that touch upon the
903 subject of divorce. Other passages will be treated to the extent deemed necessary to shed light on
904 these two, which (again) both the WA and the OPCGA have (positively) recognized as the
905 biblical support of the permissible grounds for divorce recognized in WCF 24.6, namely [a] and
906 [b], above.
907 Obviously, of these key verses – Matthew 19:6,8,9 and 1 Corinthians 7:15 – the last must play the
908 central role in understanding the confessional import of “wilful desertion” as a ground for
909 legitimate divorce; it alone describes one spouse “depart[ing]” (Bishop’s NT, KJV), “leav[ing]”
910 (NASB) or “separate[ing]” (ESV, NRSV) with the remaining brother (or sister) said no longer to
911 be bound,⁵⁴ whereas Matthew 19 records Jesus forbidding a man to divorce his wife unless she
912 has committed *porneia* (Gk.), usually translated “[sexual] immorality” (NASB, ESV), “marital
913 unfaithfulness” (NIV), or “fornication” (KJV, ASV); so (as will be confirmed, below), *prima*
914 *facie*, it constitutes the basis for the first ground recognized in 24.6, namely ‘adultery’. Given this
915 centrality of 1 Cor 7:15 and its context (vv 1-16) for this committee’s assignment, the largest
916 portion of our analysis will be devoted to that epistolary passage. However, since – we will argue
917 – detailed knowledge of Matthew 19:3-12 is presupposed of Paul’s readers throughout 1
918 Corinthians 7, we begin with a study of that Gospel passage, which, in turn, requires
919 consideration of Deut 24:1-4.

922 *The Lord Jesus on Divorce in Matthew 19: 3-9*

924 The incident described in this passage, recounted also in Mark 10:2-12, begins with Scribes and
925 Pharisees approaching Jesus “to test Him” (Mark: “to question Him”) as to when (Mark:
926 “whether”) a man may lawfully divorce his wife.

928 The Pharisees come to test Jesus (they do so elsewhere in 16:1; 22:18, 35; in each case
929 πειράζειν, “test,” is used as here) on a question they had frequently debated among

⁵⁴ Greek: δεδούλωται, meaning “be under obligation, be bound to (1C 7.15)”; *Analytical Greek New Testament AGNT2 Greek NT Grammatical Analysis Database, Version 2* Copyright © 1994 Timothy and Barbara Friberg. Hereafter, “Fribergs.”

930 themselves. The issue was not divorce itself, the right to which they took for granted, but
931 rather the justifiable grounds for divorce.⁵⁵

932
933 The traditional understanding of the nature of this ‘test’ and of Jesus’ response to it may be seen
934 in this comment on 19:3,

935
936 Knowing Jesus’ views, they could expect him both to incriminate himself by apparently
937 making light of the ‘law’ of Deuteronomy 24:1–4, and to lose popular support by condemning
938 the divorce which was freely practised by his contemporaries. Moreover, among those
939 contemporaries was Antipas, whose recent divorce had already drawn the fire of John the
940 Baptist, with disastrous results (14:3–12). So it was an explosive question. The question is in
941 Matthew’s version about the permissible grounds of divorce. ... But ***underlying this is the***
942 ***whole question of whether divorce is permissible at all*** (which is how the question reads in
943 Mark), and ***it is at this level that Jesus answers it.***⁵⁶

944
945 Before proceeding further, it will be helpful to look briefly, first at the passage in Deuteronomy
946 24 referred to by the Pharisees (v 7), then by Jesus (v 8). Thereafter, we will touch on the debate
947 about this statute, a debate which was ongoing between two rabbinical schools of thought, one
948 which undoubtedly stands behind the Pharisees’ question (“test”).

949

950 ***Deuteronomy 24:1-4***

951 The passage in question is translated well by the ESV:

952

953 ¹ When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he
954 has found some indecency [‘erwaṭ dāḇār, lit. “a matter of indecency”] in her, and he writes
955 her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she
956 departs out of his house,

⁵⁵ Hagner, 2002, p 547.

⁵⁶ R.T. France, *Matthew*, 1985, p 283; emph. added. The Pharisees may have known Jesus’ attitude toward divorce from his Sermon on the Mount (Mat 5:32). John Murray agrees on the Pharisees motive: “This question was doubtless intended to ensnare Jesus and place him under the necessity of taking sides on the question that divided rabbinical interpretation”; *Divorce* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980; first published, 1953) p 29; emphasis added. It seems likely that in his preaching to Romans – documented by Mark in his Gospel (cf. Papias in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.39) – Peter simplified the exchange for his primarily Gentile audience.

Calvin’s comment on the verse is similar,

Though the Pharisees lay snares for Christ, and cunningly endeavor to impose upon him, yet their malice proves to be highly useful to us; as the Lord knows how to turn, in a wonderful manner, to the advantage of his people all the contrivances of wicked men to overthrow sound doctrine. For, by means of this occurrence, a question arising out of the liberty of divorce was settled, and a fixed law was laid down as to the sacred and indissoluble bond of marriage. The occasion of this quibbling was, that the reply, in whatever way it were given, could not, as they thought, fail to be offensive.

They ask, *Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause whatever?* If Christ reply in the negative, they will exclaim that he wickedly abolishes the Law; and if in the affirmative, they will give out that he is not a prophet of God, but rather a pander, who lends such countenance to the lust of men.

957 ² and if she goes and becomes another man's wife,
958 ³ and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and
959 sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife,
960 ⁴ then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she
961 has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the LORD. And you shall not bring sin
962 upon the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance.
963

964 This statute does not authorize divorce, but simply regulates remarriage following a divorce in
965 order to protect women.⁵⁷ Obviously, that which is regulated is (at least) implicitly *permitted* or
966 perhaps *tolerated*. As translated, the ongoing practice of divorce is presupposed as something
967 occurring from time to time (“*When* a man ... writes her a certificate of divorce ... and she
968 departs”). Jesus’ description of the attitude of the Law of Moses toward divorce matches this
969 understanding: “Moses *permitted* (NIV,NASB or) *allowed* (ESV) you to divorce your wives”
970 (Mat 19:8).⁵⁸

971 So what is the purpose of the statute? This Mosaic regulation is designed to prohibit men
972 who have divorced their wives from bringing guilt (NRSV, NJB) or a sin (NASB, NIV, ESV)
973 “upon the land,” one described as, “an abomination before the LORD”: remarriage of a divorced
974 woman back to her first husband after she has, meanwhile, been married to another man.
975 The existence of this regulation, implicitly tolerating—but not authorizing—a man to divorce his
976 wife, had led to a debate within Judaism by Jesus’ day as to the force of the expression *‘erwat*
977 *dābār*, “a matter of indecency.” On this issue, there were two schools of thought, each bearing the
978 name of a famous rabbi living at the time of the birth of Christ: Hillel and Shammai. They treated
979 the statute as if it authorized divorce.

980
981 The school of Shammai represented fornication or adultery as the "uncleanness [*‘erwat*
982 *Dābār*]" meant by Moses. ... Hillel's school recognized the most trifling cause as enough for
983 divorce, e.g. the wife's burning the husband's food in cooking. The aim of our Lord's
984 interrogators was to entangle Him in the disputes of these two schools.⁵⁹
985

⁵⁷ “Strictly speaking, the legislation (24:1-4) relates only to particular cases of remarriage”; “The verses do not institute divorce but treat it as a practice already known”; “Possession of the bill of divorce gave her a certain protection under law from any further action by the man”; Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 304-05).

⁵⁸ Friberg, s.v. ἐπιτρέπω: “allow, permit, let someone do something.”

⁵⁹ *Fausset's Bible Dictionary*, s.v. ‘divorce’. Josephus (*circa* AD 37-100) explains the Hillel view: “He that desires to be divorced from his wife for any cause whatever [καθ’ ἄσδηποτοῦν αἰτίας], (and many such causes happen among men,) let him in writing give assurance that he will never use her as his wife any more; for by this means she may be at liberty to marry another husband” (*Antiquities*, 4:253).

986 Although the precise force of the Mosaic expression remains elusive,⁶⁰ the case *against* the
987 Shammai school of thought (limiting the force of *ʿerwat dābār* to acts of sexual infidelity) is
988 persuasive. Murray identifies six “facts [that] bear most cogently against the view that [*ʿerwat*
989 *Dābār*] refers to adultery [or fornication]”:

- 990
- 991 (1) The Pentateuch prescribed death for adultery ... Deuteronomy 24:1-4 cannot apply to a case
992 of proven adultery on the part of the wife. She and her guilty partner were both put to death.
- 993 (2) It might, however, be pleaded that though the divorce legislation could not apply to a case of
994 proven adultery it might apply to a case of adultery not proven but on good grounds
995 suspected. The provisions of Numbers 5:11-31 have to do with such a case and the ritual
996 prescribed leaves no place for divorce. ... The provisions of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 cannot
997 therefore apply to a case of suspected adultery whether such suspicion be warranted or
998 unwarranted.
- 999 (3) Furthermore, the Pentateuch deals with the case of a man who brings against his newly-
1000 wedded wife the charge of uncleanness (Deut. 22:13-21). If the charge is disproven ... the
1001 man may [never] put her away. ... if the tokens of virginity were not found in the damsel, she
1002 was to be stoned to death. So again the provisions of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 cannot apply to
1003 this case.
- 1004 (4) In Deuteronomy 22:23, 24 we have the provisions for uncleanness on the part of a virgin
1005 betrothed unto a husband. In this case both the virgin betrothed and the man who defiled her
1006 were to be put to death.
- 1007 (5) In the case of a betrothed virgin who was [raped] ... the virgin was to be treated as guiltless.
- 1008 (6) In the case of a man who lies with a virgin not betrothed [fornication in the narrow sense, i.e.
1009 premarital sex], the requirement of Deuteronomy 22:28, 29 is that the man must marry the
1010 damsel and he may not put her away all his days.
- 1011

1012 Murray then summarizes: “The law provides for all sorts of contingencies in the matter of sexual
1013 uncleanness. But in none of the cases instanced above does the phrase [*ʿerwat dābār*] or even the
1014 word [*ʿerwat*] occur. In every case the remedy or redress is entirely different from recourse to
1015 divorce.”⁶¹ Thus, the Shammai exegesis of Deut 24:1’s *ʿerwat Dābār* is untenable for those who
1016 hold to the unity of Scripture, generally, and of the books of Moses in particular (cf. John 10:35;
1017 WCF 1.9).

⁶⁰ Duane L. Christiansen says the words have a “riddle-like quality”; *Deuteronomy 21:10-34:12* WBC (Dallas: Word, Inc., 2002) p 566. “The meaning of this noun is not clear”; J. A. Thompson, vol. 5, *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale OTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1974) p. 266. John Murray opines similarly: “It has to be admitted that it is exceedingly difficult if not precarious to be certain as to what the ‘unseemly thing’ really was”; *Divorce* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980) p 9.

⁶¹ 1980, p 10-11. Brewer seems to agree: “it is very unlikely that this passage [Deut 24:1-4] originally referred to adultery because the punishment for adultery was death”; *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003) p 10. However, Brewer’s qualifier, ‘originally’, is mystifying. Has the (Spirit-inspired) term’s referent somehow changed since Moses’ day? Did it implicate one thing to Moses but something different to Jesus? (See also WCF 1.9.) ?????

1018 As to Hillel’s view of 24:1, it is crucial to recall that the divine intent here is not to authorize any
1019 sort of divorce. Rather divorces are presupposed as something occurring. Since God does not
1020 intend to authorize divorce (positively), the law never lays out specific grounds. Rightly read, as
1021 we will see from Jesus’ explanation *from the first book of the Law*, in rebuttal to both Hillel and
1022 Shammai, in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 God never approved a man separating what God Himself has
1023 (expressly) joined together. Thus, rightly read this statute tolerated and regulated, but never
1024 authorized divorce for any reason; though the Law did by capital punishment free a man whose
1025 wife had committed adultery. As we will see, Jesus’ reply to the Pharisees adjusts and fulfills the
1026 law by ending its temporary toleration of divorce, even while replacing execution with divorce in
1027 the case of adultery. As we will conclude below with Murray, Jesus’ answer – far from taking
1028 sides on the debate as to the meaning of Deut 24, as some have argued he does – emphasizes the
1029 complete “abrogation of the Mosaic [divorce] permission (toleration) of Deuteronomy 24:1-4.”⁶²
1030 With the permission implicit in the statute having *effectively* been ended, the issue of the precise
1031 force of the term [‘erwaṭ dāḇār] is now moot (with respect to the ethics of divorce today).
1032 Returning to Matthew 19, we now consider Jesus’ reply to the Pharisees in more detail, looking
1033 first at vv 3-6, then at v 9.

1034
1035 **Matthew 19:3-6**
1036 At least two widely divergent views of Jesus’ reply to the Pharisees’ test question in 19:3 exist in
1037 published NT scholarship, today. David Instone-Brewer represents a narrow understanding of
1038 the passage, to wit, Jesus is merely taking the Shammai side in the debate, and declaring, not his
1039 overall view of divorce generally, but simply the correct exegesis of Deuteronomy 24:1-4:

1041 The Gospels imply that he [Jesus] meant adultery was the only valid ground *that is found in*
1042 *Deuteronomy 24:1*. ...

1043 Jesus gives [the Pharisees] their answer, and it is one that they recognize immediately
1044 because it was the same as that of the Shammaite Pharisees, who said that here is no valid
1045 divorce *in Deuteronomy 24:1* “except for sexual immorality.”⁶³

1046
1047 Brewer claims, “it is likely that the exception that occurs in Matthew [5:32 & 19:9] is a literal
1048 translation of [‘erwaṭ dāḇār] in Deuteronomy 24:1 in a way that summarizes the Shammaite
1049 interpretation.”⁶⁴

⁶² Murray, 1980, p 51. Some on the committee noted great similarity between Murray’s treatment of Deut. 24:1-4 and that of the *Westminster Annotations on Scripture*

⁶³ *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church* (Downers Grove Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2003) pp 96-97; emph. added. Does Brewer think Jesus misreads Deut 24? See also n 61, above.

⁶⁴ *Divorce in the Bible*, 2002, p 159. Brewer relies upon this claim to help build a case for limiting his understanding of the scope of Jesus’ reply to the issue of the right exegesis of Deut 24:1. However, speaking charitably, this claim is dubious at best. Since the original meaning of ‘erwaṭ dāḇār remains unclear (see above, pp 7-9), it is perhaps lexically possible μη ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ (Mat 19:9b) could have been intended as “a literal translation of [‘erwaṭ dāḇār]

1050 One ought well to note Brewer’s qualification: “no valid divorce *in Deuteronomy 24:1*”
1051 except upon the ground of sexual immorality. First century Jews did not limit their justification
1052 of divorce to appeal to Deuteronomy 24. Accordingly, Brewer believes Matthew *assumes* that as
1053 first century AD Jews, his readers

1054
1055 would have mentally added something like this exception, whether it was present or not. They
1056 would either have added “except for valid grounds” (if they were thinking of divorce in
1057 general) or “except for indecency” (if they were thinking just about Deuteronomy 24:1). In
1058 Matthew, the clause, “except for indecency,” was used because the whole incident, as he
1059 reported it, is concerned with the debate about Deuteronomy 24:1.⁶⁵

1060
1061 On the other hand, R.T. France exemplifies the more common view of the Lord’s reply,
1062 that is, he sees Jesus as dealing with divorce, generally, not merely divorce based upon the (then)
1063 hotly debated Mosaic statute. Commenting on Mat 19:6, France contends:

1064
1065 Jesus’ argument up to this point is one of *total rejection of divorce*: it is a violation of what
1066 God has created. The dispute between Shammai and Hillel over the grounds of divorce has
1067 been firmly set aside: there simply is no basis for divorce. It is this absolute statement of
1068 principle which provokes the understandable objection of the Pharisees in v. 7.⁶⁶

1069
1070 France is correct and Brewer mistaken. In reply to their Hillel-like test query (v 3), Jesus’
1071 reasoning challenges not their interpretation of the key disputed term, ʿerwaṭ dāḇār, but the
1072 ultimate (NT) lawfulness of *all* Mosaic (OT) toleration of divorce. How?

1073 First – despite the difficulty in clearly rendering v 6’s third person imperative into English
1074 – Jesus grounds this commandment – which is as strongly legislative as the Decalogue’s seventh
1075 commandment – into the order and ethics of the pre-fall creation (which are themselves a part of

in Deuteronomy 24:1”; it is also possible παραεκτός λόγου πορνείας (Mat 5:32b) could have been so intended. However, while the (same) key word, *porneia*, appears in both places, the other terms and the overall constructions are quite different. If the same author, Matthew, truly intended for his readers to discern the same referent (the Shammaite ground for divorce) as implicated by “a literal translation of [ʿerwaṭ dāḇār] in Deuteronomy 24:1,” why would he provide two very different “literal translation[s] of” the same Hebrew expression, ʿerwaṭ dāḇār? It is much easier to take Matthew as having literally translated two differing Aramaic constructions spoken by his Lord that, being the same in import but differing in wording, were never intended to quote Deuteronomy. On Mat 19:9b, see below.

⁶⁵ *Divorce in the Bible*, 2002, p 159.

⁶⁶ *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) p 718; emph. added. David Turner argues similarly: “The gist of his teaching is that the original divine plan for monogamy is normative, not the subsequent concession to human sinfulness in Deut. 24:1”; *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Comm. on the NT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008) p 461.

1076 the Law of Moses: Gen 2); the Lord’s decree reads plainly as a blanket ban on divorce, coming in
1077 the form of a negated imperative.⁶⁷

1078
1079 He replied, “Haven’t you read that the Creator at the beginning ‘made them male and
1080 female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be attached
1081 to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? This means that they are no longer two,
1082 but one flesh. So what God has joined together, *a man must not separate*.”⁶⁸

1083
1084 The last clause cannot be read otherwise than as an “absolute statement of principle” which, until
1085 the reader arrives at Jesus’ qualification three verses hence (v 9b), reads just as does Mark 10,
1086 that is, as a rejection not only of a broad interpretation of ‘erwaṭ dābār, but of *all divorce*, per
1087 se.⁶⁹ Indeed, even after hearing Jesus’ sole exception (v 9’s *porneia*), the disciples immediate
1088 reaction, “If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry” (v 10,
1089 NASB), strongly suggests they understood Jesus’ imperative as a ban on all other traditional
1090 Jewish justifications for divorce. As we will show in our treatment of 1 Cor 7:10ff (below, pp 61-
1091 63), the Apostle Paul, too, (expressly) so reads and applies Jesus’ imperative recorded in Mat
1092 19:6 to married Christian couples, labeling it the “command ... [of] the Lord.” Thus, Jesus’
1093 reply, confirmed by his apostle’s later use of it, leaves no room whatsoever to legitimize
1094 (hypothetical) Jews whom Brewer speculates “would have mentally added something like ...
1095 ‘except for valid grounds’ (if they were thinking of divorce in general) or ‘except for indecency’
1096 (if they were thinking just about Deuteronomy 24:1).”⁷⁰ So then, Matthew 19:6 must be
1097 understood as a total rejection of Mosaic toleration of divorce.

1098 Furthermore, Jesus roots the very existence of the Mosaic regulation’s implied tolerance
1099 of divorce in the sin of mankind, sin that (obviously) flowed from man’s fall “from that estate
1100 wherein he was created.” For in reply to their query responding to his complete ban on divorce,
1101 “Why then did Moses command [Deut 24:1-4]?” (Mat 19:7a), Jesus explains: it was “because of

⁶⁷ As we will show, below (pp 61, esp. n 122), Paul refers to 19:6b as something, “the Lord commands.” In Mat 5:31-32 (cf. 19:8) Jesus sets his (strict) teaching on divorce over against the toleration of the Law (Deut).

⁶⁸ Transl. by France, 2007, pp 711-12. Turner, similarly, has “must not separate”; p 458. “The imperative is commonly used to forbid an action. It is simply a negative command (see discussion above). μὴ (or a cognate) is used before the imperative to turn the command into a prohibition”; Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1996) p 487. For Jesus’ view of his own commands, see Mat 28:19-20 and John 12:48; cf. 1 Cor 9:21, Gal 6:2, and below on 1 Cor 7:10.

⁶⁹ In Mark 10:6-8, “Jesus justifies *his unqualified opposition to divorce* and his unique interpretation of Deut 24:1-4 by an appeal to Genesis: ἀπὸ δὲ ἀρχῆς κτίσεως, ‘but from the beginning of creation.’ He refers to an implied law that is grounded in the very creation itself (cf. Mark 13:19), indeed, the very creation of man and woman. ... If the intention of the creation of the male and female is for them to be united into μία σὰρξ, ‘one flesh,’ ὥστε οὐκέτι εἰσὶν δύο, ‘so that they are no longer two,’ then God’s will simply cannot be that they divorce. Divorce is tantamount to an undoing of the created order”; Craig A. Evans, *Word Biblical Commentary: Mark 8:27-16:20* (Dallas: Word, Inc., 2002) p 84; *emph. added*. As to proposed explanations for only Matthew seeming to allow divorce on the grounds of *porneia*, see below, pp 41-42 and n 81.

⁷⁰ Brewer, *Divorce in the Bible*, 2002, p 159. See pp 64-65, below.

1102 your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives” (19:8a). Thus, “this law of
1103 Moses, said Jesus, was not only as they admitted, permissive, instead of being imperative; it was
1104 actually concessive, because of the unresponsiveness of human hearts to God (*hardness of*
1105 *heart*)”⁷¹

1106 Finally, the hermeneutical principle of WCF 1.9, applied to the two parallel pericopes in
1107 Matthew 19 and Mark 10, further confirms that France, not Brewer, is correct in this dispute over
1108 the force over the former:

1109
1110 The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when
1111 there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but
1112 one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly. (WCF 1:9 WCS)

1113
1114 As noted above, according to the Mark 10 account of what is clearly the same incident,
1115 the Pharisees’ question is not ‘when’ a man may divorce his wife but ‘whether’ a man may
1116 lawfully divorce his wife (at all): the Pharisees “*began* to question Him whether it was lawful for
1117 a man to divorce a wife” (v 2 NASB; NIV/ESV = “... ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his
1118 wife?’”). The traditional exegesis of Matthew 19 shows that it (being the passage about which
1119 there is a question) can be exegeted and understood in consonance with Mark 10, but Mark 10,
1120 where the question is clearly not about the meaning of Deut 24 but simply whether or not divorce
1121 is permissible, cannot be exegeted in consonance with Brewer’s reading of Matthew 19. Thus,
1122 our confession’s hermeneutical principle (WCF 1.9) confirms the traditional reading of Mat 19:3-
1123 9 and precludes that of Brewer (that at issue is merely the exegesis of Deut 24:1f).

1124 Thus, for these three reasons, Murray’s conclusion is on the mark: Jesus’ answer, far from
1125 taking sides on the rabbinic debate as to the meaning of Deut 24, emphasizes the complete
1126 abrogation of the Mosaic toleration of divorce:

1127
1128 We must bear in mind that the burden of the emphasis in this discourse of our Lord, in the
1129 form in which it appears both in Matthew 19:3-9 and in Mark 10:2-12, is upon the abrogation
1130 of the Mosaic permission of Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Since there was no provision for divorce
1131 for adultery in the law of Moses the passages in Matthew and Mark involve ***a complete***
1132 ***annulment of the permission granted for other reasons*** and presupposed in this
1133 Deuteronomic passage. Now, in both Mark and Luke the form of statement used focuses
1134 attention upon that fact. As far as the Mosaic provisions regarding divorce are concerned the
1135 law enunciated by Jesus, in the form of Matthew 19:9 [and perhaps 19:6?] as well as in the
1136 form of Mark 10:11; Luke 16:18, is quite absolute. In other words, there is no exception to
1137 the abrogation of the permission implied in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Not even Matthew 19:9
1138 allows for ***that kind*** of exception.⁷²

⁷¹ R. Alan Cole, *Mark: An Introduction and Commentary* Tyndale NTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989) p 233.

⁷² Murray, 1980, p 51; emph. and bracketed wording added.

1140 Murray has taken seriously both the Lord’s explanation as to the origin of Moses’ toleration of
1141 divorce (Israelites’ hard heartedness), as well as the force of the Lord’s mild adversative, ‘but’
1142 (δέ), linking “Moses permitted ...” with “from the beginning it has not been this way.” The
1143 toleration Moses permitted has come to an end with an imperatival decree issued by the Son of
1144 God to return to the state of marital order that was in force “from the beginning”: “The Creator at
1145 the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ ... they are no longer two, but one flesh. So what
1146 God has joined together, *a man must not separate.*” (Mat 19:4,6; transl. France; emph. added).

1147 As to the nature of Jesus’ response to the Pharisees’ attempt to draw him in to their
1148 internal debate, Brewer is mistaken; France is correct:

1149
1150 Jesus’ argument up to this point is one of total rejection of divorce: it is a violation of what
1151 God has created. The dispute between Shammai and Hillel over the grounds of divorce has
1152 been firmly set aside: there simply is no basis for divorce.
1153

1154 Or, as Murray puts it: both “the passages in Matthew and Mark involve a complete annulment of
1155 the permission granted for other reasons and presupposed in this Deuteronomic passage.”⁷³
1156 Since, as originally intended, the Deuteronomic statute inherently covers (regulates) all possible
1157 OT divorces, the Lord Jesus hereby nullified the toleration implied therein, and prohibited all
1158 forms of divorce that had been permitted under the Mosaic regime (under which divorce for
1159 sexual infidelity was never included).

1160 While it may seem as if Jesus is doing what in the Sermon on the Mount he asserts he has not
1161 come to do, that is, not “to abolish [the law and the prophets] but [rather] to fulfill them” (Mat
1162 5:17), in fact Jesus is simply interpreting the less clear (concessive) passage (Deut 24) in the light
1163 of the more clear (normative) passage, Genesis 2:24. The Pharisees, both of Shammai and of
1164 Hillel, misinterpreted the Law. Jesus corrects them, bringing about the fulfillment of the Law
1165 concerning divorce.

1166 ***Matthew 19:9***

1167 Three questions regarding this verse require our attention. (1) What is the scope of what is often
1168 dubbed ‘the exceptive clause’, namely, “except for sexual immorality” (ESV)? That is, what

⁷³ For France citation, see p 33 and n 66, above; for Murray citation, p 35 and n 72, above. If as some (going back to Rabbinic Judaism – see Brewer, 2002, pp 99ff) suggest, Ex 21:10-11 was actually intended (as given through Moses) to provide grounds for bona fide wives to divorce their husbands and was not simply given to direct how a female slave (the term ‘wife’, often paraphrastically added to English translations, appears nowhere in the Hebrew of the passage; she is called simply “אִמָּה”): according to Holladay, s.v., “**female slave**, maidservant & concubine, orig.: unfree woman”; W.L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament, Based upon the Lexical Work of Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner*, (Brill Academic, 1997).), who would otherwise be her master’s permanent possession, might be emancipated (as the immediately prior context, 21:1-9, providing correspondingly for male slaves suggests), such divorces, too, would necessarily have been regulated by Deut 24:1-4 (prohibition on remarriage to the first husband after an intervening marriage). If such a reading of Ex 21 were valid, toleration of such divorces, too, would be annulled along with Deut 24:1-4, by Jesus’ negated imperative in Mat 19:6 (noted above).

1169 specific sin or sins does Jesus have in mind?⁷⁴ (2) Does the exception clause govern the protasis
1170 in its entirety (= ‘whoever divorces his wife and marries another’), thereby allowing remarriage in
1171 the case of divorce for reasons of sexual infidelity,⁷⁵ or does it only modify the first part of the
1172 protasis, “whoever divorces his wife.” Put simply, does the exception imply not only permission
1173 to divorce the offending wife, but also permission to remarry – without the new marriage
1174 constituting adultery? (3) How is it that the man who remarries after (wrongly) divorcing his
1175 wife can be guilty of committing the sin of adultery?

1176 On the first two questions, the views of the WA are obvious. Looking at the latter half of
1177 WCF 24.5: in its first part, question (1) is answered; its final portion, following the colon,
1178 answers (2):

1179
1180 In the case of adultery after marriage, *it is lawful* for the innocent party *to sue out a divorce:*
1181 *and* after the divorce, *to marry another*, as if the offending party were dead. (emph. added)
1182

1183 (1) The WCF interprets the exception, the only exception (*porneia*, Mat 19:9) that Jesus makes to
1184 his otherwise total prohibition against men divorcing their wives (Mat 19:6) to be ‘adultery’, after
1185 which sin, (2) the innocent party – male or female – is free to remarry, just as if widowed. In
1186 other words, regarding (2), the WA understands the exceptive clause as effectively “governing
1187 the protasis in its entirety.”⁷⁶ As to (1), the WA interprets *porneia* to constitute *adultery*.⁷⁷ With
1188 this exegesis, as we have seen, the *Annotations* agrees: “By saying, ‘except for fornication,’ the
1189 *Annotations* understands Jesus to say: ‘The band of marriage cannot be broken by a divorce,
1190 except it be for adultery.’” The WCF takes no stand on question (3).

1191 Despite the obvious clarity of the confessional interpretations on the first two questions, (1) and
1192 (2), some evangelicals today, particularly outside conservative Reformed churches, have opposed
1193 both interpretations.⁷⁸ Therefore, it seems wise to pursue exegesis of v 9 on these questions.

⁷⁴ “There is much debate on the word πορνεία (*porneia*, sexual infidelity)”; Turner, *Matthew*, 2008, p 171. “The meaning of the word πορνεία (*porneia*), translated here ‘sexual infidelity,’ is difficult”; Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 1-13* (Dallas: Word, Inc., 2002) p 122.

⁷⁵ Donald A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 14-28* (Dallas: Word, Inc., 2002) p 549.

⁷⁶ For a fuller treatment of the syntax of the protasis, see below.

⁷⁷ A.A. Hodge lists the “only causes upon which it is lawful to grant a divorce,” as including first, “(a.) adultery; this is explicitly allowed by Christ (Matt. V.31,32; xix.9)”; *The Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1983) p 307. The OED limits the English term, ‘adultery’, to intercourse between a married man or woman *with someone of the opposite sex*, other than one’s spouse. Merriam-Webster (Unabridged) does not limit adultery to heterosexual intercourse: “voluntary sexual intercourse between a married man and someone other than his wife or between a married woman and someone other than her husband.” In view of Jesus’ choice of the somewhat broader term, *porneia*, which includes a wider variety of illicit sexual acts than does *moicheia* (adultery), Merriam-Webster’s Definition undoubtedly pertains in the instances within WCF 24.5-6.

⁷⁸ Regarding (1), see also above, n 74; “Here [in 5:32] Matthew writes nothing about the question of remarriage by the husband who has divorced his wife for unchastity. But it would be a mistake to think that Matthew allows the husband to remarry. ... in 19:9 (where remarriage of the husband does appear) the exceptive phrase applies only to divorce”; Robert Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) p 90. On (2), John Noland suggests a somewhat broader interpretation: “The point of rendering ‘*rwt* as

1194 Given the difference of opinion between two prominent OPC authors on point (3) and the
1195 relevance of one’s handling of it, not only for understanding 19:9, but also, as we will see, for
1196 comprehending some of Paul’s directives in 1 Corinthians 7, it behooves us to address that issue as
1197 well.
1198

1199 (1) The Scope of the Exceptive Clause, “Except for *Porneia*”
1200

1201 The WCF interprets the Greek term, *porneia* (KJV, ‘fornication’) as ‘adultery’, the first of
1202 the only two grounds it recognizes for a lawful divorce, and that based upon the term’s usage in
1203 this very passage (Mat 19:9 –the only proof text cited). This interpretation of the word in the two
1204 Matthean divorce passages, 5:32 and 19:19, has been challenged, by some Protestants, but
1205 particularly by recent commentators of the RCC and implicitly by its modern Bible translations.
1206 The following renderings of 19:9’s exceptive clause (μη ἐπι πορνεία = ‘except for *porneia*’)
1207 vividly illustrate the dispute:
1208

1209 KJV (Prot, 1611) “Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall
1210 marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit
1211 adultery.”

1212 ESV (Prot, 2001) “Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries
1213 another, commits adultery.”

1214 DRA (RCC, 1899 [Vulgate]) “Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication,
1215 and shall marry another, committeth adultery”

1216 NAB (RCC, 1970) “whoever divorces his wife (unless the marriage is unlawful) and marries
1217 another commits adultery.”

1218 NJB (RCC, 1985) “Anyone who divorces his wife -- I am not speaking of an illicit marriage -
1219 - and marries another, is guilty of adultery.”
1220

1221 The assumption behind the *New American Bible* and *New Jerusalem Bible* translations –contrary
1222 to the fourth century (Latin) Vulgate (reflected in Douay-Rheims: DRA) – is that *porneia* can
1223 carry the sense of a marriage within the (OT) prohibited degrees of consanguinity (i.e., incest).
1224 Yet, the standard classical Greek Lexicon, Liddell and Scott (L&S), recognizes no possible sense
1225 for the term such as ‘illicit marriage’, or ‘incestuous marriage’:
1226

1227 πορνεία, Ion. Εείη, ή, *prostitution*, Hp.Epid.7.122, etc.; of a man, D.19.200; *fornication*,
1228 *unchastity*, Ev.Matt.19:9: pl., 1 Ep.Cor.7.2.

πορνεία here is likely to be no more precise than to insist that an adequate basis for divorce will involve serious moral failure, specifically in the sexual area”; *The Gospel of Matthew*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans: 2005) p 245.

1229 **II.** metaph., *idolatry*, Lxx *Ho.4.11*, al. **ἑβείον, τό**, *brothel*, Ar.V.1283, *Ra.113*, Antipho
1230 1.14, etc. **ἑβευμα**, ατος, τό, = πορνεία, *PGrenf.1.53.20* (iv. A.D., pl.). **ἑβουσις**, εως, ή, = foreg.,
1231 *Secund.Sent.14*. **ἑβούτρια**, ή, = πόρνη, Ar.*Fr.121*. **ἑβούω**, *prostitute*, mostly in Pass., of a
1232 woman, *prostitute herself, be or become a prostitute*, Hdt.1.93, *Eup.67*, *Lys.Fr.59*; of a man,
1233 *Aeschin.1.52*, 119, *D.19.233*.
1234 **II.** intr. in Act., = Pass., Lxx *De.23.17* (18), *Luc.Alex.5*, *Phalar.Ep.121*, *Harp. s. v. πωλώσι*;
1235 *fornicate*, 1 *Ep.Cor.6.18.2*.metaph., *practise idolatry*, Lxx 1*Ch.5.25*, al. μ • **ἑη**, ή, *harlot*,
1236 *prostitute*, *Archil.142*, *Ar.Ach.527*, etc. (Prob. from πέρνημι, because Greek prostitutes were
1237 commonly *bought slaves*.) **ἑίδιον**, τό, Dim. of foreg., Ar. (v. infr.), etc. [*πορνι:δι:ον*,
1238 *Ar.Nu.997*, *Men.Pk.150*, *Com.Adesp.120*, but **ἑιδῖον** (Dim. of *πορνίον),
1239 *Ar.Ra.1301*.] **ἑικός**, ή, όν, *of or for harlots*, εἶδος Lxx *Pr.7.10*, cf. *AP12.7*(Strat.); of
1240 planetary influences, *Vett.Val.17.31*; π. τέλος the tax *paid by brothel-keepers*, *Aeschin.1.119*;
1241 οί π. *libertines*, *Cat.Cod.Astr.2.166*. [pg 1450]. (Underline added)
1242

1243 The non-figurative senses involve sexual immorality of some kind, strongly suggesting that in
1244 ordinary Greek usage the term was as a general term for **sexual immorality**. In other words,
1245 contemporary Greek usage supports the Vulgate (DRA), KJV and ESV understanding, but offers
1246 no support for renderings advocated by more recent RCC scholars. While, given the OT
1247 background of Jesus' audience, incest would surely be among the forms of sexual immorality that
1248 Jesus and his apostles subsumed under this expression (cf. 1 Cor 5:1), L&S offer no support for
1249 the notion that the term could carry *the sense*, 'an illicit marriage' or 'an unlawful marriage',
1250 thereby justifying Rome's more recent translations.⁷⁹
1251 On the other hand, NT Greek lexicons are mixed. BDAG (def. 2) recognizes the *possibility* of the
1252 sense, 'illicit marriage' (so F.F. Bruce), even while acknowledging it to be disputed (by Robert
1253 Gundry):

1254
1255 **Participation in prohibited degrees of marriage, fornication** (s. Lev. 18:16-18; cp. Acts
1256 15:20-29, s. Bruce, comm. Ac; **21:25**) **Mt 5:32; 19:9** (w. some favor RSmith, Matthew
1257 [Augsburg] • E9,100; RGundry, Matthew E2, 91: ``no need to adopt obscure definitions of
1258 πορνείας, such as marriage within the forbidden degrees. •
1259

1260 However, the Fribergs recognize no such sense:

1261
1262 **πορνεία**, ας, ή (1) generally, of every kind of extramarital, unlawful, or unnatural sexual
1263 intercourse *fornication, sexual immorality, prostitution* (1C 5.1); (2) when distinguished from

⁷⁹ It may be helpful to distinguish clearly two different ways in which the English term, 'meaning' can be used, (1) 'sense' and (2) 'reference' or 'denotation'. (1) is "the meaning of a word or fixed phrase or one of the distinct meanings that it may bear in diverse situations; *especially* : a meaning of a word as segregated in a dictionary or glossary" (Merriam-Webster Unabr.). Whereas (2) is the nonliterary reality to which the word refers in a particular context. Clarity as to which nuance of the word 'meaning' is intended is crucial in exegesis.

1264 adultery (**μοιχεία**) in the same context *extramarital intercourse, sexual immorality,*
1265 *fornication* (MT 15.19); (3) as a synonym for **μοιχεία** (*marital*) *unfaithfulness, adultery* (MT
1266 5.32); (4) metaphorically, as apostasy from God through idolatry (*spiritual*) *immorality,*
1267 *unfaithfulness* (RV 19.2)
1268

1269 The Fribergs' definitions – while more nuanced to NT ethical thought than L&S – particularly in
1270 differentiating between (1) and (2) in NT usage, are otherwise consonant with the standard
1271 classical Greek lexicon (L&S), though it is dubious that the example offered to establish the their
1272 (3), i.e. Mat 5:32, is truly a sense different than (1); for in both 5:32 and 19:9, Jesus (and
1273 Matthew) has chosen a term lexically broader than **μοιχεία**, and the nuance that a marriage
1274 covenant is being violated by the immorality cannot be shown to come from the term, '*porneia*',
1275 since marital status is obvious from the context.

1276 None of the passages cited by BDAG to support the seemingly novel notion that the term can
1277 itself carry the sense of “participation in prohibited degrees of marriage” can be proved to
1278 implicate anything more than the standard meaning recognized by L&S (or by the Fribergs' def.
1279 1). The word, then, is simply a general term for “every kind of extramarital, unlawful, or
1280 unnatural sexual intercourse”; it includes adultery unless it stands along side of **μοιχεία**
1281 (*moicheia*), as in lists of sins (e.g. Mat 15:19). To be sure, different societies in the 1st century
1282 Roman empire would have included different specific sexual acts in the category of *porneia* (just
1283 as do different societies around the world today), but the senses of the word throughout its 22
1284 other uses in the NT arguably all fall into one of the Fribergs' definitions: 1, 2, or 4.⁸⁰

1285 An example of def. 1 which is both definitive and instructive is in 1 Thes 4:2-5:
1286

1287 For you know what commandments we gave you by *the authority of* the Lord Jesus. For this is
1288 the will of God, your sanctification; *that is*, that you abstain from [*porneia*]; that each of you
1289 know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion, like the
1290 Gentiles who do not know God. (NASB)
1291

⁸⁰ Clearly not only the Jews, but also the Gentiles, viewed the incest described in 1 Cor 5:1 as included in the category of sexual immorality. Thus, Paul can be easily understood when he refers to the sin of the man having his father's wife as *porneia*. Notwithstanding, there is no proof that even in 5:1 the term 'means', i.e. carries *the sense*, of 'incest', much less 'Participation in prohibited degrees of marriage,' though 'the meaning', in the sense of reference or denotation, is certainly to incestuous conduct. Even the NJB apparently recognizes this: “It is widely reported that there is *sexual immorality* [*porneia*] among you, immorality of a kind that is not found even among gentiles: that one of you is living with his stepmother.”

The Fribergs' definition for *porneia*, “every kind of extramarital, unlawful, or unnatural sexual intercourse,” matches well with the WA's list of forms of sexual intercourse it declares to be sins forbidden under the rubric of the seventh commandment, “adultery, fornication, rape, incest, sodomy” (WLC 139). This definition would seem to be presumed in the use of the term “adultery” in WCF 24.6, where the Scripture passage offered in support of the adultery ground (Mat 19:8-9) uses the term, *porneia*. In other words, the WA's implicit interpretation of the Greek term *porneia* in Mat 5 & 19, the ground for divorce which it expresses with the English word, “adultery,” comports with the Fribergs' definition for *porneia*.

1292 The Jerusalem council's (Acts 15) decrees' directive to the Gentile churches to refrain from
1293 *porneia*, is best understood as showing the very same concern, i.e., to keep the epidemic-like
1294 Gentile societal infection (cf. 1 Cor 7:2) – sexual immorality – out of the churches of Christ. In
1295 the present instance, too (Mat 19:9 cf. 5:32), definition 1 would apply, since, despite Jesus' use of
1296 the Greek word for 'adultery' in the same verse, *porneia* is *not being distinguished* from
1297 'adultery' (as in lists of sins). Further, since the subject involved is necessarily married, most, if
1298 not all, unlawful or unnatural sexual intercourse could be said to constitute what is labeled
1299 'adultery' in English (so WCF 24.6). Neither in Matthew 19:9 nor 5:32 is there a basis *not* to
1300 construe the word *porneia* according to def. 1. Consequently, according to the Lord Jesus, a
1301 married Christian whose spouse has sinned by engaging any "kind of extramarital, unlawful, or
1302 unnatural sexual intercourse" with a third party – anyone or anything else – may divorce that
1303 spouse.⁸¹

1304 It is probably no coincidence that this semantic range for *porneia* (when a married party is
1305 involved) corresponds well with the range of sexual offenses under OT law for which the death
1306 penalty was decreed, including (at least) heterosexual adultery, homosexual intercourse,
1307 bestiality, and incest. Under the Law of Moses, too, the marriage was to be ended by death of the
1308 guilty – freeing the innocent party to remarry. Under the Law of Christ, the marriage may be
1309 ended by the innocent spouse through divorce from the guilty, likewise (as we will see) freeing
1310 the innocent to remarry. In all other circumstances the Lord's negated imperative, "what God has
1311 joined together, *a man must not separate*," applies, forbidding the Christian from divorcing his
1312 spouse.

1313 This exegesis of Mat 19:6 and 9 matches that which we saw in the *Westminster Annotations*:

1314
1315 By Jesus' assertion, "God hath joyned together," the *Annotations* understands that a union is
1316 formed both "according to Gods ordinance, and by his providence." It assumes that v 6's
1317 grammatically comprehensive prohibition, "let no man put asunder," must be understood to
1318 allow for one exception, that arising from v 9 ...

1319 ... By saying, "except for fornication," the *Annotations* understands Jesus to say: "The band of
1320 marriage cannot be broken by a divorce, except it be for adultery."

1321

1322 (2) Does the Exceptive Clause Include Permission to Remarry?

⁸¹ The question as to why Jesus (and Matthew) chose to use the broader term, *porneia*, instead of the standard term for adultery, calls for speculation since no reason is expressed or self-evident in the context. David Janzen opines, "it is in order to make it clear that sex outside of betrothal and outside of marriage allows the husband to divorce"; "The Meaning of Porneia in Matthew," *Journal of the Society for the Study of the NT* 80 (2000) p 72. In the light of Mat 1:21 this is possible, though we offer another suggestion.

We would suggest that in view of the biblical tendency from Moses' day until Jesus to define adultery narrowly – e.g. to "have unlawful intercourse with another's wife" (Thayer, s.v. μοιχεύω) – Jesus intentionally chose an expression that would include other forms of illicit intercourse such as a man with an unmarried woman, a man with a man or beast, and also incest.

1323
1324 As mentioned above, the WCF interprets Jesus’ application of the 7th commandment in Mat
1325 19:9 (cf. 5:32) as allowing a man to remarry after a divorce on the ground of *sexual immorality*
1326 (*porneia*) on the part of his previous wife. Most scholars today – be they evangelical or higher
1327 critical – ultimately read Matthew’s record of *Jesus’ teaching* on divorce similarly, though the
1328 two groups generally draw that conclusion from the key passages quite differently. Higher
1329 critical scholars usually attribute the perceived major difference between Matthew and the other
1330 synoptics to ‘Matthean additions’ (in technical jargon, to ‘Matthean redaction’). On the other
1331 hand, some evangelicals believe that while Jesus authorizes divorce for *porneia*, he disallows
1332 remarriage even to the innocent party – so long as both (divorced) spouses remain alive. Finally,
1333 some scholars remain agnostic, saying, “the problem of whether [Mat] 19.9 allows remarriage for
1334 the innocent party (so traditionally most Protestants) cannot, as Augustine conceded (*De fide et*
1335 *op.* 19), finally be answered.”⁸²

1336 Robert Gundry, a Protestant, exemplifies scholars who reject reading 19:9 as allowing
1337 remarriage to a man who has divorced his wife for sexual infidelity:⁸³

1338
1339 Throughout it is assumed that a second marriage is adulterous.

1340 If the wife proves unchaste prior to divorce, her husband may divorce her. *He* will not
1341 have made her an adulteress. Here [in 5:32] Matthew writes nothing about the question of
1342 remarriage by the husband who has divorced his wife for unchastity. ***But it would be a***
1343 ***mistake to think that Matthew allows the husband to remarry. ... in 19:9*** (where
1344 remarriage of the husband does appear) ***the exceptive phrase applies only to divorce***
1345 [ἀπολύση].⁸⁴

1346
1347 On the other hand, John Murray, who may still have the strongest case in print for the exegesis
1348 presupposed by WCF 24.6, opines regarding the view just described:

1349

⁸² Davies and Allison, *Matthew vol. III*, 2004, p 17. The best explanation for the difference between Matthew and Mark – Mark’s lack of mention of *porneia* as a legitimate ground for divorce – is that despite the common speculative reconstructive ‘solution’ to the synoptic problem (Matthew redacted Mark), the church fathers’ uniformly held view of Matthean priority is correct. Matthew was in widespread use long before Mark wrote his gospel and Mark saw no need to include the *porneia* exception to Jesus’ otherwise total ban on divorce.

⁸³ Hagner lists a number of recent scholars who also agree: “Divorce is not allowed, except in special cases, and remarriage after divorce is similarly ruled out (see Dupont, Heth, Quesnell, Wenham [JSNT 28 (1986) 17–23]). For a contrasting view, see Carson and Wiebe, who take the exception clause as governing the protasis in its entirety, thereby allowing remarriage in the case of divorce for reasons of sexual infidelity”; Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 2002, p 549. Gundry is typically categorized as evangelical, though his redaction critical-approach to Matthew led to his resignation from the Evangelical Theological Society.

⁸⁴ Gundry, 1982, p 90; emph. added.

1350 There is considerable difficulty in holding to this position. The reason is apparent. It is the
1351 difficulty of restricting the exceptive clause to the putting away (ἀπολύση) and not extending
1352 it also to the remarriage (γαμήση ἄλλην).⁸⁵

1353
1354 Yet, Wenham and Heth fault Murray as follows:

1355
1356 Murray should have sought to understand the function of the negated prepositional phrase [μὴ
1357 ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ = except for immorality] in the protasis alone (“Whoever divorces his wife,
1358 *except for immorality*, and marries another”). Does it qualify only the verbal action which
1359 precedes it (as our following word order survey will suggest), or does it qualify both what
1360 precedes and what follows (“Whoever divorces ... and marries another”)?⁸⁶

1361
1362 The heart of this disagreement lies in the difference in levels or realms in which each side
1363 of the debate is analyzing. Owing to this difference, the sides seem to be talking past each other.
1364 The latter two men contend that in terms of grammar, the exceptive (negative) phrase modifies
1365 only the first verb in the protasis, “divorces,” whereas Murray is describing the phrase’s function
1366 at a conceptual level. Strictly speaking Wenham and Heth are correct with respect to grammar:
1367 the exceptive phrase directly modifies only the verb ‘divorces’: “whoever divorces his wife,
1368 *except for immorality*.” Obviously it does not (also) modify the second verb, ‘marries’; that
1369 would read as nonsense: “no man ‘marries another’ woman, *‘except for immorality*.” Likewise
1370 modification of the final verb would twist the Lord’s meaning: “no man ‘commits adultery,’
1371 *‘except for immorality*.” So grammatically speaking, Wenham and Heth are correct.
1372 Nonetheless, on a conceptual level, Murray is right. On that level, “restricting the exceptive
1373 clause to the putting away (ἀπολύση) and not extending it also to the remarriage (γαμήση
1374 ἄλλην)” is not possible.

1375 While the phrase, strictly speaking, modifies only ‘divorces’, Wenham and Heth miss the
1376 mark when they move to the level of the sentence as a whole (and even the protasis as a whole).
1377 For they assert as follows regarding 19:9, then paraphrase it (1 and 2),

1378
1379 The construction of Matthew 19:9 basically indicates that we are dealing with two conditional
1380 statements, one that is qualified and one that is unqualified or absolute:

- 1381 1 A man may not put away his wife unless she is guilty of adultery
1382 2 Whoever marries another after putting away his wife commits adultery⁸⁷

1383
1384 There are serious problems with this highly paraphrastic rendering. First, while clause 2 bears
1385 some resemblance grammatically to Matthew’s wording, Wenham and Heth had to reword #1

⁸⁵ Murray, 1980, p 36.

⁸⁶ Gordon Wenham and Heth, William, *Jesus and Divorce*, (Eugene, Oregon: 2009) pp 116-17.

⁸⁷ 2009, pp 117.

1386 radically from a statement warning when a man’s divorce leads to adultery to one expressing
1387 permission to divorce under particular circumstances. Their paraphrase bears little resemblance
1388 to even their own proffered *translation* of the sentence:
1389

1390 And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another
1391 [protasis], commits adultery [apodosis].”⁸⁸
1392

1393 In fact, even on a grammatical level, we are not dealing with two conditional statements,
1394 but a single one, albeit a compound one. The apodosis, i.e. the determination that the man
1395 (‘whoever’) “commits adultery,” is true only when the following two coordinate conditions (a) &
1396 (b), joined by *καί* (the coordinating conjunction⁸⁹), are (both) met:
1397

1398 If a man,
1399 (a) divorces his wife for a reason other than for sexual immorality,
1400 AND
1401 (b) he then remarries to a different woman ...
1402

1403 At this point it is crucial to reemphasize that, grammatically speaking, both (a) and (b) are truly
1404 coordinate (even though (a) alone is modified by the exceptive phrase) and therefore, for the
1405 overall (compound) condition to be met and the guilty verdict (‘[he] commits adultery’) to apply,
1406 both must be satisfied. Conversely, if either one of the conditions is not met, the apodosis does
1407 not come into force, i.e. there is then no adultery asserted. Neither [1] divorce apart from *porneia*
1408 *alone*, nor [2] remarriage following divorce for *porneia* is hereby condemned by Jesus *as*
1409 *adulterous*, for in case [1] condition (b) is not met and in case [2] condition (a) is not met.⁹⁰
1410 In conclusion, Murray is correct, conceptually speaking, “restricting the exceptive clause to the
1411 putting away (*ἀπολύση*) and not extending it also to the remarriage (*γαμήση ἄλλην*)” is not
1412 possible. However, a more nuanced explanation would be to say that while the exceptive clause
1413 modifies only ‘divorces’ per se, the coordinated nature of the relationship of ‘divorces’ with
1414 ‘marries’ means that for adultery to occur there must be both divorce apart from *porneia* and also
1415 remarriage; remarriage following any other divorce (i.e. divorce for *porneia*) is not hereby said to

⁸⁸ 2009, pp 117; 113, brackets original.

⁸⁹ “**I**. as a connective; ... (2) as a continuative, connecting clauses and sentences *and* (MT 21.23c)”; Friberg, s.v. *καί*.

⁹⁰ Even the translation offered by Wenham and Heth (p 113), among Protestants perhaps the ‘no-remarriage-after-divorce’ view’s most prolific proponents over the past 30 years, seems to recognize this import for the verse (Gundry’s commentary provides no translation); they write: “Matthew 19:9 reads, ‘And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another [protasis], commits adultery [apodosis].’”

Similarly, D. Hagner, who opines without details, “Exegetically, Wenham (see too Heth and Wenham) is more convincing on this passage,” renders 19:9: “I tell you that whoever divorces his wife except for sexual immorality and marries another commits adultery”; *Matthew 14-28*, 2002, p 545.

1416 make the divorcé guilty of adultery. The interpretation of Mat 19:9 implicit in the WCF 24.6 –
1417 allowing remarriage after divorce for adultery – is hereby confirmed.⁹¹

1418 (3) How can Remarriage After Divorce Constitute Adultery?

1419 The nature of the formation of a marriage, biblically speaking, is God creating a non-
1420 physical but very real bond between the man and his wife – one intended to be, “until death do us
1421 part.” The existence of such a connection is clear both from the creation ordinance establishing
1422 marriage (Gen 2:24) and the way Jesus interprets that ordinance, according to the Gospels of
1423 Matthew and Mark. For example:

1424
1425 “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall be joined to his
1426 wife; and the two shall become one flesh[.]’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh.
1427 What therefore **God** has **joined** together, (a) man must not separate.”
1428 (Mat 19:5-6 NASB, modified)

1429
1430 Paul explains that ordinarily death alone can sever the bond God has formed between husband
1431 and wife:

1432
1433 For the married woman is **bound** by law **to her husband** while he is living; but if her husband
1434 dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband. So then, if while her husband is
1435 living she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies,
1436 she is free from the law, so that she is not an adulteress though she is joined to another man.
1437 (Rom 7:2-3, NASB, emph. added)

1438

⁹¹ An additional argument Wenham and Heth advance against remarriage pursuant to divorce for *porneia* is answered well by Carson. Wenham & Heth (2002, p 115):

There are clearly three possible positions Matthew could have placed “except for immorality” in order to express Jesus’ saying on divorce and remarriage. [1] First, ... before “divorces” and after “whoever,” ... [2] Second, ... “where he did place it ... [3] Third, ... after the second verbal action, “marries another,” and before “commits adultery.”

They then assert that [3],

comes closest to requiring the interpretation of Matthew 19:9 Erasmians [most Protestants, including Murray] now give to it. Thus although the present position of the exception clause does not eliminate all ambiguity, another word order would have served Matthew even less well, assuming that he wished to express the early church view [no remarriage after any divorce]. Had the clause come after “marries another,” it would have expressly sanctioned remarriage.

On [3], however, D.A. Carson [*Matthew, Mark, Luke*, Expositors Bible Comm. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) p 416] identifies their error on this point:

If it is placed before the verb *moichatai* (“commits adultery”), the verse might be paraphrased as follows: “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, if it is not for fornication that he divorces one and marries another, commits adultery.” But this wording suggests that fornication is being advanced as the actual reason for marrying another, and not only for the divorce – an interpretation that borders on the ridiculous.

1439 In seeking to divorce his spouse, a person is acting contrary to the plain force of Jesus’
1440 prohibitive command, “what ... God has joined together, (a) man must not separate.” Such a
1441 person seeks the dissolution of the God-formed bond such that “lawfully ... [he] may [re]marry
1442 after the divorce ... as if the offending party were dead” (WCF 24.5). As shown above, Jesus
1443 goes on to make but one exception to his otherwise absolute ban on divorce: *porneia*, shown
1444 above to be rightly interpreted by the confession as the sin of adultery – apart from which ground
1445 remarriage following divorce itself constitutes adultery.

1446 Examination of the definition of adultery, either from the Bible or from general English
1447 usage, naturally provokes the question, “how can remarriage after a divorce become adultery?” as
1448 Jesus warns in Matthew 19:9. On this issue, two of our own theologians, John Murray and Jay
1449 Adams, differ. The latter insists that a (civil) divorce, even one contrary to Christ’s prohibition
1450 has, “truly broke[n] the first marriage.” I.e., the two are no longer married, even “in God’s eyes.”
1451 That is to say, the action of human authorities – even in defiance of Christ – truly dissolves the
1452 marital bond. Adams explains Jesus’ declaration that remarriage after an illicit divorce is
1453 adulterous as follows: “adultery, then, is sexual sin with someone other than the one with whom
1454 one *ought* to be having sexual relations.” “They *ought* [to be having sexual relations] because
1455 they *ought* to be married.” On the other hand, Murray contends for what may reasonably be
1456 labeled ‘the traditional explanation’ for Mat 19:9b: “The only reason for which this remarriage
1457 can be regarded as adulterous is that the first marriage is still in God’s sight regarded as inviolate.
1458 The divorce has not dissolved it.”⁹²

1459 That Murray’s view is the historic Reformed position may be seen in the *Westminster*
1460 *Annotations* (on Mat 19:9), which agrees, “the band of marriage **cannot** be broken by a divorce,
1461 except it be for adultery,” and in the commentary by the 17th century Presbyterian, Matthew
1462 Poole:

1463
1464 We met with the like determination of our Lord’s upon this question [sic] chap. v. 32, only
1465 there was (instead of *committeth adultery*) *causeth her to commit adultery*, that is, in case
1466 she married again. Here our Lord saith the like of the husband: we have the same, Mark
1467 x.11; Luke xvi.18. The reason is this: because nothing but adultery dissolveth the knot and
1468 band of marriage, though they be thus illegally separated, yet according to the law of God
1469 they are still man and wife.⁹³

1470
1471 Murray further explains that in the aftermath of a divorce based upon **any other ground save**
1472 **sexual immorality**,

1473
1474 Illegitimate divorce does not dissolve the marriage bond and consequently the fact of such
1475 divorce does not relieve the parties concerned from any of the obligations incident to

⁹² Compare Jay Adams, *Marriage, Divorce & Remarriage in the Bible* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980) p 67 and John Murray, *Divorce* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1961) p 25.

⁹³ *Matthew Poole’s Commentary on the Holy Bible*, vol. III: Matthew-Revelation (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson) 88.

1476 marriage. They are still in reality bound to one another in the bonds of matrimony and a
1477 marital relation or any exercise of the privileges and rights of marital relation with any other
1478 is adultery. Whatever the law of men may enact, this is the law of Christ’s kingdom and to it
1479 the laws of men should conform.⁹⁴
1480

1481 So according to the Annotations, Poole, and Murray, an illicit divorce cannot dissolve the
1482 marriage bond, a proclamation of dissolution by a civil magistrate (or church) notwithstanding.
1483 Any sexual relations with a third party thus constitute adultery. What God has joined together
1484 man is not only forbidden but *unable* to rend asunder, apart from express divine authorization
1485 (i.e. Mat 5:32; 19:9). Thus, even after a civil divorce decree, the marriage bond remains intact, so
1486 long as that decree was not predicated upon an act of adultery against the spouse seeking the
1487 divorce.

1488 Adams, asserting a different explanation as to why remarriage after an illegal (vis-à-vis
1489 Christ’s law) divorce constitutes adultery, ultimately resorts to redefining of adultery. First, he
1490 insists that even a divorce contrary to Christ’s prohibition, “truly broke the first marriage.” I.e.,
1491 the two are no longer married. The action of human authorities – even in defiance of Christ –
1492 truly dissolves the (first) marriage covenant. However, Adams then (rightly) recognizes that,
1493 “adultery *always involves a violation of the marriage covenant* in such a way that a third party is
1494 introduced” (emph. added). Thus, adultery cannot take place unless there is a marriage covenant
1495 in existence, one which is violated by “a third party.” Finally, Adams broadens his definition of
1496 adultery, effectively negating the ‘always’ in his description of adultery: “adultery, then, is
1497 sexual sin with someone other than the one with whom one *ought* to be having sexual relations.”
1498 “They *ought* [to be having sexual relations] because they *ought* to be married,” even though, he
1499 asserts, they are not.⁹⁵ The (forbidden) remarriage constitutes adultery according to his adjusted
1500 definition of adultery, but not according to his initial (the correct) one. Adams’ theory is not
1501 consistent with his own (initial) definition of Adultery. More importantly, it is not consonant
1502 with the view of adultery which is presupposed in the Bible, one which requires the existence of a
1503 marriage covenantal bond.

1504 Both the scriptural definition of adultery and the interpretation of Matthew 19:3- 9
1505 reflected in 1 Corinthians 7 confirm the traditional explanation for Jesus’ verb choice in 19:9
1506 (μοιχάω) to be the correct one.

1507 Scriptural usage confirms that to commit adultery (μοιχάω), a marriage covenant must
1508 always be violated. Louw and Nida (*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on*
1509 *Semantic Domains*, 2nd Edition; emph. added) explain the verb, μοιχάω (*moichaō*), which Jesus
1510 uses to express adultery in both Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 as well as in Mark 10:11 and Luke 16:18:
1511 “sexual intercourse of a man with a married woman other than his own spouse – ‘to commit

⁹⁴ *Divorce*, p 25. On the def. of adultery, see below. Charles Hodge would agree: “If, therefore, a human tribunal annuls a marriage for any reason other than those assigned in the Bible, the marriage is not thereby dissolved”; *Systematic Theology* Vol. III (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) pp 404-05.

⁹⁵ *Marriage, Divorce*, p 67.

1512 adultery, adultery” (though Jesus, in Mat 19:9, expands the definition to include relations of a
1513 woman with a married man).⁹⁶ Hence, if the marital bond has truly been dissolved and she is no
1514 longer married, in Paul’s terminology, no longer “bound to her husband” – as Adams claims –
1515 there can be no adultery (rigorously defined), only fornication. Thus, in the passage cited above
1516 (Rom 7:1-2) we read, “the married woman is **bound** by law **to her husband** while he is living;
1517 ... So then, if while her husband is living she is joined to another man, she shall be called an
1518 adulteress.” So long as she remains bound, a new marriage is adulterous. Once the bond is
1519 broken (as it is by death), there can be no adultery. Adams’ explanation for the adultery in
1520 Matthew 19:9 is mistaken; the traditional explanation, followed by Murray, is correct.

1521 The apostle Paul implicitly adopts this traditional exegesis of Jesus’ instructions in
1522 Matthew 19, as we will confirm when we take up 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 and 15 (see below).
1523 Here we anticipate that section’s conclusions: In verses 10-11, the Apostle, referring to Lord’s
1524 teaching in Matthew 19:6, declares that when one or both parties in a Christian marriage want
1525 to separate (when adultery has not occurred) the Lord forbids it. Should one or both spouses
1526 defy the Lord by separating or divorcing, thereby attempting to rend their marital bond apart,
1527 the Apostle, still based upon the Lord’s teaching (cf. Mat 19:6,9), forbids remarriage to a third
1528 party (“but if she does [separate], she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her
1529 husband”; 1Cor 7:11 ESV), lest the (still extant) divinely enacted marriage bond be violated by
1530 adultery, thereby compounding the sin against the Lord’s command (19:6) with violation of
1531 the seventh commandment (19:9). However, in the case of a mixed marriage, when the
1532 unbelieving spouse defies the Lord by refusing to continue to dwell with his spouse, Paul
1533 declares, the “brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases” (1Cor 7:15 KJV); the
1534 bond has been dissolved. Ergo the marriage bond remains in the case of two believers.

1535 We conclude that the traditional explanation is to be maintained, to wit, only divinely
1536 authorized divorces are divinely recognized, since only God can empower men to dissolve the
1537 bond He Himself has created; that is our Lord’s point in commanding that man not separate what
1538 God has joined (Mat 19:5-6). Therefore, since the Son of God authorizes dissolution of
1539 marriages only for *porneia*, man-made divorces on other grounds are invalid before the throne of
1540 Christ; such purportedly ‘divorced’ couples remain married in the eyes of God. Any new sexual
1541 relations, therefore, constitute the sin of adultery against the supposedly dissolved marriage, as
1542 adultery is defined both biblically and in standard English usage.⁹⁷ This is also the understanding
1543 asserted in WCF 24.5, which cites both Matthew 5:31 and 19:9.

1544 This, then, is the state of progressive revelation regarding divorce given by God to his
1545 people as they move into the apostolic age.

1546

⁹⁶ Surprisingly, initially Jay Adams acknowledges the biblical definition for adultery: “adultery **always** involves a **violation of the marriage covenant**”; *Marriage, Divorce*, p 67; emph. added.

⁹⁷ This finding will be relevant to analyzing Paul’s application (below) of the Lord’s command (Mat 19:6), particularly in 1 Cor 7:10-11.

Paul on Divorce and Desertion in 1 Corinthians 7

From the confession's proof texts on 24.6, we noted above that 1 Corinthians 7:15 must play the central Scriptural role in understanding the confessional import of "wilful desertion" as a ground for lawful divorce since it is the only passage cited by the WA to support that ground. Moreover, it alone describes one spouse "depart[ing]" (KJV), "leav[ing]" (NASB) or "separate[ing]" (ESV,NRSV), with the remaining spouse said to be no longer bound. Accordingly, we determined that the key biblical passage for study of desertion as a ground for divorce based upon willful desertion is 1 Corinthians 7:1-16 – especially vv 12-16, the sub-unit containing v 15.

It is useful to begin with consideration of a major exegetical problem affecting one's analysis of not only 1 Corinthians 7:1-16 but all of chapter 7, before looking at the structure of that chapter and then undertaking its exegesis proper.

A Preliminary Issue:

The Corinthian's Question and Its Impact on One's Understanding 1 Cor 7

Probably, the most notorious and significant unresolved exegetical problem in 1 Corinthians 7 is the nature – both content and number – of the question or questions raised by the Corinthians to which Paul is responding beginning in 7:1. That nature was fully known by both author and original readers. Since their query does not appear to be expressly stated, those seeking to determine the force of that question must do so by inference. The position one takes on that church's inquiry impacts his reading of the entire chapter. What sort of interrogatory prompted this complex, 40 verse-long reply? John Hurd observes, "More scholars have attempted the reconstruction of the Corinthians' questions concerning marriage than have attempted the formulation of their inquiries on any other topic [i.e., in 1 Cor 7—16]."⁹⁸ Despite this abundance of attention, no consensus has emerged. While, David Garland opines, "the issue is difficult to settle," it is—nonetheless—important; he adds, "the answer affects how one interprets the thrust of the rest of the chapter."⁹⁹ That is to say, since in 7:1ff Paul is responding to their

⁹⁸ *The Origin of 1 Corinthians* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer Univ. Press, 1983) p 154. Hurd reviews numerous diverse attempts at reconstruction, with some positing a single lengthy query, others multiple questions. Hypotheses for the first part, vv 1ff, are as varied as shall we "make marriage universal?" versus, "is marriage to be allowed?" (pp 155-56). Hurd's own attempt at a reconstruction consumes twelve lines of fine print in English (p 168). Deming suggests Paul is answering a series of queries: "in 7.25 Paul introduces a new topic into the chapter. Until now he has addressed questions relevant to married people—whether they can separate, ... divorce, ... remarry; in 7.25ff. he will take up the question of whether virgins should marry"; *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy: The Hellenistic Background of 1 Corinthians 7*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) (SNTS Monograph Series, vol. 83) p 173. It is hard to see how answering a simple question could require the 40 verses of chapter 7, but it also seems unreasonable to imagine an entire congregation—a contentious one at that—crafting the complex queries that have been proposed as reconstructions of the Corinthians' question. Hurd (PhD in NT, Yale) is Fellow Emeritus on the Faculty of Divinity, Trinity College in the Univ. of Ontario.

⁹⁹ *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the NT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003) p 252.

1575 communication somehow raising this matter, an exegete's reconstruction of their query ought to
1576 correspond to his understanding of Paul's answer (most or all of chapter 7). To be persuasive,
1577 one's reading of chapter 7 must dovetail with a plausible reconstruction of the Corinthians'
1578 question or questions. This issue cannot be ignored if a compelling exegesis of the chapter and of
1579 its key verses related to divorce are to be achieved.¹⁰⁰

1580 ***The Key: the Relationship of Mat 19:3-12 and 1 Cor 7:1-16***

1581 Some NT scholars have recognized that these two passages –which happen to be the key
1582 ones for the question before us – are related to one another, and not just topically; obviously both
1583 touch on divorce and celibacy. (For those who accept the view that the bona fide apostles of
1584 Christ are all true disciples of Christ, it should come as no surprise that Paul would take his ethics
1585 on divorce and remarriage from the teaching of his Lord.)

1586 From the higher critical side of NT scholarship, W. D. Davies¹⁰¹ lists both 1 Cor 7:10 and
1587 11:23ff as two of a number of “clear evidence[s] that there was a collection of sayings of Jesus to
1588 which Paul appealed”; he labels them, “explicit references to the words of Jesus.”¹⁰² David
1589 Wenham¹⁰³ (cited in Lauer), an evangelical, suggests a much closer relationship. Lauer writes,

1590 In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul is responding to

1591 those in Corinth who were advocating celibacy . . . [by] themselves drawing on Jesus' teaching and . . .
1592 taking the 'eunuchs' saying to mean that celibacy is the highest Christian calling, to which *all* should
1593 aspire.

1594 Wenham thinks Paul's readers knew, and were seeking (somehow) to follow, Jesus' teaching that “it
1595 is not expedient to marry” (. . . 19:10, ASV; though uttered by his disciples, the Lord gives the
1596 principle his qualified approbation). Thus, they sought to make “themselves eunuchs for the
1597 kingdom of heaven” (. . . 19:12). Wenham elaborates:

1600 It is not difficult to see how the Corinthians might have reasoned from such passages, including the
1601 'eunuchs' saying of Matt 19:11,12, that Jesus recommended celibacy, at least for the most spiritual.

1602 The idea is that the Corinthians were taking Jesus' (contextually limited) endorsement of eunuch-
1603 hood (self-adopted sexual abstinence) as if it were unqualified, something “to which all should
1604 aspire.”

1605 Thus, according to the reconstruction Wenham implies, the Corinthians' (single, simple)
1606 question must have been along one of these lines:

¹⁰⁰ This paragraph is largely taken from Stewart Lauer, “Traces of a Gospel Writing in 1 Corinthians: Rediscovery and Development of Origen's Understanding of 1 Corinthians 4:6B,” Ph.D. Diss., (Univ. of Wales, Trinity Saint David, 2010) pp 303-04.

¹⁰¹ Davies (1911-2001), a Congregational minister from Wales, held Professorships at Duke, Union Theological Seminary (NYC), and Princeton Univ.

¹⁰² *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology*, (London, S P C K: 1948) p 140.

¹⁰³ Wenham is an Anglican minister and professor at Trinity College, the University of Bristol, England.

1611 (1) Shall we all [who would be spiritual] follow Jesus’ teaching and make ourselves “eunuchs for
1612 the kingdom” [= abstain from sexual intercourse]?

1613 *Or*

1614 (2) In keeping with Jesus’ teaching, is it really good [spiritually] for us (all) not “to touch a
1615 woman” [= to have sexual intercourse]?¹⁰⁴

1616

1617 In the light of Lauer’s thesis regarding 1 Corinthians 4:6b’s “Nothing beyond what is written”
1618 (NRSV), to wit,

1619 The function of the rule [=4:6b] in relation to 1 Corinthians 1—3 and, in particular, Paul’s
1620 statement in 4:6a explaining that in 3:5-17 he was teaching them to adhere to that rule show that
1621 the only available proposal for [“what is written” in] v 6b which fits this data—*all of it*—is the
1622 understanding reflected in Origen’s exposition and use of 4:6: ‘*What stands written*’ is identified
1623 as a Gospel document, one at least similar, if not identical to one of the Four extant Gospels of the
1624 NT canon. Paul delivered both the saying and the document to the church at Corinth, circa AD 50,

1625

1626 Lauer goes on in his final chapter to examine 1 Corinthians 5 and 7 and shows that both chapters
1627 presuppose knowledge of the teaching of Jesus, teaching always found in Matthew and almost
1628 always found *only in Matthew*, indicating that the Gospel document Paul was (re)advocating to
1629 the Corinthians in 4:6 could only have been Matthew.

1630 This result necessarily implies that as Paul writes 1 Corinthians, he not only knows the
1631 Corinthians possess a copy of Matthew, but they both know and are being reminded of their duty
1632 to preach the gospel (in the sense of the Jesus story; see Lauer’s chapter 5, section 2) from
1633 Matthew only, and not from memory or from oral traditions about Jesus. Paul, then, can
1634 presuppose in his readers a detailed knowledge of the very wording of the first Gospel. As such,
1635 readers today, too – if they are to be able to read 1 Corinthians as Paul expected the Corinthians
1636 to read it – must come to that epistle with the teaching of Matthew not only at hand, but also
1637 clearly in mind.

1638 In the case of 1 Corinthians 7, Lauer tested Wenham’s theory by examining vv 1-11 in the light
1639 of Mat 19:3-12:

1640

¹⁰⁴ Lauer, 2010, pp 304-05; citing D. Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity* (Grand Rapid: Eerdmans, 1995), pp 246, 250; brackets Lauer’s.

In addition to the reconstruction of the Corinthians’ query to Paul, two other questions have also occupied much attention of those studying 7:1: Is Paul quoting their actual words? And, does “to touch a woman” allude to sexual intercourse specifically, or to marriage more generally? Who first employed the circumlocution, they or Paul? These need not be settled here. Still, in view of Paul’s initial response *with respect to married Christians*, commanding them first in positive, then in negative terms to practice regular conjugal relations (τῇ γυναικί ὁ ἀνὴρ τὴν ὀφειλὴν ἀποδιδότω, ... μὴ ἀποστερεῖτε ἀλλήλους) it seems obvious that, if 1 Cor 7 is linked with the eunuch saying,—in keeping with Jesus’ figurative use of the term eunou/coj (lit. ‘1. castrated male, ... 2.a male born without ability to reproduce [,or] ... 3.**figuratively, of one who imposes sexual abstinence on himself**’; Friberg; emphasis added)—an explicit, albeit euphemistic, reference to intercourse is to be understood in 7:1’s “touch a woman.”

1641 Wenham’s theory that in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul is “draw[ing] on much of the material that is
1642 found in Matt 19:1-12 . . . [and] debating with the Corinthians about sayings of Jesus which
1643 they were familiar with and were interpreting in ways which Paul disagreed with” (1995,
1644 250), strongly suppor[t] the theory. **Verses 1-11, the portion of 1 Corinthians 7 where Paul**
1645 **expressly mentions and seems to be applying and clarifying the Lord’s own teaching,**
1646 **read very smoothly when one takes Paul to be answering their question about a**
1647 **generalized application of the eunuch-saying (19:10-12) by correcting their**
1648 **misinterpretations of much of Matthew 19:3-12 (the lone NT document recording that**
1649 **key saying). Arguably, Paul not only carefully and accurately clarifies Jesus’ teaching**
1650 **on making oneself a eunuch for the kingdom to married Christian couples and to**
1651 **unmarried Christians . . . , he also faithfully applies the command of ‘the Lord [Jesus]’**
1652 **(found in the same Matthean pericope) for ‘a man’ not to divorce his wife (Mat 19:6),**
1653 **applying it to women as well as to men. Only the latter dominical saying [=saying of Jesus]**
1654 **finds a parallel passage in another Gospel. In both matters, the eunuch-saying and divorce,**
1655 **Paul exhibits detailed knowledge of Jesus’ teaching in Mat 19:3-12, expressly attributing**
1656 **some of it to the Lord Jesus, and he seems to assume the same knowledge on the part of his**
1657 **readers (the Corinthians).¹⁰⁵**
1658

1659 From this one may conclude that 1 Corinthians 7 provides a window into the Apostle’s
1660 inspired, infallible understanding of Jesus’ teaching on celibacy and divorce recorded in Matthew
1661 19. Paul is standing squarely on the shoulders of his Lord, especially his directives recorded in
1662 Matthew 19, as he addresses the Corinthians’ question about how or how not to apply Jesus’
1663 advocacy of celibacy, with respect to the various types of persons in the church at Corinth.

1664 It is important to highlight that the chapter is not about divorce, or even about marriage,
1665 but about how the Corinthians ought or ought not to implement Jesus’ teaching advocating
1666 celibacy. Issues of divorce and marriage are considered only in so far as they relate to Paul’s
1667 replies regarding making oneself a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven.
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The Structure of Paul’s Treatment of Mat 19:3-12 in 1 Cor 7

1670 While the above analysis of Paul’s treatment of Matthew 19:3-12 ends with 7:11, its
1671 outline goes beyond, pointing the way to understand the context of the only verse cited as a proof
1672 text for “wilful desertion” as well (1 Cor 7:15). That outline is reprinted here alongside of that of
1673 Gordon Fee (for comparison).
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¹⁰⁵ Lauer, 2010, pp 320-21; bold print added.

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**Outline of 1 Corinthians 7 –
Groups With Respect to Whom Paul Answers
the Corinthians’ Question about Abstaining from Sexual Relations”**

	<u>LAUER</u>	<u>FEE</u> ¹⁰⁶
I.	7:2-5 to married Christians (Christians)	vv. 1-7 – to the married
II.	7:6-9 to unmarried and widows (Christians) and widows	vv. 8-9 –to the “unmarried”
III.	7:10-11 to married Christians who might divorce	vv. 10-11—to the married (both partners believers)
IV.	7:12-16 to Christians married to non- Christians who might divorce	vv. 12-16—to those with an unbelieving spouse
V.	7:25-38 to “virgin” Christians engaged to marry.	vv. 25-38—to “virgins”

Broadly speaking, Paul’s lengthy reply to the Corinthians’ question about making themselves eunuchs or staying celibate for the kingdom divides on two different principles: First, points I to III clarify how *the teaching of the Lord Jesus* (Paul: “not I, but the Lord,” v 10) on celibacy (found solely) in Matthew 19:10-12 and on divorce, (found both) in Matthew 19:3-9 and in Mark 10:2-12 does or does not apply to three particular groups in the church, while IV and V instruct two groups outside the immediate purview of the Lord’s instructions (hence, “I say, **not the Lord**,” v 12; and “Now concerning virgins I have **no command of the Lord**,” v 25; NASB, bold print added) on the matter.

Second, on a different principle, 1 Corinthians 7 also divides between IV and V: the first part deals with Christians who are able (conceivably) to “remain with God in that *condition* in which [they were] called” (7:20, NASB) — a general principle which Paul indicates has obtained in his response to those groups.¹⁰⁷ On the other hand, Christians in category V have pledged to marry and so must decide whether or not to do as promised — to go forward and marry — or to break off their engagements (cf. Mat 1:19) and rather make themselves ‘eunuchs for the kingdom’. Either way, being betrothed to marry, they cannot simply follow the ‘stay-as-you-are’ principle of I through IV.

To summarize, vv 1-16 answer the Corinthians’ question about becoming ‘eunuchs for the kingdom’ with respect to Christians whom Paul would prefer ‘stay-as-they-are’. Vv 17-24 articulate the ‘stay-as-you-are’ principle. Finally, vv 25ff reply to their question with respect to those who cannot ‘stay-as-they-are’, but must either marry (as promised), or break off their

¹⁰⁶ Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) (NICNT) p 268.

¹⁰⁷ Commenting on v 17, C.K. Barrett says, “In the rest of the paragraph (up to verse 24) Paul generalizes on the conclusions he has reached and stated [prior to v 17] in regard to marriage in general and mixed marriages in particular”; *First Corinthians*, Black’s NTC (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996) p 167.

1715 engagements and remain virgins.¹⁰⁸ This second bifurcation explains the position of the chapter’s
1716 second topic shift indicator, “now concerning [περὶ δε,]” (v 25).¹⁰⁹
1717 We will treat I and II briefly, but III more fully, since there Paul clearly deals with divorce.
1718 However, we will take up IV (vv 12-16) in still greater detail as this, according to the
1719 determinations of the WA and OPCGA, contains the verse that supports “wilful desertion” as a
1720 ground for (biblically) lawful divorce.
1721

1722 I. Paul’s Reply with Respect to Married Christians

1723 While by asserting that “it is good for a man not to touch a woman” (v 1b) Paul echoes his
1724 Lord’s advocacy of ‘eunuch-hood’—in the NT, recorded only in Matthew 19:10-12—he
1725 immediately qualifies [“but (δέ)”] that endorsement so as to exclude any applicability to those
1726 who are married, giving as the reason, “because of immoralities” [διὰ δὲ τὰς πορνείας ...].
1727 Thusly, he might appear to be creating an ‘exception’ to the Lord’s approbation of celibacy. Paul
1728 says that although in theory it would be great if “all men were even as” he is (abstaining from
1729 sexual relations)—hence actively applying Jesus’ eunuch-teaching to themselves—nevertheless,
1730 those who are married must not: “because there is so much sexual immorality, each man (ἕκαστος

¹⁰⁸ While the trend in recent decades has rightly been away from viewing Paul’s concern as with a man and his ‘virgin daughter’ (7:36, ASV, NASB), the RSV’s rendering of v 25’s τῶν παρθένων as ‘the unmarried’ (cf. NLT; Collins 1999, 287) is not sufficiently precise. Περὶ δὲ τῶν παρθένων certainly takes up the matter of persons *never* married (not simply unmarried, cf. 7:8). Furthermore, v 36’s possessive-bearing instance of the same term, τὴν παρθένον αὐτοῦ, *cannot* be rendered “his unmarried.” In this latter instance the RSV (in v 25 corrected by the NRSV to “virgins” and by the ESV to “betrothed”), Collins, the NLT and even the NRSV found it necessary to modify their rendering of παρθένος to “[his] betrothed” or “[his] fiancée.” Given that the only topic shift marker after 7:1 is at 7:25 (see below, n 61), the ESV’s consistency in rendering the term ‘betrothed’ is preferable – from 7:25 onward the whole section is concerned with the very same παρθένοι. However, since semantic force of the literal usage of the word is certainly ‘virgin’, not betrothed (“in our lit. one who has never engaged in sexual intercourse, *virgin, chaste person*”; BDAG), it seems best to render it ‘betrothed virgin’ in both passages. The engaged state is implied by the context, not by παρθένος itself.

¹⁰⁹ Fee (1987, 269, cf. 307) thinks this principle is still Paul’s ethical imperative in vv 25ff, “Paul’s response on both sides [of vv 17-24] is the same: ‘Stay as you are.’” Yet, Margret Mitchell (*Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation*, [Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992] 191) contends well that περὶ δέ functions as “a topic marker ... introducing the next topic,” not necessarily signalling response to a new point in *their* letter. Her argument has been very well received; e.g. Thiselton (2000, 483), Garland (2003, 248, 319), Joseph Fitzmyer (*First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, [Anchor Bible, vol. 32] [New York: Doubleday, 2008, 277]), Hays (1997, 110); but see Lockwood [Gregory J *I Corinthians*, (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing) (Concordia Commentary) 2000, 228]. As such, the newness of what follows at v 25 can be explained by the fact that this group, versus those of 7:1-16, cannot ‘stay-as-you-are’. It seems best to take v 25’s περὶ δέ as introducing the treatment of a group that is new not only vis-à-vis vv 2-16 but also vv 17-24, the express statement of the principle which had characterized his answers throughout the earlier section. Finally, it is surely more natural rhetorically for Paul to articulate the principle following *completion* of its application than to digress from application, state the principle, and then return to its application.

1731 = ἄνθρωπος) should have his own wife (γυνή), and each woman (γυνή) should have her own
 1732 husband (ἄνῆρ)” (v 2, New Living Transl.). Verses 3-5 leave no doubt as to how couples are to
 1733 protect each other from such sexual temptations: husbands and wives must seek to satisfy each
 1734 other’s conjugal desires by not denying each other sexual affection (vv 3-5). He expressly calls
 1735 such conjugal relations a duty, debt, or obligation (ὀφειλή¹¹⁰) each has to the other. He then
 1736 reiterates in other words, saying that each spouse has authority over the other’s body: “The wife
 1737 does not have authority over her own body, but the husband *does*; and likewise also the husband
 1738 does not have authority over his own body, but the wife *does*” (v 4; NASB).

1739 Is Paul hereby actually creating an exception to Jesus’ advocacy of celibacy? Upon
 1740 scrutiny of the context of Jesus’ saying in Matthew 19, one finds no true exception, since the
 1741 Lord’s positive (‘pro-celibacy’) response in 19:11-12 was to his disciples’ opinion *pertaining to*
 1742 *those* who are (necessarily) *unmarried*.¹¹¹ Thus, this first element of Paul’s reply creates no
 1743 exception (to Jesus’ celibacy-ethic) but accurately clarifies the true objects of the Lord’s
 1744 advocacy of self-imposed celibacy, warning: it does not apply to those already married. So in
 1745 7:2-5, Paul—based upon accurate contextual exegesis of the Lord’s instruction—is applying
 1746 Jesus’ teaching found in Matthew 19 in order to answer the Corinthians’ question with respect *to*
 1747 *married Christians*. Additionally, the Apostle asserts strongly and repeatedly that so long as a
 1748 man and wife are married, they are forbidden to deny each other sexual relations. Furthermore,
 1749 any notion that in vv 2-5 Paul is suggesting denial of conjugal affection to one’s spouse might
 1750 justify the denied party in divorcing the denier is put to rest by the Lord’s prohibition against
 1751 nearly all divorce, referred to explicitly five verses hence (vv 10-11). While such denial of sex is
 1752 clearly sin, it does not constitute illicit sexual intercourse (*porneia*) such as would fall into the
 1753 Lord’s sole exception to his Mat 19:6 prohibition.¹¹²

¹¹⁰“*Debt*; literally, a debt of goods or money (MT 18.32); figuratively *obligation, duty*”; Friberg, s.v.

¹¹¹ “Bengel, *ad loc.*, commenting on οὐ πάντες [not all], wrote: ‘Jesus opposes these words [vv. 11-12] to the universal proposition of his disciples.’ In other words, Matthew does use the saying on eunuchs to confirm celibacy as a calling, but his emphasis—in contradiction to the disciples—is upon its special character. ... One is reminded ... of 1 Corinthians 7, where Paul qualifies an ascetic generalization of the Corinthians (‘It is good for a man not to touch a woman’); W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew: In Three Volumes, Vol. 3: Commentary on Matthew XIX-XXVIII* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997) (ICC) 21.

¹¹² Brewer asserts a different source (than Jesus) for Paul’s reply (vv 2-6) to the Corinthians’ query (v 1) and thereby makes the verses about divorce, and that despite no mention of divorce therein by Paul and Paul’s explicitly stated reason for forbidding denial of sexual relations to one’s spouse (“because of immoralities”). Without attempting to demonstrate a *verbal* connection, Brewer merely declares,

Paul’s reply is based on the law of Exodus 21:10-11, concerning the rights of the slave wife. This passage said that even a slave wife had the right to expect love from her husband, and so the rabbis (and Paul) had deduced that a free wife and a husband also had the right to expect this. This explains why the language is so strong, and why he used the imagery of slavery.

While Brewer had previously shown *the rabbis* so reasoned, he provides no such demonstration in Paul’s case. Perhaps he assumes that, trained as a Pharisee, Paul must have followed that tradition? Brewer goes on to claim that while “many commentators have missed the reference to Exodus 21:10-11 in this passage, others have noticed it”; *Divorce in the Bible*, 2002, p 193-94; emphasis original. While in fact Brewer cites no commentaries per se in his

1754 Three additional inferences that can be drawn from v 5, “Stop depriving one another,
1755 except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together

accompanying footnote (n 7), he does refer to Brian Rosner’s monograph; Rosner has since co-authored a substantial commentary on 1 Cor (Ciampa & Rosner, Pillar NTC, Eerdmans, 2010).

In fact, in the monograph that Brewer cites, Rosner never claims Paul here makes a “reference to Exodus 21:10-11.” The closest he comes is to opine, “The *idea* that husbands and wives owe one another conjugal rights in 7:3 *can be traced* to Exodus 21:10, where it is said of the husband, ‘he shall not diminish her food, clothing, or her conjugal rights’, a text which Tomson demonstrates was commonly cited in early Jewish teaching on the subject. N. Herz has even suggested the direct influence of Exodus 21:10 on 1 Corinthians 7:3”; *Paul, Scripture & Ethics: A Study of 1 Corinthians 5-7*, (Leiden: Brill, 1994) p 159; emphasis added. Rosner seems to accept the former’s conclusion (“demonstrates ... commonly cited” by rabbis), but seems at best non-committal with respect to the latter suggestion (“direct influence”). In any event, Brewer’s “is based on” and his, “reference to,” far exceed Rosner’s own “can be traced.” Furthermore, in his (later) commentary, Rosner concedes, “Although *not* explicit, much of what Paul says here finds its roots in the Old Testament,” citing Exodus 21:10-11 as merely one among five passages as, (merely) “key background texts”; p 272; emphasis added. When they comment directly on vv 2-3, they opine, “the notion that sexual relations within marriage ought to act as a check on immorality is reflected in Paul’s Jewish inheritance: for example, “Drink water from your own cistern. ... rejoice in the wife of your youth. ... Why should you be infatuated, my son, with a loose woman?” (Prov. 5:15, 18, 20); and citing the first Brewer quote, above (p 193), they suggest, “Paul’s convictions [in v 2ff] may be traced to Exodus 21:10-11, which concern the rights of the slave wife”; Ciampa and Rosner, 2010, p 279. They never assert Paul is himself referring, much less that he is referring his readers, to any of these OT passages, merely that the origins of the ideas lie in them. The difference should not be underestimated. In making an intentional reference to an OT passage, the reader is invited to reflect on that passage and its context as he exegetes the NT writing; not so when the OT passage is merely the root or origin of the idea in the NT document.

Further, we note that – a number of paraphrastic modern translations notwithstanding – Exodus 21 never directly calls the man (or his son) ‘her husband’, but rather refers to, ‘her master’ (Hebrew רִבְוֹנֵהָ; Greek τῷ κυρίῳ ἀντὶς) and to and his ‘son’. Similarly, the expression, רְבִיבֵיּהָ, often rendered ‘her marital rights’ or ‘her conjugal rights’ (implicating a marriage), is literally simply, “[her] **sexual intercourse**, intimacy” (HALOT, s.v.). The LXX has τὴν ὁμιλίαν ἀντὶς, “[her] *association, companionship, company*” (Friberg) neither in Hebrew (which few if any Corinthians would have known), nor in the Greek (their native language) is there any reference to marriage or divorce (such as would justify calling the slave girl a wife), only to enslavement and emancipation. The rabbis have read marriage into a passage that makes no mention of it, explicit or implicit.

Even if, in Paul’s mind, with its Pharisaical upbringing, there were a subtle allusion to Exodus 21:10 in this first section of Paul’s reply to their question, this primarily Gentile congregation could not be expected to be familiar with extra-biblical Jewish traditions that argued from such slave girls to wives *and husbands*, given Ciampa and Rosner’s (plausible) translation of 12:2, formerly “you [Corinthian Christians] were pagans.” Most translations have ‘Gentiles’, but Ciampa and Rosner reason, “here Paul seems to be stressing their religious background” (p 561, 63). Surely, the great preponderance of the membership of the church at Corinth had been pagans until evangelization by Paul and Apollos from c. AD 49-52: about three to five years prior to this letter. More importantly, the pericope of Mat 15:1-20, in the Gospel to which Paul (c. 50) had bound the Corinthian teachers according to 1 Cor 4:6, portrays the Lord Himself as opposed to the very Jewish (Pharisaical) oral legal traditions that were later recorded in the Talmud, and upon which Brewer bases much of his case for the importance of the slave girl passage in understanding divorce in the NT. The Apostle to the Gentiles, had most certainly not spent his 18 months at Corinth teaching Judaistic traditions to these former pagans! Given the demonstrable allusions to Matthew throughout 1 Cor 7:1ff, it is surely more plausible that Paul’s concern that husbands and wives not be unduly separated from each other, so as to avoid *porneia*, is rooted not in a Jewish traditional interpretation of the slave girl passage, but in Jesus’ warning that separating what God has joined may lead to infidelity (esp. Mat 5:32). See also pp 57-58, below.

1756 again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control” (NASB), are as
1757 follows.

1758 (1) It is sin for *either* spouse to engage in sexual relations with anyone outside of that
1759 marriage. While this may seem obvious, from a (whole) biblical perspective this cannot be taken
1760 for granted. Under OT law, the seventh commandment, “thou shalt not commit adultery,” was
1761 one sided. Adultery, **זָנָה**, and other forms of the same root (**זָנָה**; LXX, **μοιχεία**) implicate
1762 “sexual intercourse with the wife or betrothed of another man.”¹¹³ Sexual relations by a
1763 (unmarried) woman with another’s husband did not fall under the commandment. Hence Jewish
1764 males could take additional wives with impunity.¹¹⁴ Jesus, however, changed that distinction, in
1765 the passage to which Paul refers hereby, specifically in Matthew 19:9: “I say to you: whoever
1766 divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery” (ESV).
1767 Thus, a married man, too, taking another wife, without a legitimate divorce, commits adultery.
1768 Consequently, pursuant to Jesus’ decree, (henceforth) the taking of a second wife constitutes
1769 adultery against the first.

1770 Paul’s agreement with Jesus’ modification of the meaning of adultery under the seventh
1771 commandment is implied here in v 5. Addressing *both* parties in a Christian marriage, Paul
1772 orders them to stop denying each other sexual intimacy, and gives as the reason, “so that Satan
1773 will not tempt you (pl.),” i.e., tempt *both* of you to violate your marriage covenant by
1774 transgressing the seventh commandment through extramarital relations.

1775 (2) The Apostle goes beyond telling both husband and wife that providing sexual intimacy is
1776 a debt (v 3) and that each spouse has authority over the body of the other, and he issues a direct
1777 order, “Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote
1778 yourselves to prayer,” so anything that one party in the marriage does willfully and unilaterally
1779 that has the predictable effect of depriving his spouse of sexual intimacy constitutes defiance of
1780 the Lord, hence serious sin. For the Lord’s Apostle later reminds us, “the things which I write to
1781 you are the Lord's commandment” (1 Cor 14:37; cf. John 13:20; 15:20b). “Stop depriving” is a
1782 negated 2nd person plural imperative, **μη ἀποστερεῖτε**. This danger of sharing responsibility in
1783 one’s spouse’s adultery by withholding sexual affection, provoking the other to that sin is implied
1784 in Jesus’ teaching, not in Mat 19, but in Mat 5:32, though Jesus does not himself specify why an
1785 unjustly divorced woman would be tempted to remarry, thereby falling into adultery (cf. 1 Tim
1786 5:11).¹¹⁵ However, the point is not that a failure, or even refusal, to fulfill said obligation becomes
1787 – contrary to the Lord’s command (v 10, cf. Mat 19:6) – a ground for divorce (as in contemporary
1788 Judaism). Rather, Paul is simply contending that married couples must not apply the Lord’s

¹¹³ *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol.2, eds. R. Harris, G. Archer, B. Waltke, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), s.v.

¹¹⁴ “A married woman cohabiting with a man not her husband. The prevalent polygamy in patriarchal times rendered it impossible to stigmatize as adultery the cohabitation of a married man with another besides his wife”; *Fausset’s Bible Dictionary*, s.v. ‘adultery’.

¹¹⁵ Inferring such sexual temptation would not preclude the financial consideration sometimes suggested as Jesus’ unstated cause (e.g. Hagner, 1995, p 124).

1789 eunuch saying to their conjugal relations. This section of chapter 7 is not directly about divorce or
1790 desertion, but (in answer to the Corinthians’ query, cf. 7:1) about the (non) applicability of the
1791 eunuch saying to Christians who are already married.

1792 (3) The exception proves the rule: “except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote
1793 yourselves to prayer,” leaves no room for other implicit exceptions that recalcitrant spouses might
1794 be inclined to read into the passage. Thus, so long as one is married, including a Christian spouse
1795 who has separated himself in violation of the Lord’s command (7:10-11; for exegesis, see below)
1796 Paul’s warning remains applicable, “stop depriving one another”; neither spouse may deny the
1797 other, nor may both together choose celibacy for an extended period of time. Furthermore, the
1798 godly response to disobedience to vv 2-5 is not to fabricate another exception (divorce), but to
1799 “come together again so that Satan will not tempt you” to adultery (cf. Mat 5:32).

1800

1801

II. 7:6-9 Paul’s Reply to Those Who are Unmarried and to Widows (Christians)

1802

1803 Verses 6-9 are addressed “to those who are not married (lit. ‘to the not married’)” and to
1804 widows (cf. 7:39); they *may* implement the (figurative) eunuch-hood Jesus advocates.¹¹⁶ Hereby,
1805 Paul faithfully applies Jesus’ eunuch-teaching to the very same group implied (contextually) by
1806 the Lord (Mat 19:10-12)—those who are not (currently) married.¹¹⁷ For them Paul agrees, “it is

¹¹⁶ BDAG, s.v. ἄγαμος: “**an unmarried man/woman**, of both 1 Cor 7:8”; bold print original. Heth and Wenham dispute this understanding of ἄγαμος in this context, suggesting it ought to be rendered, “widowers,” such that in v 7, Paul is addressing only “widowers and widows” (p 137). They argue:

The word “unmarried” (*agamos*) is used four times in the New Testament, and all of these occur in 1 Corinthians 7 (vv. 8,11,32,34). In verse 8 it is masculine and is used in parallelism with “widow” (*chēra*) where Paul says: “But I say to the *unmarried* and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I.” There is a word for “widower” in Greek (*chēros*), but it is not used in the New Testament or in the Septuagint. A glance at Liddell and Scott’s *Greek-English Lexicon* will reveal that “unmarried” is used to denote both “bachelors” and “widowers.” The parallelism with “widow” suggests that in 1 Corinthians 7:8 “unmarried” refers *only* to “widowers,” and not to any bachelor or single person. Furthermore, Paul, in this context, specifically points to himself as an example of one of these “unmarried” who has decided to remain single. In the context of verses 8-9 this may well confirm what many believe: Paul himself was a widower. (p 144)

However, while it is true that “a glance” at L&S shows the term can be used to *denote* both bachelors and widowers, further consideration of the lexical entry shows this standard Classical Greek reference work, like its NT counterparts, does not support **translating** the term as ‘widower’, merely that it can be used to refer to (denote) a widower. The relevant portion of the L&S entry reads, “ἀγάμ-ετος, ον, ≡ ἄγαμος, S.Fr.970:—also• Ἐητος, ον, Com.Adesp.315. **Ἐλα**, ῆ, *single estate, celibacy*, Plu.2.491e. . . . **Εος**, ον, unmarried, single, prop. of the man, whether bachelor or widower (ἀνανδρος being used of the woman), Il.3.40, X.Smp.9.7, etc.; ζῶ δὲ Τίμωνος βίον, ἄγαμον, ἄδουλον Phryn.Com.18:—of the woman.” L&S supports only “unmarried” or “single” as possible *senses* – hence translations – for the adjective, but notes that singleness can be the result of either being widowed or never having married. Furthermore, L&S, like BDAG and Friberg, recognize what is obvious from 7:11, that the word can denote females, too. Properly understood, L&S offers no support for Wenham and Heth’s “suggest[ion]” to modify the usual understanding of the term in 7:8 that is reflected in standard English translations. We add, such translations are completely in harmony with supposing Paul was a widower.

¹¹⁷“There is considerable disagreement as to the previous point of the reference intended by the word ‘this [τοῦτο]’, at the beginning of v 6”; David Dungan, *The Sayings of Jesus in the Churches of Paul: The Use of the Synoptic*

1807 good ... to remain as I,” that is, unmarried. Thus, following Jesus to the letter, Paul’s answer to
 1808 the unmarried is: it is indeed good to abstain from sexual relations (and, hence, to remain
 1809 unmarried). Once again, assuming Wenham’s model, that there is a debate of sorts going on over
 1810 Jesus’ sayings, especially the eunuch-saying, then in vv 6-8 the Lord’s Apostle applies the saying
 1811 to unmarried Corinthian Christians.

1812 Verse 9, however—in what is effectively a parenthetical ‘exception’ of sorts—digresses
 1813 from Paul’s overall thrust (answering their query about making themselves eunuchs): while he
 1814 affirms it is good for the unmarried to stay celibate, exceptively, he *urges marriage* (γαμησάτωσαν
 1815 is an imperative) for some who are single. Paraphrasing and abridging vv 8-10 yields,

1816 But to those not married I say (λέγω δὲ τοῖς ἀγάμοις), it is indeed good so to remain.
 1817 (But if they cannot control themselves, have them marry [γαμησάτωσαν] ...) ¹¹⁸

Tradition in the Regulation of the Early Church Life (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971) p 87. Obviously, Paul is insisting or perhaps clarifying that something (‘this’) in the near prior context is to be understood as a concession rather than a command. Fee claims ‘this’ refers to allowing “temporary abstinence by mutual consent at set times for prayer. ... *this* is”; he paraphrases, this is “a concession to you; you are *not* to take it as a command.” He contends that this view (presumably over against what he dubs the ‘traditional view’; see below) “has the advantage of taking the δέ seriously.” He notes that “the traditional view ... must make either v. 2 or all of vv. 2-5 a concession to his own preference for celibacy”(1987, pp 282-84). In fact, the ‘traditional view’, too, takes the δέ seriously. The following shortened paraphrase brings out the traditional understanding, “It is good for a man to be abstinent, but each Christian must have his or her spouse ..., but (δέ) [lest you misread me] I say this by way of concession, not command [– that despite my use of the imperative (‘must have’)].” In view of what he is about to say to group II, Paul does not want to be (mis)construed as commanding that all Christians must marry.

Even apart from recognizing a reference to Mat 19, this ‘traditional view’ (exegesis) is superior. First, v 5b’s concession (for a time or prayer) *needs no clarification* to inform the reader it is not a command. Whether NA’s reading, εἰμήτε [unless indeed, unless perhaps], is correct, or the MajT (εἰμή *except, if not*) is, no native reader would mistake such a conditional (‘if’) clause in v 5b for a command. Verse 2, on the other hand, could easily be mistaken as unqualified command (at least to each (v 2b) and every ἄνθρωπος (*anthrōpos*) [v 1b])—apart from Paul’s obviously singles-directed clarification in v 6a. Furthermore, whichever way one attaches vv 6-7 (with what follows or what precedes), those verses are clearly transitional, since v 7 not only continues the thought of v 6, but it expresses Paul’s preference for singles’ celibacy, the next group to be addressed (vv 8-9). As such, v 6 is a pivot point between Paul’s commands to the married and his advice to the unmarried and reads naturally as referring to vv 2-5, not simply to v 5b. Finally, taking v 1b as reaffirming Jesus in Mat 19:10-12, would clinch the matter. Jesus is clearly endorsing the notion that for all who “can accept it” it is good not to marry, but to make oneself a eunuch for the kingdom, so v 2 introduces an exception (implied by Jesus in context), which Paul (immediately after completing treatment of it) then explains is a concession to some (those already married), not a command to all that would contradict Jesus’ preference for abstinence (for some).

¹¹⁸ 7:9 is quite similar to 7:11a, which is appropriately put in parenthesis by the ASV, NASB, NRSV and RSV. In both passages Paul has just laid down an ethical instruction (‘it is good for them ...’ / ‘the Lord [commands] ...’) and then, as it were parenthetically, provides for the less than ideal circumstance of someone who does not follow that ethic. The prior instance is signaled by εἰ δέ, the latter by the nearly synonymous ἐὰν δέ. (On the latter, see below, p 67.)

The same phenomenon occurs at 1 Cor 7:36 where Paul digresses from ch.7’s main thrust (answering the question, ‘shall we apply Jesus’ teaching and stay celibate?’). In a context encouraging those engaged not to marry, Paul writes,

1818 But to the married I charge (Τοῖς δὲ γεγαμηκόσιν παραγγέλλω) ...”

1819
1820 Yet here, too, Paul follows Jesus in portraying celibacy, or at least the ability to remain
1821 celibate, as a gift of God. Jesus said, “only those to whom it is given (οἷς δέδοται)” can accept
1822 this teaching, to wit, it is not expedient to marry” (Mat 19:11) but rather to “make oneself a
1823 eunuch for the kingdom.” To the same effect, Paul writes, “each has his own gift [ἕκαστος ἴδιον
1824 ἔχει χάρισμα].”¹¹⁹ Thus, only to some is it given “to be even as I myself [Paul] am (εἰναιῶς καὶ
1825 ἐμαυτόν),” that is, to remain celibate (7:6). Once again, Paul accurately represents, develops and
1826 applies the teaching of his Lord, not only showing detailed knowledge of Matthew 19:10-12, but
1827 commending the same conduct to the same element of his audience as had Jesus to his. (Though,
1828 Paul seems to ‘fill out’ Jesus’ teaching a bit when he implies that those who marry, too, have a
1829 gift.¹²⁰) In short, just as with case I (married Christians), also in II (unmarried or widows) Paul’s
1830 reply faithfully clarifies how Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 19:11-12 applies to a group in the
1831 church. Once again, Paul presumes his readers have a detailed knowledge of doctrines which are
1832 recorded as coming from Jesus (in Matthew 19:3-12).

1833 **III. 7:10-11 Paul’s Reply to Married Christians who Might Consider Divorce**

1834 Having answered the Corinthians’ question about making themselves eunuchs for the
1835 kingdom with respect to Christians who are married (vv 2-6) and those who are currently single
1836 (vv 7-9), Paul now takes up a third category, perhaps one where a trend disturbing to Paul had
1837 already emerged concretely: those who, though married, would divorce (or possibly had

And this I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is seemly, and *to secure* undistracted devotion to the Lord. (But if [εἰ δέ] any man thinks that he is acting unbecomingly toward his virgin *fiancée*, if she should be of full age, and if it must be so, let him do what he wishes, he does not sin; let them marry.) But he will do well who stands firm in his heart, being under no constraint, but has authority over his own will, and has decided this in his own heart, to keep his own *fiancée* a virgin. (transl. NASB, corrected from “*daughter*” to “*fiancée*”)

By removing 37’s δέ, which returns the reader back to the main thought from the digressive v 36, the continuity of v 35 and v 37 becomes obvious: “I say this [encouraging those engaged not to marry] ... to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord. ... He who stands firm in his heart ...” On Paul’s consistent digressive use of εἰ δέ throughout 1 Cor, see also Lauer, 2010, pp 102-09.

¹¹⁹ Commenting on this “divine ‘gift’ given to some but not others,” France recognizes, “Paul uses similar language with regard to marriage or celibacy in 1 Cor 7:7. To speak of a ‘gift’ of celibacy is to assume that marriage is the norm, but that God has given to some people the ability, perhaps even the inclination, to stand apart from that norm”; *The Gospel According to Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007) p 723.

¹²⁰ Paul does draw out the implications of celibacy as a gift (to some singles) in two ways: first, he says that this is not for all, it is better to marry than to burn; this is suggested in Mat 19:11a (οὐ πάντες χωροῦσιν τὸν λόγον). Second, he insists that the judgment is for the individual (not for Paul, parents, or the church to make), who alone can discern if he has said gift. This too, seems a fair inference from Jesus’ words in v 11b (rendered by virtually all English translations as “not all [can themselves] accept [or receive]”). It is a connotation implied by God’s gift being the decisive factor (v 11b); it is objective ability; not merely subjective will, that is crucial. Still, no one but the individual himself can judge if he can or cannot accept Jesus’ encouragement, echoed by Paul, to remain celibate for the kingdom.

1838 divorced) their spouses to become single, and then undertake celibacy ‘for the kingdom’. Some,
1839 probably wives, were apparently reasoning along these lines: let us divorce, and then follow the
1840 Lord’s eunuch saying.¹²¹

1841 In response, Paul again refers his married readers to what he rightly calls a ‘command’
1842 from the Lord Jesus—this time quite explicitly: “To the married I give this command— not I but
1843 the Lord” (7:10, NRSV).¹²² What command of the Lord and from what source? These questions
1844 have long been debated. Frédéric L. Godet’s answer is (still) on the mark, save for the precise
1845 verses he proffers:

1846
1847 What are the meaning and bearing of the distinction which Paul establishes in the words, *not I, but*
1848 *the Lord*? The simplest supposition is that he means to speak here of a command given by Jesus
1849 Himself during His earthly sojourn. And what confirms this meaning is, that we really find this
1850 precept in our Gospels proceeding from the mouth of Jesus, just as we read it here; comp. Matt. v.
1851 32, xix. 9; Mark x. 11; Luke xvi. 18.¹²³

1852
1853 Godet is certainly correct that the simplest supposition is that Paul refers to the Lord’s
1854 command forbidding separation which is found in the Gospels, and there is no basis in the text of
1855 1 Corinthians to search for a more complex explanation. However, the verses he mentions
1856 contain warnings, not commands. That difference notwithstanding, in the cases of his citations
1857 from Matthew and Mark, just a couple of verses earlier, the Lord employs a true *command*
1858 (negated imperative = prohibition) to forbid just such separation and divorce. Both evangelists
1859 recount words uttered by Jesus which constitute a perfect match for what Paul describes in 1

¹²¹ At two points in 1 Cor 7, v 10 and vv 39-40, there are indications that, “women were claiming that sex and marriage had no place in the new order”; Wenham, 1995, p 236. Quite atypical to precepts laid down in Scripture, Paul addresses *the women before the men* in v 10, and in v 11a he covers (ostensibly hypothetical) ground which he never deals with for the men. Similarly, Garland notes that for “some interpreters” the priority of address to the wives and consideration of “the husbands almost as an afterthought hints ... that wives were the ones behind the problem”; 2003, p 281. Furthermore, in closing out the chapter, Paul summarizes by addressing only the wives (v 39f). It is hard to avoid the impression that among the married at Corinth, those actually practicing abstinence for the kingdom were wives, producing for Paul an urgency that he did not feel with respect to the men.

The reality of the problem, indicated by the priority, fullness, and repetition of the exhortation *to the women*, belies Garland’s contention that in vv 10-11 Paul “introduces the word of the Lord forbidding divorce not to deter zealous ascetics from divorcing but to set up his discussion about mixed marriage and divorce”; 2003, 282.

¹²² Only the Fribergs’ def. 1 is pertinent, “strictly *pass on an announcement*; in the NT; (1) as issuing a directive from an authoritative source *command, give (strict) orders, direct, instruct*,” s.v. ‘παρραγγέλλω’. Paul immediately qualifies himself: that authority is the Lord himself. Joseph Fitzmyer agrees, “Paul uses *parangellō*, ‘I enjoin, give orders, command,’ as again in 11:17”; *First Corinthians*, Anchor Bible (New Haven: Yale Univ., 2008) p 292. See also below, pp 64-65 and n 134; likewise Garland (2003, p 280), “[Paul] issues a sharp command: ‘I order (*παρραγγέλλω, parangellō*) the married.’”

¹²³ *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. transl. A. Cusin (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971 (1886)) 332; italics original. It is curious that Godet cites Mat 19:9 and Mk 10:11, where the Lord’s *warning* against divorce is found, but does not mention 19:6 and 10:9 where the Lord’s *command* against divorce is recorded (Cusin’s citations match the French original).

1860 Corinthians 7:10, and, in the case of Matthew, the utterance comes just four verses prior to the
1861 pericope containing the eunuch saying (19:10-12). There, in reply to the Pharisees’ query, “Is it
1862 lawful for a man (ἄνθρώπῳ = *anthrōpō*) to divorce (ἀπολύσαι) his wife for any cause?” Jesus
1863 answers with a negated imperative, i.e. a prohibition, often rendered, “what God has joined
1864 together, let [a] man (ἄνθρωπος = *anthrōpos*) not separate” (Mat 19:3, NRSV; Mat 19:6, NIV).

1865
1866 The allusive character of Paul’s reference [in 1 Cor 7:10] shows that Paul and *the Corinthians*
1867 *were well aware of the teaching of Jesus on this subject and that its authority can be taken*
1868 *for granted*: “the allusion implies an accepted authority.” What is implicit throughout the
1869 letter on every subject is made explicit here; the Corinthians are to live under Christ’s
1870 lordship.¹²⁴

1871
1872 That Paul attributes the command not to divorce to the Lord *Jesus* is self-evident,¹²⁵ but
1873 how exactly did Paul expect the Corinthians to have known that dominical commandment
1874 (prohibition)?

1875 At least three further considerations support a conclusion that Paul and the Corinthians
1876 knew Jesus’ decree, in the *same words of Jesus that appear in Matthew and Mark*. Two
1877 additional considerations point only to Mat 19:6. Firstly, Paul and Jesus use the same verb
1878 (according to the Greek of Mat 19:6 and Mark 10:9; bold print added):¹²⁶

1879
1880 Paul: “a wife is **not to be separated** from her husband (γυναῖκα ἀπὸ ἀνδρὸς μὴ
1881 χωρισθῆναι).”

1882 Jesus: “[a] man **must not separate** (ἄνθρωπος μὴ χωριζέτω).”

1883
1884 As many translations recognize (e.g., NAB, NIV, NJB), while the denotation (i.e.
1885 reference) is indeed ‘divorce’, or at least includes divorce, the *sense* of this verb is not ‘divorce’,
1886 but ‘separate’ (albeit not in the technical sense as in modern American family law). Brewer
1887 asserts that by this term, “the type of divorce Paul referred to here is the Greco-Roman divorce by
1888 separation.”¹²⁷ Certainly Paul’s wording would implicitly cover such divorces. However, the
1889 reason for Paul’s choice of terms lies elsewhere; Paul could have employed ἀφίημι, explicitly
1890 carrying the sense of divorce (cf. 7:11). He would thereby have, as Jesus did originally,
1891 prohibited nearly all divorce (including by separation).

¹²⁴ Ciampa & Rosner, 2010, p 292; citing James Dunn, *1 Corinthians*, (New Testament Guides; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) p 101; emphasis added. “Since [Paul] felt no need to cite verbatim the full command of the Lord, he apparently assumes that the Corinthians were already familiar with it”; Garland, 2003, p 282.

¹²⁵ “*Kyrios* is used by Paul with reference to Christ most frequently, far less often to designate God”; Hawthorne, G.F., R.P. Martin, D.G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993), s.v. ‘Lord’.

¹²⁶ “The verb χωριζέτω (*chōrizetō*) appears in the word of the Lord recorded in Mark 10:9: ‘What God has yoked together, let man not separate,’ which also may have influenced Paul’s usage”; Garland, 2003, p 281.

¹²⁷ *Divorce in the Bible*, 2002, p 199.

1892 As with much of 1 Corinthians 7 to this point, Matthew 19:3ff lies behind vv 10-11, too.
 1893 There the Lord – in reply to a question about divorce, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife
 1894 for any cause?” asked using terminology rightly rendered ‘divorce’ (ἀπολύσαι) – chooses a
 1895 different verb, one whose *sense* (to separate) stands opposite to that of the divine action expressed
 1896 in (the Greek transl. of) the Genesis passage the Lord there cites to support his prohibition on
 1897 divorce: “a man shall ... **be joined to** his wife.”¹²⁸ The result is a prohibition that, with respect to
 1898 *denotation* (or reference), unquestionably implies divorce, but, on its face, also forbids physical
 1899 separation, strictly speaking, the *sense* of the term.¹²⁹ When considering the married Christian
 1900 women, Paul utilizes the very same verb even though in the next three verses (11-13) he
 1901 addresses the men twice, then the women once, using a (different) verb (ἀφίημι) whose actual
 1902 *sense* is ‘divorce’.¹³⁰ Taking 1 Corinthians 4:6b’s ὁ γέγραπται as a Gospel, it is hard, perhaps
 1903 impossible, to avoid the conclusion that it was the Lord’s negated imperative, recorded in Greek
 1904 by Matthew (and Mark) as, μὴ χωρίζετω, which led to Paul’s choice of the same verb in v 10a
 1905 (where he expressly attributes the prohibition to the Lord [Jesus]).
 1906 Secondly, as in both Gospels, so also for Paul, the verb, though broader lexically than
 1907 ‘divorce’ in context *refers to* divorce.¹³¹ In Jesus’ case, there is no lack of clarity as to the

¹²⁸ Matthew has κολληθήσεται, for which BDAG gives, “τῆ γυναικὶ αὐτοῦ *be joined to his wife Mt 19:5*”; so NASB, NRSV. (The reading of the Majority Text, προσκολληθήσεται, is better explained as a correction to the LXX (cf. Mk) than to suppose that a scribe early in the Alexandrian text tradition mistakenly dropped the prefix, προσ-.)

¹²⁹ Liddell and Scott (unabridged) give first, “I. in local sense, *separate, divide*,” an overtone that is unmistakable, but BDAG’s 2nd definition applies, “**to separate by departing from someone, separate, leave**, pass., freq. in act. sense” (underline added), but they recognize divorce as a possible connotation, “*be separated of divorce*” (emph. original). Still, what the Lord forbids to men in his reply is clearly broader than dissolving the marriage bond (divorce).

¹³⁰ Friberg, s.v. ‘ἀφίημι’, gives, “(2) as a legal technical term *divorce* (1C 7.11).” Similarly, BDAG, citing Herodotus, offers (1c), “in a legal sense **divorce** γυναικᾶ (Hdt. 5, 39) **1 Cor 7:11ff**”; bold print original. The selection of **χωρίζετω** by Jesus for issuing the command (and by Paul to cite it) may also stand behind the strong warnings to couples in vv 2-5 not to abstain from coming together conjugally.

¹³¹ Davies and Allison point to this verb’s distinctive denotation here in Paul and in Matthew 19:6, “For **χωρίζετω** of divorce see 1 Cor 7:10,” highlighting, “the verb ... does not mean ‘divorce’ in the LXX (BAGD, s.v.)” (1997, 13). While they claim “the verb is common in Greek marriage contracts,” L&S (s.v. **χωρίζετω**, def. III) only recognizes such a sense for the passive voice. In 19:6 the voice is active, not passive.

Noting that “Paul uses different verbs to describe the action of the wife (‘separate’) and the husband (‘divorce’)” even though “there is no difference in the legal or practical effect of the action: the modern distinction between ‘separation’ and ‘divorce’ is not in view,” Richard Hays goes on to speculate a reason: Paul “probably reflects his Jewish background and sensibilities”; *First Corinthians*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997) 120,—apparently suggesting, to put it in modern terms, a ‘sexist’ bias. Given the Gentile roots of most of the congregation (“when you were pagans”; 12:2) and Paul’s principle for dealing with Gentiles (9:21-22), this would have to be subconscious. If 4:6b refers to Matthew, there is a more likely possibility. That is, Paul is carefully adapting the Lord’s actual word-selection to be able to remind some married women (who seem to have been divorcing) that the Lord Jesus himself had prohibited divorce. Despite some recent so-called ‘gender-neutral’ translations which render ἄνθρωπος as, for example, ‘human being’ or ‘[no] one’, instead of ‘[a] man’, in context, Jesus is commanding *the males* not to divorce their wives: “let a man not separate (ἄνθρωπος μὴ χωρίζετω).” For the Lord is replying to the question, “is it lawful

1908 *referent*, since his command not to separate replies to a question *about divorce* (ἀπολύσαι). In 1
 1909 Corinthians 7, however, it is not until the next verse (“... remain unmarried”; v 11a) that the
 1910 reader learns v 10’s ban on separation definitely includes not only living apart, but also divorce.
 1911 While this is admittedly not much delay, one must still wonder why Paul would select a less
 1912 precise verb (χωρίζω) in v 10 to denote the very same phenomenon that he clearly expresses with
 1913 respect to husbands in v 11b, and to both husbands and wives in vv 12-13 (each time using more
 1914 precise term, ἀφίημι).¹³² Thus, Paul, in 1 Cor 7:10, not only uses the same verb as Jesus, in Mat
 1915 and Mark, but uses it with a connotation that includes divorce.

1916 Thirdly, Paul’s own construction (γυναῖκα ... μὴ χωρισθῆναι) reminding them of the
 1917 Lord’s *command* carries the “meaning . . . [a wife] **should not** separate,”¹³³ and, on its own,
 1918 would not rise to the level of *command, order, or charge*—Paul’s own characterization of the
 1919 Lord’s parænesis.¹³⁴ However, taken as an express reference to the Lord’s (imperatival)
 1920 proscription against divorce in a Gospel in the Corinthians’ possession, the basis of Paul’s
 1921 representation of the Lord’s parænesis as a command (παραγγέλλω) becomes apparent. Paul’s
 1922 assertion that “not I but the Lord” *commands* a wife not to be separated (= divorce), is perfectly
 1923 grounded in Matthew 19:6 (or Mark 10:7, if one thought Mark was at Corinth *circa* AD 50).

for a man (εἰ ἕξεισιν ἄνθρωπῳ) to divorce his wife ...” (NRSV) [“3] with the translation according to the context *man, adult male* (LU 7.25), *husband* (MT 19.10)”; Friberg, s.v. ἄνθρωπος; cf. BDAG def. 3]. Paul apparently so reads Jesus in v 6. However, in so forbidding divorce to the males, Jesus *implicitly* commands a wife not to ‘be separated’ from her husband. A very literal rendering of Paul’s passive voice in 7:10 would say precisely, “[the Lord commands that] a wife must not be separated from her husband (γυναῖκα ἀπὸ ἀνδρὸς μὴ χωρισθῆναι)” (NJB). Thus, Paul’s decision to use the broader verb may have nothing to do with his viewing men and women differently (a point few would contest; cf. 11:2ff; 14:33b-36), but everything to do with wanting to be able to refer his readers to Jesus’ originally ‘male focused’ command against divorce so that it would bear directly upon some Corinthian women who were (by their own volition, pursuant to Roman law) “being separated from” their husbands. (Had Mark been available to the Corinthians, an allusion to Mk 10:12 would have been possible, alleviating any need for the somewhat awkward adaptation of Jesus’ active voice into Paul’s passive.)

¹³² On ἀφίημι see also n 130. There are certainly other ways—more clear ones—to express divorce where the wife acts unilaterally. BDAG, 2.a, rightly takes Paul as here implicating divorce, not merely a woman putting distance between herself and her husband. Such an understanding is confirmed by what follows. V 11a’s command for the ‘separated’ woman, μετέτω ἄγαμος, proves that Paul envisions her resultant state to be ἄγαμος [unmarried]. Louw & Nida list three verbs as having semantic ranges including the action of ‘dissolving the marriage bond’: ‘34.78 ἀφίημι; χωρίζω; ἀπολύω...: to dissolve the marriage bond – “to divorce, to separate.”’ Still, the heart of the semantic range of χωρίζω is physical separation: BDAG 2a, “*separate (oneself), be separated* of divorce.”

¹³³Thiselton, 2000, p 520; bold print added. Majiscules A & D and several miniscules have χωρίζεσθαι instead of the majority reading (accepted by NA), χωρισθῆναι; while G has χωρεῖζεσθαι. Finally, P⁴⁶ and two miniscules read χωρίζεσθω; Reuben Swanson, *New Testament Greek Manuscripts: 1 Corinthians* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 2003) p 90. Only by the last—sparsely attested reading—would the verb qualify as a command. That variant could have arisen as an inference from the imperatival connotation of παραγγέλλω.

¹³⁴ “Very rarely an infinitive may function like an imperative. ... Only if an infinitive is obviously not dependent on any other verb can it be treated as an imperatival infinitive. But the following three instances (in two verses) are apparently the *only* examples of this in the NT [Rom 12:15; Phil 3:16]”; Wallace, 1996, p 608, citing BDF §389; italics orig.

1924 Additionally, with respect to Matthew (but not Mark), Paul’s treatment of Jesus’ teaching
1925 is scrupulously faithful to what Matthew records, and that *in detail*. Dungan summarizes: in
1926 Matthew,

1927
1928 Jesus is portrayed as holding the general position (taking 19.3—12 as a whole) that celibacy is a
1929 gift for some (‘not all can receive it’), while for everyone else, marriage must be once-for-all. *It is*
1930 *a position corresponding precisely with Paul’s*.¹³⁵

1931
1932 Finally, accepting Lauer’s full thesis, to wit, 1 Corinthians 4:6b refers the Corinthians back
1933 specifically to *Matthew*, it is not Mark 10, but Mat 19:6 that must be the presumptive basis for
1934 Paul’s expectation that the Corinthians will recognize his referent, i.e., the Lord’s **command**
1935 forbidding divorce. Thus, Paul presumes the Corinthians’ intimate familiarity with the extended
1936 Matthean pericope (19:3-12), even down to the fine details. Given the Lord’s imperatival
1937 prohibition on separation – focused on, but not limited to divorce – in Mat 19:6, Paul’s
1938 application of the Lord’s command must be understood as prohibiting Christian married couples
1939 not only from divorcing one another, but also from separating themselves from each other (spatial
1940 estrangement). Even though divorce itself was the issue at hand, Jesus chose to reply with
1941 terminology carrying a connotation clearly proscribing physical separation as well (cf. 1 Cor
1942 7:5b). Paul, in the case of the wives, selecting the same term as Jesus, appeals explicitly to the
1943 Lord’s “command,” declaring that it is not he but the Lord Jesus who prohibits both Christian
1944 husbands and wives from separating (and divorcing) their spouses. Thus, in 7:10-11 we have an
1945 inspired apostolic confirmation of the comprehensive character of Jesus’ proscription of
1946 Christians pursuing separation and divorce. Paul’s implicit exegesis of Matthew 19:6 matches our
1947 exegesis, above (cf. WCF 1.9).

1948 This recognition of a Pauline reference to Mat 19:6 also explains Paul’s ban on remarriage
1949 (v 11a) when a Christian couple has disobeyed the Lord’s divorce ban (v 11b). If the historic
1950 understanding of the nature of the adultery warned against in both Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 is
1951 accepted (see above, pp 45-47) then the Matthean divorce teaching also becomes the ground for
1952 Paul’s prohibition on remarriage in 7:11b: “But if she does [separate], she must remain unmarried
1953 or else be reconciled to her husband” (NIV). Remarriage after a divorce unauthorized (by God),
1954 constitutes adultery against the spouse to whom one remains bound (by God’s law, even though
1955 not according to man’s). Following his Lord, Paul, too, prohibits such remarriage.

1956 A couple of crucial questions remain regarding Paul’s answer with respect to group III (to
1957 those married Christians who might divorce). Based upon Gordon Fee’s treatment of vv 10-11,
1958 we ask,

1959

¹³⁵Dungan, 1971, p 126; italics added. However, Dungan (mistakenly) contends Jesus prohibits remarriage following a divorced based upon infidelity (see above on Matthew 19:9).

1960 (1) Is it true that according to Paul in 7:10, while “no divorce’ is what is *commanded* for
1961 believers” by the Lord Himself, nevertheless, “*Paul* allows an exception” in 7:11?¹³⁶
1962

1963 In v 11, Fee thinks Paul “allows an exception” to the Lord’s just referenced prohibition on
1964 separation (and divorce). In fairness, Fee qualifies his take on the so called “exception,” opining
1965 that Paul considers (a) the Lord’s command (no divorce) merely “expresses the ideal,” while the
1966 subsequent “conditional clause introduced by *de* (‘but’) ‘describes (b) the alternative possibility
1967 which is permissible but not ideal.’”¹³⁷ So (a) is best, but (b), too, is ‘allowable’. In v 10 Paul
1968 merely advocates the Lord’s ideal (no divorce), but in v 11 allows for the less-than-ideal
1969 (divorce). Fee adds, what is permissible is divorce “without remarriage.” This, he claims, is
1970 “precisely what one finds in the teaching of Jesus: no adultery.”¹³⁸ He really does believe Paul
1971 sees this divorce without remarriage as allowable, even if less than ideal; for he concludes: “Thus
1972 ‘no divorce’ [the Lord’s ‘command’] is not turned into law, and the woman who does so is not
1973 put out of the community.”

1974 This treatment of v 11a and the conclusion drawn from it are truly breathtaking. Virtually
1975 every clause in Fee's handling of v 11a is an unsupported assertion. Without explanation, Fee
1976 sees Paul reducing what he (Paul) says the Lord “commands” to a mere “ideal.” In turn, appealing
1977 only to the mild adversative, *de*, Fee labels “permissible” and an “alternative possibility” what
1978 appears to constitute direct defiance of what Fee’s own translation recognizes Paul himself deems
1979 *a command of the Lord*.¹³⁹ Finally, there is no explanation whatsoever for why Fee believes Paul
1980 does not reckon the Lord’s prohibition to constitute law, or why he is certain “the woman who
1981 does [defy the Lord’s command] is not put out of the community.”

1982 Since Fee explains so little, one is left to speculate as to his logic. It seems likely that he
1983 is taking v 11a as coordinate with v 10 rather than subordinate to it. However, the construction
1984 here in v 11a, employing the relational expression, εἰ δέ, appears 16 or 17 times in 1
1985 Corinthians.¹⁴⁰ In every case it either clearly or plausibly *begins or continues* a parenthesis-like
1986 digression from the flow of the main argument, hence is necessarily subordinate. There are five
1987 instances where one might question such a discourse analysis, (a) 3:12-15, (b) 4:7c, (c) 7:9, (d)
1988 7:36 and (e) 11:16. Lauer has shown that arguably, these, too, are plausible cases of digression,
1989 reasonably put into parenthesis in English translation.¹⁴¹ This is precisely what at least six
1990 translations do in the present case: ERV, ESV, NASB, NET, NRSV and RSV. For example: “the

¹³⁶ Fee, 1987, p 294; emphasis added.

¹³⁷ Fee, 1987, p 295, citing M.E. Thrall, *Greek Particles in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) p 81.

¹³⁸ Fee, 1987, p 295.

¹³⁹ On ‘commands’ (παράγγελλω) see pp 61-62 and n 122, above. Confirmation Paul sees the Lord having issued a command in this case, and Paul himself issuing a command in the case of mixed marriages (vv 12-16) comes in the word he chooses as a contrast in the case of ‘virgins’, about whom he says, “I have no ‘command’ of the Lord” (v 25). ‘Command’, ἐπιταγήν, means “**1. authoritative directive, command, order, injunction** ἐπιταγήν ἔχειν *have a command* **1 Cor 7:25**”; BDAG. See also Fitzmyer, 2008, p 292.

¹⁴⁰ MajT has 16 uses; UBS4 adds 11:31.

¹⁴¹ Lauer, 2010, pp 102-08.

1991 wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else
1992 be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife” (7:10b-11, ESV). A
1993 parenthetical aside or digression is inherently subordinate to, not coordinate with, the main point.
1994 It cannot reverse what it modifies, only clarify, nuance or restate it. If Fee’s exegesis is based
1995 upon coordination of v 10 and v 11a, he is mistaken.

1996 However, grammatically speaking, there is a small difference in the present case, vis-à-vis
1997 most other instances in 1 Corinthians. For example, unlike the digression signaled by εἰ δέ in 7:9,
1998 that of 7:11 includes, ἄν (an) thereby intimating “uncertainty or indefiniteness ἐάν (ean).”¹⁴²
1999 Given the subjunctive mood of ‘separate’, the Fribergs would support a translation for ἐάν such
2000 as, “If ever [she does separate ...]”¹⁴³ This difference vis-à-vis v 9 is probably to be explained in
2001 that in the prior case, the exception does not constitute disobedience to the Lord (hence ≠ sin), but
2002 results from lack of giftedness. In 11a, however, by divorcing, the woman, if (ever) she does
2003 separate, would be violating what Paul rightly labels the Lord’s command (hence violation = sin)
2004 not to separate (v 10; cf. Mat 19:6). Thus, the prior parenthetical exception (v 9) surely does exist
2005 and carries no stigma or censure, the second (v 11a) may exist, but surely ought not to, and hence
2006 is censurable. In the second, the parenthesis is designed to prevent compounding of one sin
2007 (against the Lord’s command) by another (adultery, cf. Mat 5:32).¹⁴⁴ Slightly modified, the
2008 NRSV brings out the true force of 11a quite well:

2009
2010 To the married I give this command – not I but the Lord – that the wife [must] not separate
2011 from her husband (but if [ever] she does separate, [she must] remain unmarried or else be
2012 reconciled to her husband), and that the husband [must] not divorce his wife. (7:10-11;
2013 brackets added)

2014
2015 Finally, it should perhaps be obvious; a prohibitive command from the mouth of the Lord
2016 Jesus, especially one expressly grounded in the ordinance of creation, is not merely an ideal, with
2017 violations being merely less than ideal; it is the very standard against which men will be judged
2018 (John 12:48; cf. WLC 24; WCF 14.2a). No one, not even an Apostle is free to fabricate
2019 exceptions to it. Fee’s assertion notwithstanding, Paul most certainly does not.
2020 In conclusion, contra Fee, it is not true that in 7:11 “Paul allows an exception” to the Lord’s
2021 command to Christian couples (recorded in both Matthew and Mark) against divorce (and
2022 separation). Furthermore, there is no reason to think that Paul would not have supported the use
2023 of church discipline up to and including excommunication to seek to win back a Christian
2024 husband or wife defying the Lord’s command by separating himself from his spouse. Indeed, the
2025 WCF’s wording, “... can in no way be remedied by the church,” seems to presuppose such use of
2026 all the ecclesiastical measures available, up to and including the ordinance of Mat 18:15-20.
2027

¹⁴² Friberg, s.v. ἄν.

¹⁴³ “(1) with the subjunctive; (a) to introduce a hypothetical condition *if (ever)*,” s.v. ἄν.

¹⁴⁴ However, it should be noted that ἐάν δέ also appears in 7:28, a verse ethically closer to v 9 than v 11a.

2028 (2) Despite writing, “To the married I give this command – not I but the Lord – that the wife
2029 [must] not separate from her husband” (1 Cor 7:10, NRSV), does Paul recognize the
2030 exception Jesus mentions both in Mat 19:9 and 5:32 (i.e. *porneia*)?
2031

2032 The formal silence of 1 Cor 7 notwithstanding, the answer must be ‘yes’. We have shown
2033 that throughout chapter 7 Paul is presupposing not only detailed knowledge of Matthew,
2034 especially 19:3-12, but likely also of 5:32; he is also presupposing that nothing less than the
2035 authority of the Lord Himself stands firmly behind every word written in Matthew (“[Teach]
2036 nothing [of the gospel] beyond what stands written [in Matthew]”; 4:6b). Consequently, one may
2037 be certain that Paul recognized the Lord’s exception included by Matthew, similarly in both 5:32
2038 and 19:9. Furthermore, since throughout this chapter Paul is presupposing the Corinthians’
2039 similar familiarity with the details of 19:3-12, one may, with confidence, assume that Paul
2040 expects his readers to know and agree with Jesus’ wording therein. Leon Morris’ explanation for
2041 the lack of its mention fits perfectly with the aforementioned understanding of Paul’s purpose in 1
2042 Cor 7: “Paul does not mention the exception Jesus allowed on the grounds of fornication (Matt.
2043 5:32; 19:9). But he is not writing a systematic treatise on divorce. He is answering specific
2044 questions,”¹⁴⁵ or, more precisely, a specific question – and that not about divorce or marriage, but
2045 about celibacy (see above pp 49-51). To answer their question regarding application of the
2046 eunuch saying, (particularly in view of the apparent behavior of some Corinthian wives) reference
2047 to the Lord’s prohibition against divorce and separation was obviously very relevant, but there
2048 was no reason for Paul to refer to the sole exception the Lord permits (*porneia* = sexual
2049 infidelity¹⁴⁶).
2050

2051 ***IV. 7:12-16 Paul’s Reply to Christians Married to non-Christians*** 2052 ***Who Might Consider Divorce to Become Celibate***

2053 In answer to the Corinthians’ question about application of the Lord’s eunuch-saying with respect
2054 to group IV, Christians married to non-Christians, Paul addresses them as “the rest” or “the
2055 remainder,” and informs them that, unlike the case of those married to fellow Christians,
2056 concerning whom the Lord spoke (commanded) directly, the Lord Himself has not dealt with
2057 their case: “To the rest (Τοῖς ... λοιποῖς) I say—I and not the Lord—” (7:12a NRSV).¹⁴⁷

2058 The first question to be addressed is the precise implication of the plural adjective which
2059 is functioning as a noun, “the rest.” In the singular, the Greek term refers to “one [out of a group]
2060 not previously cited or included.”¹⁴⁸ Here, too, the plural, “the rest,” presupposes the existence of

¹⁴⁵Morris, Leon: *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985 (Tyndale NT Commentaries) p 108.

¹⁴⁶ On the meaning of this word, see above: under “Matthew 19:9.”

¹⁴⁷ Friberg’s second def. clearly applies: “(2) as a substantive οἱ λοιποὶ *the rest, the others, the remaining ones.*” The Lord was speaking to Jews who were to marry only among the people of God; Paul speaks to Christians who, likewise are to marry only among the people of God.

¹⁴⁸ BDAG, def. 2.

2061 a larger group or set which has been in view; “the rest” form the subset of those “not previously
2062 cited or included” to that point. The identity of the rest is clearly Christians married to non-
2063 Christians. What is not obvious, however, is just who comprises the entirety of the set? Opinions
2064 vary.

2065 For example, Godet and Thiselton both see the term as over against married Christian
2066 couples, just addressed in vv 10-11. Thus, the whole set would be all married Christians,
2067 including both those with believing spouses and those married to unbelievers.¹⁴⁹ On the other
2068 hand, Fee contends “the rest” are to be defined with respect both to “the ‘unmarried’ and
2069 ‘widows’ [who] have been addressed in vv. 8-9 and the ‘married’ in vv. 10-11.”¹⁵⁰ Given the
2070 repeated pattern of dative plurals constituting indirect objects for verbal expressions meaning “I
2071 say/command [to] _____,” Fee’s exegesis is stronger:

2072
2073
2074 Λέγω ... τοῖς ἀγάμοις καὶ ταῖς χήραις (1 Cor 7:8) To the unmarried and widows I say
2075 Τοῖς ... γεγαμηκόσιν παραγγέλλω (1 Cor 7:10) To the married I command
2076 Τοῖς ... λοιποῖς ... λέγω (1 Cor 7:12) To the rest I say

2077
2078 Further confirmation comes at the start of the next section, where Paul articulates the ‘stay-as-
2079 you-are’ principle (in vv 17-24); he does so linking vv 17ff with the preceding using the
2080 generalized term, ‘each (ἕκαστος)’; making it fairly clear that he is summarizing that which
2081 characterized the directives he had just given to ‘each’ sort of Corinthian Christian. Indeed vv
2082 17ff, do summarize what he has just directed the three groups: married Christians (2-5; 10-11),
2083 unmarried Christians (6-9), and Christians married to non-Christians (12-16). In v 17, employing
2084 a third person singular imperative, he commands each, “let him walk (περιπατεῖτω)”: “as the
2085 Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner he must walk” (v 17;
2086 NASB, modified¹⁵¹), whether married or not, and irrespective of the faith of one’s spouse. So
2087 then, it would seem best to understand the whole set implicated by v 12’s “the rest” as being
2088 those Corinthian Christians whom Paul believes are in a position to ‘stay-as-they-are’, vis-à-vis
2089 application or non-application of the eunuchs saying to themselves. What ties them together as a
2090 set is the fact all (I-IV) are able to “stay-as-they are,” that over against group V.¹⁵²

2091 A second question arises: what is the precise import of Paul’s “I say—I and not the
2092 Lord—” (v 12)? Fee’s explanation seems correct as far as it goes. The circumstances addressed

¹⁴⁹ Godet, 1971, p 336; Thiselton, 2000, p 526.

¹⁵⁰ Fee, 1987, p 298

¹⁵¹ On this imperative, see pp 71-73, below.

¹⁵² V 25ff virgins engaged to marry. See pp 25-26, above. See p 28 for makeup of groups I-V.

2093 in vv 12-16 – one of God’s people is married to an unbeliever, an outsider – are a concern which
2094 “lay outside the province of Jesus’ own life-setting.”¹⁵³

2095 Fleshing out Fee further, there are two such developments based upon which Paul
2096 apparently saw the need to supplement or develop further what the Lord had taught while on
2097 earth. Thus, in keeping with the Lord’s promise to his Apostles (John 16:12-13), this Apostle
2098 issues directives to the believing spouses in such mixed marriages, albeit still with the full
2099 authority of the Lord Jesus Himself (1 Cor 1:1, 14:37b; cf. John 15:20b). The first development
2100 might be termed redemptive-historical; the second might be called practical.

2101

2102 ***Redemptive-Historical Development***

2103 *First*, Paul’s missionary labors produced new circumstances: “[his] Gentile mission was
2104 more complicated than the ministry of Jesus, which was primarily to the Jews.”¹⁵⁴ Contrary to
2105 the people of God in the OT, the origin of the mixed marriages in the church was not – at least for
2106 the most part – in the Christian having disobediently married outside of the Lord (cf. 1 Cor 7:39;
2107 WCF 24.2), but in one spouse having been converted to Christ *after marriage*, leaving the other
2108 spouse (still) outside of the faith. “The question of what should be the attitude of a person when
2109 one party of a married couple comes to faith and the other does not was not a situation addressed
2110 in the teachings of Jesus.”¹⁵⁵ On the other hand, under the Law – the authority of which Jesus
2111 clearly does maintain (Mat 5:17ff) – God’s people were strictly forbidden from marrying pagans.
2112 Such marriages were nearly if not always the result of flagrant disobedience, and they had been a
2113 source of great corporate sin in the history of the people of God (Neh 13:26-27). After having so
2114 married, it was the Jew’s duty not only to divorce his foreign wife, but, along with her, to send
2115 away any children produced with her (Ezr 10:1-5). Such marriages could never “be made lawful
2116 by any law of man or consent of parties, so as those persons may live together as man and wife”
2117 (cf. WCF 24.4).

2118 Apart from Paul directly addressing this issue, the church would have been left with that
2119 OT teaching on this subject (cf. Mat 5:17ff.). Members of the people of God as “the Israel of
2120 God” (Gal 6:16) in this present age, stand in relationship to non-Christians in a way comparable
2121 to the relationship of Israelites to non-Israelites. Thus, without a decree from Christ or his
2122 Apostle, the OT precept concerning intermarriage with pagans would naturally be applied to
2123 intermarriage with non-Christians. Indeed, the Apostle Paul seems to do so (1 Cor 7:39).
2124 However at Corinth, unlike Israel, mixed marriages were not the result of disobedience by God’s

¹⁵³ Fee, 1987, p 298. Similarly, Thiselton: The case “when one of a married couple comes to faith and the other does not was not a situation addressed in the teachings of Jesus”; 2000, p 525; and Godet: “It is clear that neither the apostle nor the Church would have authorized a marriage between a member of the Church and a Jew or heathen; but one of two spouses might have been converted after marriage; hence the possibility of mixed marriages”; 1977, p 336.

¹⁵⁴ Ciampa and Rosner, 2010, p 295. See Mat 15:24.

¹⁵⁵ Thiselton, 2002, p 525. Strictly speaking this may be true. However, the likelihood of marital strife, if not divorce, is suggested in Gospel accounts of Jesus teaching, e.g. Mat 10:34-36.

2125 people, but by God’s having graciously saved one spouse before the other (hence 7:16). It would
2126 hardly be just to make the salvation, for example of a husband, the cause for requiring him to
2127 eject his wife and children from his home; “God has called us to peace”; v 15d. Still, the OT
2128 era’s concern for preventing uncleanness (Ezra 9:11) and maintaining holiness in the next
2129 generation (cf. 1 Cor 7:14b), a concern that, in the light of earlier Israelite history and the Law
2130 (Ezra 9:1, 7), had led Ezra and Nehemiah to demand expulsion not only of Jews’ pagan wives,
2131 but *also of their children*, was a real one with which Paul had to be deal. He does so in vv 12-13,
2132 providing the theological grounding (‘for’= γάρ) in v 14.

2133 ***Impracticality of Exhorting Unbelievers***

2134 *Second*, put simply Paul (speaking for Christ) could not expect an as yet unconverted
2135 spouse to pay any heed to the Lord’s commandment not to separate/divorce (Mat 19:6), to which
2136 he had just alluded in v 10 – his instruction for (Christian) married couples. Two chapters prior,
2137 he expressly denied the behavior of outsiders to be his responsibility (1 Cor 5:12). As a practical
2138 matter, such unbelievers are fundamentally inclined toward disobedience to God and his Christ
2139 (see Eph 2:1f; Psalm 2:1-3). Paul knew full well that among Christian couples, there would be
2140 cases of temporary defiance against Christ’s command (not to separate) – hence the parenthetical
2141 provision of v 11a in the case of a rebellious Christian spouse, concerning whom Paul and the
2142 author of Hebrews were convinced, “He who began a good work in [him] will perfect it until the
2143 day of Christ Jesus,” and, “of better things concerning [him], and things that accompany
2144 salvation” (Phil 1:6; Heb 6:9). Such rebellious Christian spouses who are separated and living in
2145 defiance of their Lord, “must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to” their (Christian) spouse;
2146 while the one abandoned must wait patiently and prayerfully for the Spirit of God and the
2147 discipline of the church to bring the delinquent spouse back to him. However, Paul could not
2148 *expect* non-Christian spouses to repent.

2149 ***The Structure of 1 Cor 7:12-16***

2150 These two considerations notwithstanding, Paul still does indirectly apply the Lord’s
2151 commandment, but only to the Christian partner in such mixed marriages. However, by the Spirit
2152 of Christ (cf. 7:40), he makes adjustments now that the Apostles are in a position that they “can
2153 bear” the counsel of God on divorce in this new redemptive-historical era (cf. John 16:13-14). So
2154 then, how does Paul handle this new setting? How does the Spirit adapt the teaching of Jesus in
2155 Matthew 19:3-12 to answer the question, may Christians married to non-Christians make
2156 themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven by divorcing their spouses and then staying
2157 celibate?

2158 After Paul introduces the matter saying, “but to the rest I say—I and not the Lord—“
2159 (7:12a NRSV), Fee contends, “Paul moves to the third in the series of directives.”¹⁵⁶ The
2160 Apostle’s instructions “to the rest” of those whom Paul would have “stay as [they] are,” structure
2161 as follows:

- 2162 • V 12b directive (imperative) to brothers married to unbelieving wives

¹⁵⁶ 1987, p 297.

- 2163 • V 13 directive (imperative) to sisters married to unbelieving husbands
- 2164 • V 14 Ground ('for' γὰρ) for the imperatives of vv 12b, 13
- 2165 • V 15 exception to the imperatives of v 12b, v 13
- 2166 • V 16 Additional ground ('for' γὰρ) for the imperatives of v 12b and v 13.

2167

2168 ***1 Cor 7:12-13 (Directives)***

2169 “With two sets of perfectly balanced sentences [12b & 13], Paul sets forth his judgments,
 2170 this time in the order of husband and wife.”¹⁵⁷ In both cases he tells the believer married to the
 2171 unbeliever not to divorce, using a verb clearly carrying that sense, ‘divorce’.¹⁵⁸ The two balanced
 2172 sentences, verses 12b and 13, are each complex conditional clauses joined together by ‘and’ (καί)
 2173 that function together as the compound direct object of v 12a’s main verb, “I say.” In other words,
 2174 they constitute two things that Paul is saying in reply to these two groups (① certain believing
 2175 husbands [lit. ‘brothers’] ② certain believing ‘wives’) in response to the Corinthians’ question to
 2176 him. The key questions for this study are, (1) under what condition(s) does Paul tell a believing
 2177 spouse not to divorce, and (2) how binding is that ‘telling’?

2178 We first consider (2). Both sentences are standard conditional structures, with a protasis
 2179 (condition) and apodosis (conclusion). In both cases the main verb of the apodosis is an
 2180 (negated) imperative (ἀφιέτω), a prohibition. In English such third person imperatives are
 2181 usually rendered “let him” However, the Greek is stronger than that English suggests: “Its
 2182 force is more akin to *he must*, however, or periphrastically, *I command him to . . .*” (e.g. NIV,
 2183 NASB).¹⁵⁹ In other words, in spite of the difficulty rendering it literally into suitable English, the
 2184 third person imperative (Greek) is usually a true imperative.¹⁶⁰ So the force of Paul’s ‘telling’ is
 2185 that of an apostolic command, about which elsewhere Paul solemnly declares, “the things which I
 2186 write to you are the Lord’s commandment.” (1 Cor 14:37b, NASB; cf. 2 Peter 3:15-16). The
 2187 common, ‘Let him/her ...’ translation language notwithstanding, when the conditions of the
 2188 protases are met, the binding force of the apodoses is just as firm as in v 10, where Paul says
 2189 expressly that it is the Lord who *commands* the believer not to separate/divorce from a (believing)
 2190 spouse. So then, regarding (2), Paul intends what he tells the believing spouses in mixed
 2191 marriages in v 12b and v 13 to be understood and strictly obeyed, just as if it were a direct
 2192 imperative from the mouth of the Lord Himself.

¹⁵⁷ Fee, 1987, p 298. Since the two sentences are well balanced – what he says to the brothers ①, then to the sisters ②, is the same – we treat the two together, generically.

¹⁵⁸ I.e. ἀφίημι, see n 132, above.

¹⁵⁹ Wallace, 1997, p 486.

¹⁶⁰ “There is a permissive imperative (see below), but its semantics are quite different”; Wallace, 1997, p 487. See p 49, below. Wallace actually recognizes 7-8 possible usages of the imperative, but the current instance is clearly that of prohibition.

2193 Regarding (1), the protasis of each, introduced by “if,” “express[es] a condition thought of
2194 as real” – Paul knows such marriages at Corinth are real, not merely hypothetical.¹⁶¹ In each
2195 sentence, the apodosis, i.e. the command not to divorce, comes into force when two coordinate
2196 conditions (a) & (b) – joined by καί the “coordinating conjunction” (Fribergs s.v.) – are both met:
2197

2198 **If** the [Christian] spouse (both)

2199 (a) has an unbelieving spouse, and [καί]

2200 (b) that spouse consents to live/dwell (συνευδοκεῖ οἰκεῖν) with the Christian.
2201

2202 At this point it is crucial to reemphasize that, grammatically speaking, both (a) and (b) are
2203 truly coordinate, conjoined not with ‘or’ but with ‘and’. Therefore, for the overall ‘if’ condition
2204 to be met and the imperative to come into force, *both* must be satisfied. Conversely, if either
2205 condition is not met, the apodosis does not apply.

2206 The force of the first condition, (a), is obvious, the brother or sister must be married to an
2207 *unbelieving* spouse, someone who does not embrace the Christian faith.¹⁶² Thus, if the brother or
2208 sister is married to a Christian, the Apostle Paul does not intend for the respective apodosis (of v
2209 12b or v 13) to apply. (Of course, the Lord’s command of Mat 19:6, referred to in 7:10, would
2210 then apply, prohibiting divorce, save for the ground of *porneia*; 19:9.) The force of the second
2211 condition (b) is also clear, especially when its construction, standing opposite the verb
2212 “separates” or “leaves” in v 15 (χωρίζεται) is fully appreciated, but because this portion of v 15
2213 is understood by some more broadly today, it merits closer scrutiny (see below).

2214 Most translations render v 12’s main verb, συνευδοκεῖ (*suneudokei*), by ‘consents’
2215 (NASB, ESV, NRSV, RSV) or ‘is willing’ (NIV, NJB), both of which definitions are well
2216 supported by reliable lexicons, especially given its construction here, followed by the infinitive
2217 ‘οἰκεῖν (*oikein*)’. Regarding *suneudokei*:

2218 “W. inf. foll. *be willing* to do someth. (PMich 202, 12 [105 AD]) **1 Cor 7:12f.** ” (BDAG)

2219 “With an infinitive following *be willing to, agree to* (1C 7.12, 13)” (Fribergs)
2220

2221
2222 In this context, with either English word choice, it is the *will of the unbeliever* that is
2223 determinative. Accordingly, hereafter, ‘*be willing*’, is employed. Regarding *oikein*:
2224

¹⁶¹ Eι is a “marker of a condition, existing in fact or hypothetical, *if*”; BDAG, s.v. εἰ, def. 1.a.α.

¹⁶² We pass on consideration of the question as to how to define precisely who has embraced the Christian faith and who has not, a knotty issue in the modern world with its wide variety of denominations and independent churches. However, a confessional answer to that question would probably begin by analysis of WCF 24.3b, with the word ‘reformed’ probably carrying the sense of ‘Protestant’, as per Merriam-Webster Unabridged (on line), s.v. ‘reformed’, def. 2a, “of or relating to the whole body of Protestant Christianity stemming from the Reformation: *protestant*.”

2225 “to reside in a place, *live, dwell*, intr. ... οἰκ. μετά τινος *live with someone* ... ; in marriage (Soph.,
2226 Oed. R. 990) 1 Cor 7:12f.” (BDAG, def. 1)¹⁶³

2227
2228 The center of the semantic range of this verb is clearly the physical notion of remaining in a
2229 particular place as one’s abode. The verb implicates nothing about the cordiality of the
2230 relationships with others who might share that abode – despite the possibility of such nuances for
2231 the oft utilized English translation, ‘to live’. Thus, the rendering ‘to live’ opens the door for
2232 possible misunderstanding.

2233 In the NT, Paul alone employs this verb, using it seven other times. In every other
2234 instance, it is rendered by both the NASB and NRSV as ‘dwell’. Interestingly, each time, that
2235 ‘dwelling’ does not constitute a literal taking up residence, but a figurative usage: of the Spirit
2236 ‘dwelling’ in the believer, of sin ‘dwelling’ in the sinner, or of God ‘dwelling’ in inapproachable
2237 light. Even in its figurative usage, however, nothing suggests the word can carry one of the other
2238 senses of the English ‘to live’.¹⁶⁴

2239 The (pre-Christian Greek translation of the OT) Septuagint uses the verb 110 times.
2240 Looking at the 16 instances in Genesis as a sample, Brenton’s English translation renders 15 as
2241 “dwell,” in a literal sense, and one as “inhabit”; all 16 uses are literal. As such, the translation,
2242 ‘dwell’ (ASV, ERV, KJV), is superior to the semantically broader verb, ‘live’ (preferred by
2243 modern translations); so hereafter *oikein* will be rendered ‘to dwell’. Thus the compound verbal
2244 expression would be, “is willing to dwell,” and the second condition (b) becomes:

2245
2246 “If ... she/he is willing to dwell with him/her,”
2247

2248 This spatial understanding of *oikein* is confirmed by the choice of verb to which Paul
2249 returns in v 15, immediately following a ground for vv 12b-13 (v 14): χωρίζω (separate). As
2250 noted above, it, too, carries a spatial sense, implicating physical movement away from something
2251 or someone.¹⁶⁵ Linked to vv 12b-13 by an adversative *de* (but, yet), v 15’s ‘separate’ expresses
2252 the antithesis of the unbeliever “being willing to dwell with” the believer (vv 12-13). Thus, the
2253 sole criterion as to whether or not requirement (b) is satisfied is clear and straightforward: if the

¹⁶³ BDAG def. 2 is transitive: “to inhabit a place, *inhabit, dwell in*”; while its syntax is necessarily different, its connotation matches its intransitive definition.

¹⁶⁴ The verb ‘to live’ (intrans.) has a wide range of definitions besides “to occupy a home : DWELL, RESIDE” (def. 5) that can confuse the English reader’s understanding of what Paul means by ‘*oiken*’. For example Merriam-Webster (online, Unabridged) recognizes, “to flourish in human life or consciousness : retain effect, existence, or vigor” (def. 8), “to realize the possibilities of life amply : attain fulfillment or satisfaction” (def. 10), and “COHABIT” (def. 11), meaning “to live together as or as if as husband and wife” (s.v. ‘cohabit’, def. 1). The possibility of the English reader taking ‘live’ with either def. 10 or 11, makes ‘live’ a particularly poor choice for rendering ‘*oiken*’ in 7:12-13. On the other hand no other definition recognized by Merriam-Webster for ‘to dwell’ (intrans.) besides “LIVE, RESIDE” (def. 1a) could possibly fit in the context of vv 12-13.

¹⁶⁵ See p 63 and nn 130-131, above.

2254 unbelieving spouse is willing to dwell with, i.e. reside in the same place as, the believing spouse,
2255 then this condition is met.

2256 Returning to Paul's full compound protasis (of what "I say, not the Lord"):

2257

2258 **If** the [Christian] spouse both

2259 (a) has an unbelieving spouse, and

2260 (b) that unbelieving spouse is willing to dwell with the Christian,

2261

2262 then the apodosis applies, the believing spouse is exhorted by the Apostle, with the full authority
2263 of a command of the Lord Jesus Himself: "You must not divorce or separate from your spouse!"
2264 This paraphrase accurately explicates (in the second person) the directive issued both to believing
2265 husbands (v 12b) and to believing wives (v 13); it is binding upon both sexes whenever both
2266 conditions, (a) and (b), are met.

2267 ***1 Cor 7:15 (Exception to the Directives)***

2268 On the other hand, v 15 introduces an exception to these imperatives of v 12b and v 13
2269 which forbid divorce and separation; it is the case in which condition (a) of v 12b or v 13 is met,
2270 but (b) is not. In other words, it prescribes the Christian's duty in the case when the unbelieving
2271 spouse is not "willing to dwell" with the believing spouse. Its exceptive character is signaled by
2272 v 15's initial adversative conjunction, *de* ('but' KJV, ESV, NRSV or 'yet' NASB, ASV). The
2273 unwillingness of the unbeliever is described in positive terms by the protasis of v 15. This time
2274 Paul covers both cases, husband and wife, in one clause, generically: "But if the unbelieving
2275 partner separates (*χωρίζεται*)" (15a, ESV).

2276 As noted above (n 129), the sense of the verb rendered 'separates' is first of all one of
2277 "separat[ion] by depart[ure]" away from someone or something, here away from the believing
2278 spouse. It is the same verb used by Jesus, also with a contextually clear physical connotation, but
2279 there employed so as to prohibit divorce (Mat 19:6; see above). It is a verb that both BDAG (def.
2280 2a) and Fribergs (def. 2a) recognize can implicate divorce, at least when used in the passive voice
2281 (though here it is active). Under Roman law divorce by separation was a recognized means of
2282 securing a divorce from one's spouse (though such was *not* the case for Jesus' Jewish audience).
2283 To effect a divorce, "it was enough for a spouse simply to leave home with the aim of ending the
2284 union."¹⁶⁶ (Note: physical departure from the residence was required.) Thus, in the Roman
2285 colony of Corinth, "if the unbeliever separates," would suggest the possibility of "separates unto
2286 divorce," though given the Apostle's obviously self-conscious choice to return to the broader
2287 verb, *χωρίζω* (*chōrizō*; cf. v 10), from vv 12-13's technical and more precise, *ἀφίημι* (*aphiēmi*),
2288 one ought to assume that Paul intends his readers to hear the selected verb's distinctive spatial
2289 connotation, 'separates', and also to recall Jesus' divorce ban expressed with the same verb (Mat
2290 19:6, cf. vv 10-11): Even, "the *unbeliever[s]* separat[ing]," constitutes flagrant defiance against

¹⁶⁶ Garland, 2003, p 295. "See especially the papyrus examples in MM (n. 18 on v. 10), which use this verb [*χωρίζω*] for mutual agreement to dissolve a marriage"; Fee, 1987, p 302 n 31.

2291 the command of the Lord (though as an unbeliever, he will be unconcerned for the Lord's will,
2292 and Paul denies such malefactors to be his responsibility; cf. 1 Cor 5:12-13).

2293 This understanding of vv 12-13 probably explains Perkin's somewhat cryptic distinction:
2294 while the departure of the unbeliever from a believer may justly result in divorce, it is "the
2295 malicious or willful departing of the unbeliever [which] dissolve[s] the marriage, but that is no
2296 cause of giving a bill of divorce; only adultery causes that. Here the believer is a mere patient,
2297 and the divorce is made by the unbeliever, who unjustly forsakes, and so puts away the other." In
2298 the case of adultery, the Christian (victim) may initiate divorce, but in the case of the unbeliever's
2299 willful separation, the unbeliever divorces the believer, who "is a mere patient [≈ victim]."
2300

2301 *1 Cor 7: 12-13 and 15*

2302 Thus, vv 12-13 and v 15 together encompass the only two possible scenarios for answering the
2303 Corinthians' question (on 7:1, see pp 22-24, above) with respect to a believer married to an
2304 unbeliever. In the first scenario, the unbeliever remains willing to continue to dwell with the
2305 believer. In the second case, the unbeliever is not willing *and* he or she manifests that
2306 unwillingness by (willfully) physically separating himself from the believer.

2307 The crux in both vv 12b-13 and v 15a is this: the *will* of the unbeliever. It is the sole
2308 determinative factor in (b) and, according to v 15, must be manifested by an action: spatial
2309 separation. According to vv 12b-13, the *believer* is not permitted to separate from or divorce an
2310 unbelieving spouse who remains willing to reside together. The satisfaction or non-satisfaction of
2311 condition (b) is entirely dependent upon the will of the unbeliever to stay together, versus that
2312 unbeliever acting physically and unilaterally to separate, putting distance between himself and his
2313 believing spouse.

2314 Two issues remain to be considered concerning the latter part of v 15, that is, concerning its
2315 apodosis. In other words, when the protasis is fulfilled, when an unbelieving spouse has
2316 determined not to continue to dwell with his Christian spouse, and when he has manifested that
2317 determination by acting to put distance between himself and his spouse, what does Paul decree in
2318 the apodosis? For such consideration the (RCC) New American Bible is both accurate and
2319 convenient:
2320

2321 If the unbeliever separates, however, [1] let him separate [χωριζέσθω]. [2] The brother or
2322 sister is not bound in such cases;
2323

2324 The first question pertains to [1], the third person imperative here, rendered "let him
2325 separate." It is the very form which in the case of Matthew 19:6 (where it is negated) we noted
2326 that the Apostle Paul (rightly) describes it as a command (1 Cor 7:10). Accordingly, we rendered
2327 it idiomatically, "[man] must not separate."¹⁶⁷ Daniel Wallace's *Greek Grammar: Beyond the*
2328 *Basics*, explains the current case differently: as an example of the "permissive imperative

¹⁶⁷ See above, p 72 and n 165.

2329 (imperative of toleration).” He defines it as follows, offering as examples, Mat 8:31-32 and 1 Cor
2330 7:36, as well as the instance currently under consideration (1 Cor 7:15).

2331

2332

a. Definition

2333 The imperative is rarely used to connote permission or, better, *toleration*. This usage does *not*
2334 normally imply that some deed is optional or approved. It often views the act as a *fait*
2335 *accompli*. In such instances, the mood could almost be called “an imperative of resignation.”
2336 Overall, it is best to treat this as a statement of *permission*, *allowance*, or *toleration*. The
2337 connotations of “permission” are usually too positive to convey adequately the nuances
2338 involved in this type of imperative.¹⁶⁸

2339 Taking Paul’s import as Wallace describes means that the attitude of the believer, if his spouse
2340 departs, far from seeing divorce as duty, should rather see God as requiring him merely to tolerate
2341 it – as a “*fait accompli*.” Such an attitude squares well with the Lord’s divorce prohibition in Mat
2342 19:6, a ban which, read verbatim, is not limited to Jews married to Jews (Jesus’ immediate
2343 audience) or Christians married to Christians (Paul’s audience in 1 Cor 7:10 where he alludes to
2344 19:6). This would imply that the Christian spouse ought in no way to encourage the unbeliever’s
2345 departure (since the Lord prohibits it), but ultimately ought not act to prevent the unbeliever from
2346 leaving and divorcing (since divorce by separation is suggested in Paul’s uses of the verb) if he is
2347 determined to leave. The Apostle requires the believer to be tolerant of the unbeliever’s sinful
2348 (vis-à-vis Jesus’ prohibition) departure. Again, as in vv 12-13, the will of the unbeliever is
2349 determinative. (Paul offers no approval for the *Christian spouse* refusing to remain together. On
2350 the contrary, we said above that in vv 12-13 he orders such spouses not to separate from
2351 unbelieving partners who are willing to remain together.)

2352 The second question pertains to [2], the meaning of the second part of v 15’s apodosis: “The
2353 brother or sister is not bound [οὐ δεδούλωται] in such cases.” There are broadly two
2354 approaches to this clause: (A) ‘not bound’ means no longer married, hence free to remarry; (B) it
2355 does not mean no longer married, but rather no longer obligated to the duties of marriage, such as
2356 cohabitation or support. The position of the WCF is clearly (A), given that the WA recognizes
2357 freedom for a deserted spouse to remarry by appeal to this very verse.

2358 Wenham and Heth put forward seven arguments against (A) or for (B). In the light of their
2359 influence among evangelicals, we summarize them, and then respond to them in detail.¹⁶⁹

2360

2361 [1] The first and most important consideration is the nature of marriage itself: it is a creation
2362 ordinance and binding on all irrespective of one’s faith or the lack thereof. Whether a spouse is a
2363 Christian or a non-Christian appears to have little to do with Christ’s teaching on the
2364 indissolubility of marriage which he derives from Genesis 1: 27; 2: 24.

¹⁶⁸ *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics - Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*, (Garland, TX: Galaxie Software) 1999, ©1996, p 488.

¹⁶⁹ 2009, pp 140-144. The wording of the next eight paragraphs is that of Wenham and Heth, but wording deemed not necessary for a fair treatment has been culled, reducing their nearly five pages to about two.

- 2365
2366 [2] The entire context of verses 10-16 revolves around and does not depart from Paul's and the Lord's
2367 command that a believer must not divorce. ... what does Paul's statement in verse 15b – 'the
2368 brother or the sister is not under bondage (*ou dedoulotai*) in such cases' – mean in the context of
2369 w. 10-16? ... 'All that *ou dedoulotai* clearly means is that he or she need not feel so bound by
2370 Christ's prohibition of divorce as to be afraid to depart when the heathen partner insists on
2371 separation.' Paul cannot be saying that the believer is no longer 'bound in marriage' to his
2372 unbelieving spouse because this introduces an idea foreign to the whole context and contrary to
2373 the nature of marriage as a creation ordinance. Paul knows the binding nature of creation
2374 directives because he appeals to them in support of his teaching elsewhere (1 Cor. 11: 2-16; Eph.
2375 5: 22-33; 1 Tim. 2: 12-15).
2376
- 2377 [3] Paul uses in verse 15 the same word for 'divorce' (*chōrizō*) that he does in verse 11 where he
2378 clearly states the content of his use of it: it does not include the right to remarry. J.A. Bengel
2379 speaks of the believer's freedom from feeling they somehow had to change the desire of their mate
2380 to be divorced, yet adds 'but with that exception, *let her remain unmarried*, ver. 11'.
2381
- 2382 [4] Dungan notes the 'similarity between "let her remain unmarried *or be reconciled*" (v. 11a)
2383 with the general hopeful outlook in v. 16 that not divorce but conversion occur'. ... The hope
2384 of conversion is good. This means verse 16 looks back to verses 12-13, both of which
2385 conclude with a prohibition of divorce. We believe the *NEB* translation is correct because
2386 lexical usage (of interrogative *ei*) allows for it and contextual congruency favours it. Thus we
2387 believe verse 16 provides a reason for Paul's remarks in verses 12-15 as a whole. Why should
2388 believers live harmoniously with their unbelieving mates either in marriage or separation?
2389 Because they may very well be the channel through whom God brings their unbelieving
2390 partner to faith.¹⁷⁰
2391
- 2392 [5] Whenever Paul is speaking about the legal aspects of being 'bound' to one's partner (or bound
2393 by a promise of marriage to one's betrothed, 1 Cor. 7: 27), he uses the verb *deō* (Rom. 7: 2; 1
2394 Cor. 7: 39), not *douloō* ('enslave, subject') as he does in 1 Corinthians 7: 15. The burden of
2395 proof is on the interpreter who attempts to show that something other than the actual, literal
2396 death of one's partner provides a basis for remarriage. The only clear precept about remarriage
2397 in Paul's theology and explicitly stated in Scripture is that remarriage is permitted to an
2398 individual after the partner has died. To introduce the consideration that some kind of divorce
2399 or desertion 'breaks' the marriage bond and permits the 'innocent' party to remarry is an
2400 attempt at eisegesis of the writings of Paul.

¹⁷⁰ The rest (ellipsis) of argument [4] reads, "It is interesting that the early church Fathers connected verse 16 with the distant verse 13, whereas modern commentators from the thirteenth-century onwards hold that verse 16 is the explanation of verse 15.⁸³ These two options depend upon how verse 16 is to be translated. The *NASB* reads: 'For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?' This translation implies that the hope of conversion is remote. This means verse 16 would most naturally refer to verse 15. In contrast, the *NEB* reads: 'Think of it: as a wife you may be your husband's salvation; as a husband you may be your wife's salvation.' This translation implies that the hope of conversion is good."

2401 . . . A simple concordance study will show where Paul employs *deō* and where he
2402 employs *douloō*. Never does Paul use *douloō* (1 Cor. 7: 15) in reference to that legal aspect of
2403 marriage which, in Paul's theology, can only be broken by the death of one of the partners.
2404 And even if Paul had used *deō* in verse 15, the word's occurrence in its immediate context of
2405 Christ's command not to divorce, and not its usage in a different context, determines its
2406 semantic value. The arguments for no remarriage after desertion would still apply even if Paul
2407 had used *deō* in verse 15 instead of *douloō*. What Paul is saying to the deserted Christian is in
2408 principle in line with what we have said about the exception clauses in Matthew: Paul
2409 exempts the Christian from the responsibility for the divorce which an unbelieving partner
2410 brings about.

2411
2412 [6] The testimony of the Fathers in the first centuries. We have already noted the testimony of
2413 Tertullian on this issue in chapter one. He speaks quite firmly about the permanence of
2414 marriage even with non-Christian spouses: complete divorce with the right to remarry appears
2415 to be ruled out. H. Crouzel's study likewise concluded that the only Father in the first five
2416 centuries who permits the deserted Christian to remarry is the Latin Father Ambrosiaster (who
2417 wrote between 366 and 383). This is a fact of which many present-day canonists are unaware.
2418

2419 [7] Finally, the principle which Paul teaches in verses 17-24 immediately following this question
2420 of desertion is further evidence that Paul did not permit the deserted believer to change his
2421 status. . . . At least three times in verses 17-24 Paul states the equivalent of, 'Let each man
2422 remain in that condition in which he was called.' The principle is this: Believers should
2423 remain in the same situation in life in which they were when they became Christian because
2424 Christ demands of His 'slaves' sole obedience to Him not a shared allegiance to other masters.
2425

2426 Wenham and Heth then conclude their arguments contending no remarriage is permitted by 7:15:
2427

2428 In the light of these seven points we feel the burden of proof is really upon defenders of the
2429 Erasmian view and Roman Catholics who propose that Paul here permits the deserted
2430 Christian to remarry. The evidence which they cite does not establish their case. In saying 'the
2431 believer is not bound', Paul is simply allowing the believer to agree to an unbeliever's
2432 insistent demand for divorce. The responsibility for this divorce lies on the unbeliever's head.
2433 Paul is not thereby suggesting that the Christian divorcee may then remarry. This would be a
2434 contradiction of our understanding of the meaning of 'one flesh' in Genesis 2: 24: the basis for
2435 Jesus' teaching that all remarriage after divorce amounts to adultery.
2436

2437 We respond to Wenham and Heth point by point.
2438

2439 [1] This is really an appeal to Matthew 19, which we dealt with previously, showing that
2440 Wenham and Heth have misunderstood the structure of Matthew 19:9. Jesus' application
2441 of the Genesis citations (Mat 19:4-5) in Mat 19:6 declares only that man must not separate
2442 what God has joined, but in no way precludes the Son of God or his Apostle authorizing

2443 or recognizing such separations (including divorces). Since we believe Paul’s teaching in
2444 1 Cor 7:1-17 is based upon and to be understood in the light of Jesus’ teaching in Mat
2445 19:3-12, and since rightly understood in 19:9 Jesus grants freedom to remarry after a
2446 divorce based upon one’s spouse’s act or acts of *porneia*, i.e., a legitimate divorce, it
2447 follows that Paul’s imperative of toleration, “let him separate (i.e., unto divorce),” would
2448 imply that the freedom ascribed to the believing spouse in 7:15c would match that
2449 freedom authorized by the Lord in Mat 19:9.
2450

2451 [2] The assertion, to wit, “in the context of vv. 10-16 ... [a]ll that *ou dedoulotai* clearly means
2452 is that he or she need not feel so bound by Christ’s prohibition of divorce as to be afraid to
2453 depart when the heathen partner insists on separation,” inexplicably postulates something
2454 not mentioned or suggested in the portion addressed to believers married to unbelievers
2455 (or even in the two preceding verses), namely, that the separation contemplated is not the
2456 unbeliever willfully leaving the believer, but the believer separating from the unbeliever,
2457 that is, “when the heathen partner insists.” Such a scenario is of course possible, but is not
2458 what Paul plainly describes. It has been read into the context.

2459 As to their contention, “Paul cannot be saying that the believer is no longer ‘bound
2460 in marriage’ to his unbelieving spouse because this introduces an idea foreign to the whole
2461 context,” this is simply not true. Taking the context to be as they contend, vv 10-16, we
2462 have argued that throughout this section Paul presumes the Corinthians’ intimate
2463 familiarity with the extended Matthean pericope (19:3-12), even down to the details. We
2464 also argued that this dependence upon Matthew explains Paul’s prohibition on remarriage
2465 (v 11a) when a Christian couple has disobeyed the Lord’s command against divorce (and
2466 separation; v 10, 11b, cf. Mat 19:6). In such a case, presuming no sexual immorality, the
2467 innocent spouse has been left unmarried (*ἄγαμος*) by the departure (*χωρισθῆ*) of the
2468 guilty one, but — assuming the historic understanding of the nature of the adultery warned
2469 against in both Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 (see above, pp 19-20) — he remains bound. Hence,
2470 the Matthean divorce teaching also becomes the ground for Paul’s prohibition on
2471 remarriage in 7:11: “But if she does [separate], she must remain unmarried or else be
2472 reconciled to her husband” (NIV). However, contrary to Wenham and Heth’s no. [4],
2473 Paul says the separation (*χωρίζεσθω*) of the unbeliever that in v 15 Paul directs the
2474 believer to tolerate — which again presumably leaves the believer unmarried (*ἄγαμος*) —
2475 now frees the believer from the marriage.

2476 Thus, the issue of the departing spouse remaining bound (or not) to the obedient
2477 spouse is not “an idea foreign to the whole context,” but one already alluded to in v 11a.
2478 Paul now decrees differently in the case of a departed unbelieving spouse.
2479

2480 [3] Appeal to Paul’s explication and application of the Lord’s own decree pertaining to
2481 marriages among God’s people to support reading 15d in the same way is begging the
2482 whole question. The mere fact that Paul differentiates, providing new (vis-à-vis Jesus)

2483 instructions for group IV, creates a presumption that there must be a significant difference
2484 in the ethics of IV over against III. Furthermore, we have already (otherwise) explained
2485 Paul’s use of the verb ‘separate’ versus ‘divorce’.
2486

2487 [4] We agree that v 16’s hope of reaching the unbelieving spouse for Christ looks back to vv
2488 12-13 where the believer is forbidden to divorce the unbeliever *who is willing to remain*
2489 (dwell) *with him*, i.e., the situation where conditions (a) and (b), above are met. However,
2490 when (a) is met, but (b) is not, but rather the protasis (condition) of v 15a is fulfilled, then
2491 the “tolerant imperative,” i.e., “let him separate [unto divorce],” is operative. This time,
2492 however, instead of “but if she does leave, she must remain *unmarried*, or else be
2493 reconciled to her husband” (v 11a, NASB), Paul says, “the brother or the sister is not
2494 under bondage in such *cases*.” The bond which in God’s eyes binds the (governmentally)
2495 divorced couple no longer exists – just as if the divorce had been sought by the victim of
2496 adultery, or the unbeliever had died. Furthermore, the idea of such (now) *unmarried* (cf. v
2497 11a) persons “liv[ing] harmoniously with their unbelieving mates in ... separation” – a
2498 point rather crucial to their argument [4] – seems incongruous.
2499

2500 [5] The accusation of eisegesis is answered implicitly in [4], above. The word *douloō* need
2501 not express literal enslavement (see 1 Cor 9:19’s fig. usage). While it is true that Paul
2502 uses *deō* for the marriage bond elsewhere, his variation in words for divorce demonstrates
2503 that Paul can express the same denotation with differing synonymous or nearly
2504 synonymous terms. As shown above, the context, especially the contrast between the
2505 deserting believer’s treatment in v 11a and the deserting unbeliever’s treatment in v 15c,
2506 demonstrates that remarriage (or none) is very much at issue.
2507

2508 [6] The Church Fathers’ writings, while not insignificant, are outside the scope of our
2509 committee’s assignment.¹⁷¹
2510

2511 [7] We are in full agreement that what we have labeled the “stay-as-you-are” principle
2512 articulated in vv 17ff is based upon Jesus’ teaching in Mat 19:3-12 and underlies Paul’s
2513 treatment of those groups in the church who can, with respect to the Corinthians’ question
2514 about application of the eunuch saying, remain in that condition in which they were
2515 called. However, we pointed out that under Roman law to secure divorce, “it was enough
2516 for a spouse simply to leave home with the aim of ending the union.”¹⁷² Thus, the change

¹⁷¹ Wenham and Heth (p 20), too, seem to recognize the principle expressed in WCF 1.10 – “The supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture” – when they write: “Now in beginning with the views of the early church we are not attempting to suggest that their interpretation has final authority. Only Scripture deserves that honour.”

¹⁷² See p 75 and n 172, above.

2517 in status of the believer who is “no longer under bondage” after the desertion of his
2518 unbelieving spouse is solely the result of the will and actions of the unbeliever.

2519
2520 Furthermore, Exegesis (B) puts Paul’s very strong directives and warnings to married
2521 Christians not to abstain from conjugal relations but to fulfill their duties to one another, save
2522 briefly by mutual agreement for prayer, at odds with v 15c. In the earlier passage Paul is adamant
2523 that those who are married must not provoke temptation in one another by ceasing such relations
2524 or refusing each other. Indeed willful separation for any significant period of time would seem a
2525 direct violation of the prescriptions and proscription of vv 2-5. (B) insists the parties are still
2526 married, but one party, simply by leaving the other, has forfeited the right to sexual relations with
2527 his spouse. However, the reason given by Paul why husbands and wives must have regular
2528 relations would be unaffected by physical separation: “But because there is so much sexual
2529 immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman should have her own husband”
2530 (7:2, NLT).

2531 So then, exegesis (A) must be adopted. ‘Not bound’ means no longer married, hence free
2532 to marry. The confession’s implicit understanding of the term is affirmed. Willful desertion of a
2533 believer by an unbelieving spouse, such that neither civil nor ecclesiastical authorities are able to
2534 rectify (and of course the church has no real power over the unbeliever) allows the innocent party
2535 not only to divorce the unbeliever, but also to remarry thereafter.

2536
2537
2538 **(4) Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations for the Preservation of the Peace, Purity,**
2539 **and Unity of Christ's Church**

2540
2541 In conclusion, as a preliminary remark, we underline the seriousness of the issue, both for
2542 any Christian who is married and is considering separation or divorce, and for the elders of his
2543 church or presbytery. As we understand the Lord’s teaching in Matthew 19:6 and 9, the Lord not
2544 only forbids most divorces (occurring both in His day and ours), but makes it very clear that a
2545 Christian who separates from and divorces his spouse for any reason not specifically authorized
2546 by the Lord and then remarries is, in the eyes of God, violating the seventh commandment just as
2547 egregiously as if he engaged in sexual relations with another person while still (according to the
2548 state) married to his spouse. Furthermore, if the spouse he has supposedly (but not really)
2549 divorced without just cause then remarries, he is complicit in his spouse’s sin of adultery (Mat
2550 5:32). It is crucial that the church’s elders get this right; for if they give their consent to, or
2551 neglect to discipline, a member pursuing a divorce which Jesus does not recognize, they not only
2552 allow what God forbids, but they, too, share in the responsibility for any subsequent (adulterous)
2553 union (cf. Ezekiel 33:7-8; Mat 18:1-20). No session would give its OK to members to cheat
2554 openly on their spouses while society reckons them married, but by laxness with respect to
2555 divorce elders can do just that, even if unintentionally. In short, with regard to divorce, *we must*
2556 *not err on the side of laxity.*

2557 The broad freedom for men to divorce their wives that was tolerated under the law of the
2558 OT – the precise breadth of which is hard to pin down – has been nullified by the Lord Jesus, who
2559 categorically forbids his disciples – both male and female – to divorce their spouses, save for the
2560 case where one’s spouse has committed some “kind of extramarital, unlawful, or unnatural sexual
2561 intercourse” (*porneia*) with a third party, sins with which the OT law dealt not by divorce, but by
2562 execution (note: both regimes allow the innocent party to end the marriage and to remarry). This
2563 comprehensive ban on divorce on various grounds tolerated under Mosaic Law is imposed by the
2564 Lord using an imperative (command) in Mat 19:6, and is affirmed by Paul with respect to
2565 Christian marriages in 1 Cor 7:10-11; according to the Lord, this is the only offense for which a
2566 Christian may divorce a Christian spouse. The Apostle Paul applies the Lord’s ban on all other
2567 divorces to Christians married to non-Christians, *forbidding the Christian* to take action even to
2568 separate himself from his non-Christian spouse.

2569 So apart from the ground of one’s spouse’s *porneia* (which brought death, not divorce in
2570 the OT) any married Christian – irrespective of the spiritual state of his spouse – seeking to be
2571 free from his/her spouse when that spouse expresses her/his will to stay together is acting in
2572 defiance of the command of both the Apostle and the Lord (1 Cor 7:10, cf. Mat 19:6), for whom
2573 the Apostle speaks (in 1 Cor 7:12-13, cf. John 16:12-13, 1 Cor 14:37). Such defiance requires
2574 discipline (Mat 18:15-20; Gal 6:1).

2575 The Lord’s own command, referenced in 1 Cor 7:10-11, together with the commands
2576 issued for the Lord by his Apostle (vv 12-15), unequivocally forbid a Christian from separating
2577 himself from a spouse willing to dwell together with him. Up to this point, the rule for the
2578 married Christian is effectively the same for both Christian marriages and mixed marriages:
2579 married Christian, *you must not* separate! Also in both cases, the fact that in 1 Cor 7:1-11 Paul is
2580 exegeting and applying Matthew 19:3-12 necessarily means that any Christian whose spouse has
2581 committed *porneia* may (but need not) pursue a divorce. Paul is most certainly not seeking to
2582 undo anything that Matthew records Jesus having decreed; on the contrary, Paul presupposes its
2583 existence and authority, as well as his readers’ intimate knowledge of it, even referring directly to
2584 it (Mat 19:6) in 7:10a and alluding to it (Mat 19:9) in 7:10b. The sole difference between the
2585 Christian in a believing marriage versus one bound to an unbeliever is this: when the unbeliever,
2586 by expressing his will through (willful) physical separation, leaves the believer, the believer is no
2587 longer bound (married); separation with intent to divorce was sufficient under Roman law to
2588 secure divorce. The WCF ought expressly to recognize this distinction in its treatment of “wilful
2589 desertion,” but does not.¹⁷³ Willful desertion – refusal to continue to dwell together – of an

¹⁷³ John Murray believes it does not. “Consequently it will have to be concluded that the proposition respecting willful desertion in the Confession is not sufficiently guarded and delimited so as to confine itself to the apostle in this passage”; 1980, pp 76-77 n 13. Similarly, A.A. Hodge, regarding “wilful, causeless, and incurable desertion” as a lawful ground for divorce, opines, “This is allowed by Paul to the Christian husband or wife deserted by their heathen partner. 1 Cor. vii. 15”; *The Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1983) p 307. Exegeting 7:12-15, Charles Hodge writes, “if the *unbelieving* partner depart, *i.e.* repudiates the marriage, the believing partner is not bound; *i.e.* is no longer bound by the marriage compact. This seems to be the plain meaning. ... This desertion,

2590 unbeliever from a believing spouse does indeed free the believer from continuing the marriage,
2591 but does not free the believer when the deserting party is a fellow Christian. 1 Corinthians 7:10-
2592 11 (cf. Mat 19:6) alone governs such marriages.

2593 A believer, whose believing spouse separates from him, remains bound (married) before
2594 God and must with patience and forbearance await the return of the estranged spouse. In such
2595 cases, the departing spouse is not ἄπιστος (*apistos*), an unbeliever; consequently the protasis
2596 (condition clause) of v 15a is not met, hence the apodosis, an imperative of tolerance, “Let him
2597 leave,” does not come into force; hence, there can be no legitimate divorce. (Of course this
2598 remains the “counsel of God” on the matter, whether the Westminster Confession so reads vv
2599 12ff., or not.

2600 Since the Lord, Himself personally in Matthew 19:6 – cited in 1 Corinthians 7:10 and
2601 adapted to mixed marriages in vv 12-15 – forbids all Christians from initiating separation as well
2602 as from divorcing, when a Christian willfully and physically separates from his spouse (not guilty
2603 of *porneia*), either by himself leaving or by forcing his spouse away from his residence (in either
2604 case he is refusing to dwell with his spouse), that Christian is in violation of a command “of God,
2605 given as a rule to the reasonable creature” (WLC 24), hence has fallen into sin against both God
2606 and his spouse. Accordingly, the elders of the congregation or presbytery of jurisdiction have a
2607 clear duty in love to utilize the discipline appointed by Christ to seek to compel repentance.
2608 Should that discipline result in excommunication, the deserted spouse would be free before the
2609 Lord to sue for divorce (if the deserter has not already done so) or to agree to a divorce if the
2610 deserter has already sued. For excommunication requires that the people of God ultimately treat
2611 the steadfastly unrepentant sinner as an unbeliever (Mat 18:15ff). If this is what is implied by
2612 WCF 24.6 when it refers to “such wilful desertion as can no way be remedied by the Church,”
2613 then the WA *implicitly* accounted for the Pauline distinction between the deserting believer,
2614 whose spouse may not remarry (7:10-11), and the deserting unbeliever, whose spouse may
2615 remarry (7:12-15).

2616 We should note: careful study of 1 Cor 7:15, the confession’s sole *stated* ground for
2617 authorizing divorce for willful desertion, shows the verse does not use the term ‘desertion’ (or
2618 any Greek equivalent word). Rather, it is more precise: it clearly describes an ***unwillingness to***
2619 ***dwell together on the part of the unbeliever***, an unwillingness demonstrated by action: his
2620 physical departure from the home or his expelling the believer out of the home. Thus, if the
2621 confession’s extra-biblical terminology is to be interpreted consonantly with Holy Scripture, then
2622 such, too, *must* be its definition of ‘desertion’. Other sins some have tried to characterize as
2623 desertion, such as physical, verbal, or emotional abuse, heinous though they may be, do not

however, must be deliberate and final. This is implied in the whole context. The case contemplated [by Paul] is where the ***unbelieving*** husband refuses any longer to regard his believing partner as his wife.

This interpretation of the passage is given not only by the older Protestant interpreters, but also by the leading modern [19th century] commentators, as De Wette, Meyer, Alford, and Wordsworth, and in the Confessions of the Lutheran and Reformed Churches. Even the Romanists take the same view”; *Theology* III, 1979, p 395; emphasis added.

2624 constitute the sin Paul (in 1 Cor 7:15) describes and declares to free the believer from a marriage
2625 to an unbeliever. Whether or not the English word, ‘desertion’, *can be* broad enough to include
2626 such sins is beside the point. They are not what Paul describes as freeing the believer in v 15 and
2627 therefore must not be considered to constitute ‘desertion’ in WCF 24.6 which is interpreting v 15.
2628 Furthermore v 15 cannot in any case legitimately be applied to a believing spouse, unless that
2629 spouse has first been excommunicated from the church and is, thereby, (by Christ’s decree) to be
2630 treated as an unbeliever. The Apostle’s teaching on this is clear, and the wording of WCF 24.6,
2631 which can be understood likewise, ought – since it intends to express the counsel of God on the
2632 matter – also to be so understood.

2633

2634 **Excursus: The Stay-as-You-Are Principle (1 Cor 7:17-24)**

2635 An additional note on the “stay-as-you-are” principle of 7:17-24: This, too, is not really
2636 Paul’s own, but a summary of the Lord’s teaching in Matthew 19:3-12. The Lord’s
2637 prohibition against separation together with his advocacy for staying single, are well
2638 summarized by the principle Paul expresses in 1 Cor 7:17-24 since the Lord is ordering those
2639 married to stay together and urging those not married, if possible, to stay single, just as Paul
2640 does in vv 1-16, summarizing that teaching in vv 17-24.

2641

2642

2643 **Separation, Divorce, and Physical Abuse**

2644 In our historical survey of key writers closely related to the WA such as Perkins and Ames, we
2645 noted that some contend God allows a wife whose husband’s violence places her in serious
2646 danger to separate herself from her husband, seemingly putting herself in violation of the
2647 command of the Lord Jesus (Mat 19:6; referred to as a command by Paul in 1 Cor 7:10a).¹⁷⁴
2648 However, with the exception of the earlier (and never adopted) RLE, none of those authors we
2649 surveyed permitted divorce in such situations, but expressly forbid the battered wife to divorce
2650 and remarry, requiring her to await repentance on the part of her husband. Did these prominent
2651 Reformed authors – contributors either to the WA itself or the lead up to it – find ground for
2652 allowing such separation in 1 Corinthians 7? Do they view such abuse as somehow constituting
2653 willful desertion as some today are contending?¹⁷⁵ Since we found no logic explaining their
2654 conclusions, we are left to infer their thinking on this (currently) hotly debated topic.
2655 If, as we have argued, the sin of “willful desertion” in WCF 24.6 is to be defined in conformity
2656 with the sole Scripture cited by the WA in its support (1 Cor 7:15), and found *exegetically* to
2657 consist in the willful refusal of an unbeliever to dwell with his believing spouse, then (assuming
2658 the standard for determining the “whole counsel of God” stated in WCF 1.6a) the justification for
2659 such an (otherwise sinful) separation cannot be – especially in the case of a Christian marriage

¹⁷⁴ See for example the Perkins citation from *Oeconomie*, 687-688, on pp 11-12, above and Calvin, as cited on pp 8-9, above (“Working History” 29).

¹⁷⁵ See for example the PCA Report, pp 227-29, which adds human wisdom to that which is “*expressly set down* in Scripture, or by *good and necessary consequence* may be *deduced* from Scripture” (WCF 1:6), rationalizing and justifying its expansive ‘application’ of principles it has wrongfully inferred from Mat 19 and 1 Cor 7.

2660 but even in the case of a mixed marriage – found in defining desertion so as to encompass wife
2661 abuse; such toleration of separation must be justified otherwise. This explains, too, why said
2662 WA-related authors refused to allow remarriage in such cases (as per 1 Cor 7:10b’s parenthetical
2663 prohibition); such is not the case with desertion (cf. 1 Cor 7:15 and WCF 24.6). So how then
2664 might we (biblically) explain their permitting separation (but not divorce) in the case of on-going
2665 serious wife abuse?

2666 The best explanation would be in the demands not of the seventh commandment (which
2667 Jesus applies to the matter of divorce; Mat 5: 19), but of the sixth. Regarding it, the assembly
2668 declares: “The sixth commandment requireth all lawful endeavours to preserve our own life”
2669 (WSC 68); and, “the duties required in the sixth commandment are, all careful studies, and lawful
2670 endeavours, to preserve the life of ourselves and others by ... avoiding all occasions ... which
2671 tend to the unjust taking away the life of any; by just defence thereof against violence” (WLC
2672 135). Arguably, just as these requirements justify the taking of human life in “necessary defense”
2673 (WLC 136), which is, strictly speaking, a violation *of the wording* of the sixth commandment,¹⁷⁶
2674 they may likewise be a ground to justify temporary violation of the wording of Jesus’ prohibition
2675 against separation from one’s spouse (Mat 19:6), until the threat to one’s life has passed.
2676 So then, assuming the sixth commandment to be the ground justifying those divines and others
2677 who recognized the lawfulness of a wife temporarily leaving her husband to protect her life, and
2678 recognizing that this is the same principle by which killing as a necessary defense is a legitimate
2679 exception to the wording of the sixth commandment, one must seek principles to determine both
2680 the circumstances where such an exception exists and when such an exception is no longer
2681 applicable, lest (as with the self-defense justification for killing), sessions or presbyteries
2682 overlook violations of Jesus’ prohibition on separation and become complicit in adultery (1 Cor
2683 7:2ff).

2684 In cases of “necessary defence,” the killing must truly be essential to protect one’s self or
2685 his neighbor from serious wrongful harm or death. Accordingly, Ridgeley explains “certain
2686 limitations” on this exception as found in WLC 136: “If there be only a design or conspiracy
2687 against our lives, but no immediate attempt made to take them away” we are rather to have
2688 “recourse to the protection of the law, whereby he may be restrained, or we secured.” Similarly,
2689 “if, again, there be a present attempt made against our lives, we should rather choose to disarm

¹⁷⁶ For the verb, *tiršāḥ*, in the sixth commandment, most older translations (KJV, ASV, WSC & WLC) give, “kill” (so, too, Holladay’s Lexicon); newer translations generally render it “murder,” hence, “you shall not murder” (NASB, ESV, NIV, NRSV; HALOT offers both “**kill, murder**,” as well as, “**strike down, slay**”). However, the older rendering, “kill,” is better as a *translation*, for the life-taking expressed by this verb is not necessarily unlawful (e.g. “if ... the blood avenger finds him outside the border of his city of refuge, and the blood avenger kills (*rāṣaḥ*) the manslayer, he will not be guilty of blood”; Num 35:27) as is the case with “murder,” and this now popular rendering, in the case of Ex 20, is really an interpretive inference from the fact that elsewhere in the Mosaic Law the taking of human life is commanded; hence, the reference in the sixth commandment is to “murder,” but the sense remains, “kill.” For a further case for this translation see John Durham, vol. 3, *Word Biblical Commentary : Exodus* (Dallas: Word, 2002), 292.

2690 the enemy, or flee from him, than take away his life.”¹⁷⁷ In short, the danger must be immediate
2691 and the killing truly necessary to avoid serious injury to justify what would otherwise be the
2692 Decalogue’s explicit prohibition on the taking of human life.

2693 Similarly, if we are to join Calvin, Perkins, and perhaps others, in justifying a spouse in
2694 defying the very wording of Jesus’ prohibition against separation, adaptation of the term
2695 “necessary defence” would seem to be the only righteous approach. The woman who merely
2696 claims to fear her husband, but lacks objective evidence or credible testimony to support that fear,
2697 or the woman whose husband has expressed repentance (Luke 17:4) is not justified in rebelling
2698 against Christ’s command (Mat 19:6) and the lawful authority whom God has put over her (Gen
2699 3:16; Eph 5:22-23) by refusing to dwell together with him, as implied in 1 Cor 7:2ff and
2700 commanded in Mat 19:6, and 1 Cor 7:10, 12-15. She should be required to continue to live with
2701 her husband as his wife, and the session or presbytery should deal with the sins of the husband in
2702 a biblical fashion.

2703 In conclusion, the only biblical support for allowing *divorce* in the case of what our
2704 confession calls, “wilful desertion,” requires we define it strictly as the case where an unbeliever
2705 married to a believer refuses to continue to dwell together with the believing spouse, and
2706 manifests that refusal by leaving and refusing to return, or by driving the believer from the home,
2707 either by violence or by recourse to the power of the state. A believer who exhibits the same
2708 conduct must, as is implied in WCF 24.6, be dealt with fully through church discipline up to and
2709 including excommunication, before he can be treated rightly as an unbelieving deserter and
2710 permission be given to the innocent party to divorce and remarry.

¹⁷⁷ Thomas Ridgeley, *Commentary on the Larger Catechism*, vol. 2, (Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books, 1993 [1st publ. ?1855]) p 381.