

Biblical Grounds for Divorce: 1 Corinthians 7:10–16 in the Church’s Ethics of Divorce and Remarriage

Daniel Baker

Cornerstone Fellowship Church, Apex, NC

Abstract: *With marriage, divorce, and remarriage, the church has the burden of being neither stricter nor more lenient than the Bible itself. First Corinthians 7:10–16 speaks to these issues in unique and important ways, addressing three types of marriages and how each is to be handled. Christians in an unbiblical divorce are to “remain unmarried or else be reconciled” (7:10–11). Christians in a mixed marriage of a believer and unbeliever are encouraged about the spiritual impact they can have (7:12–14, 16). Christians divorced by an unbelieving spouse are freed to remarry (7:15), “only in the Lord” (7:39). This third category connects to recent scholarship on grounds for divorce beyond adultery. Paul does create a narrow and circumscribed path to divorce for Christians here provided his twofold criteria is met: one of the spouses is an unbeliever (unbeliever, apostate, or excommunicated) and the unbeliever divorces the spouse.*

Key Words: *1 Corinthians 7, Church Discipline, Divorce, Marital Separation, Marriage, New Testament Ethics*

Most ecclesiastical traditions and Christian theologians believe adultery gives grounds for divorce and remarriage to another person (Matt 5:31–32; 19:9; Rom 7:2–3).¹ But are there any *other* grounds that would enable a spouse lawfully (i.e., biblically) to divorce and marry another? Recently, John Frame, Andrew Naselli, and Wayne Grudem have argued in the affirmative.² They did so in a way somewhat similar to what older

theologians called creating “intolerable conditions” for a spouse, “conditions” which free the innocent spouse to divorce and remarry another.³ When the discussion turns to these other grounds for divorce, 1 Corinthians 7:10–16 becomes central to the conversation. Such a move is correct since this paragraph adds a unique and critical perspective to the New Testament view on these matters. The goal of this article is to exegete 1 Cor 7:10–16 in its context, engage current scholarship on the passage, and consider the ethical implications found in it. To anticipate the findings below, the passage provides vital information on how the church should respond to an illegitimate divorce between two Christians, gives true encouragement to a Christian who finds himself or herself in a marriage to a non-Christian, and it allows for a divorce in a mixed marriage when the non-Christian leaves. This last idea connects to recent reflection on grounds for divorce beyond adultery and will take up the most space below. We begin with the passage in the context of Paul’s letter.

1 Corinthians 7:10–16 in Its Context

First Corinthians 7:10–16 falls in the middle of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, a letter sent to the church he founded when Gallio was “proconsul” in either AD 51 or 52 (Acts 18:1–17).⁴ His eighteen months there began a relationship that continued through at least three and likely four epistles, only two of which are extant (cf. 1 Cor 5:9; 2 Cor 2:4).⁵ Within what we call 1 Corinthians, Paul deals with a number of issues raised in a letter sent by the Corinthians, several of which are introduced by Paul’s phrase, “Now concerning the matters about which you wrote” (7:1; 8:1; 12:1).⁶ The first of these (7:1) concerns the general topic of marriage and especially marriage lived out in “the present distress” (7:26) when “the appointed time has grown very short” (v. 29) and “the present

³ On this see “Divorce and Remarriage: Report of the Ad-Interim Committee on Divorce and Remarriage to the 20th General Assembly,” *PCA Digest* 2 (1992): 227–28; Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 781.

⁴ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 29; D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2005), 447.

⁵ On the variety of theories and a good estimation of the likeliest one, see Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 29–31; Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 444–47.

⁶ All English Bible quotations are taken from the ESV, unless noted otherwise.

¹ On this “majority” view, see William A. Heth, “Jesus on Divorce: How My Mind Has Changed,” *SBJT* 6.1 (2002): 4–29.

² John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 769–81; Andy Naselli, “What the New Testament Teaches about Divorce and Remarriage,” *DBSJ* 24 (2019): 3–44; Wayne Grudem, *What the Bible Says about Divorce and Remarriage* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021).

form of this world is passing away” (v. 31).⁷ In light of this crisis, Paul exhorts them not to invest “themselves inappropriately in issues and affairs that belong to the old age.”⁸ Amidst counsel on a number of topics related to marriage, Paul addresses divorce and remarriage in 7:10–16 and speaks to it by addressing three types of potential divorce situations: (1) divorce between two believers (vv. 10–11); (2) mixed marriages between a believer and an unbeliever where the unbeliever stays in the marriage (vv. 12–14, 16); and (3) mixed marriages where the unbeliever divorces the believer (v. 15). We will examine each of these categories.

1 Corinthians 7:10–11: Divorces Between Two Believers

The first category addressed is a divorce in a marriage between two believers (note that everywhere in chapter 7 Paul assumes marriage is between one male and one female; no other makeup is envisioned). Context makes it clear he is speaking of *believers* in these two verses. In the chapter he is addressing matters in the Corinthian church and not matters in the abstract. In v. 8 he spoke “to the unmarried” in the Corinthian church and now he speaks “to the married” in the church. Further, both spouses are “expected to recognize the authority of the commandment ‘from the Lord’ and to obey.”⁹

In v. 10, his language becomes forceful. He says, “I give this charge,” using *παράγγελλω*, a strong verb often translated as “command” or a verb with that nuance (e.g., see Acts 16:18, 23; 1 Thess 4:11; 2 Thess 3:4, 6, 10, 12; 1 Tim 4:11; 5:7). Additionally, note the weighty, “not I, but the Lord,” an unusual idea in Paul’s writing. It means that in what he says he is not offering his own insight or revelation but adhering to what Christ himself taught: “In the new instance, divorce, the regulation is absolute; for it comes from the Lord himself.... The regulation given by the histor-

ical Jesus is also that of the exalted Lord; it is a supratemporal command.”¹⁰ Paul’s basic attitude toward marriage and divorce is revealed in Romans 7:2–3 and 1 Cor 7:39 and lines up closely with Jesus (see Matt 5:31–32; 19:3–12; Mark 10:2–12; Luke 16:18).

Paul speaks to the wife first in vv. 10–11: “the wife should not separate from her husband.” It is important to note here what is meant by “separate,” since the meaning is so radically different in our day. The verb here is *χωρίζω*, which can mean “depart” (Acts 1:4), but in 1 Corinthians 7 it is a more formal action. It refers to what is really a “divorce-by-separation,” divorce by walking out the door with no intention of returning; as Instone-Brewer notes, “There is no distinction in the marriage papyri between divorce and separation, and in Graeco-Roman law, separation with intention to end the marriage *was* divorce.”¹¹ Support for this idea can be found in Jesus’s statement, “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate (*χωρίζέτω*)” (Matt 19:6; Mark 10:9). “Separate” here does not mean “separate” in distinction from “divorce,” but “separate” as a synonym for “divorce.” Jesus is affirming two possible states of a marriage, “joined” and “separated,” not three—joined, separated, or divorced. That Paul has such an understanding in v. 10 is supported by the fact that the result of this action is that the wife is now “unmarried” (*ἄγαμος*): “If she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband” (v. 11).

The importance of this idea should not be missed. As used in this paragraph, “separation” is really “divorce-by-separation” and so is equivalent to what is meant by “abandonment” or “desertion” in certain contexts. As one example, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647) speaks of “wilful desertion” as “cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage” (WCF 24.6). But in 7:10–11 the desertion (“divorce-by-separation”) itself is *not* a sufficient ground for divorce, since it does not allow for remarriage to another spouse. We will see with 7:15 below a type of “divorce-by-separation” that does allow for remarriage to another, but Paul narrowly defines when this is allowed.

Regarding the parenthetical statement in v. 11 (“but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband”), several statements need to be said. First, Paul is not condoning or approving of a sinful action here but is instead regulating sin when it occurs: Paul states explicitly in vv. 10–11 what “the wife/husband should not” do. But he is

⁷ On this language as eschatological, see Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Int (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 128–29. For a perspective referring to present trials perhaps from threat of famine but still retaining the eschatological aspect, see Brian S. Rosner, “The Torah and Paul Regulating Marriage: 1 Corinthians 7:1–40,” in *Paul, Scripture and Ethics: A Study of 1 Corinthians 5–7*, AGJU 22 (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 164–69; Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 492–93, 580–83.

⁸ Hays, *First Corinthians*, 127.

⁹ Yonder Moynihan Gillihan, “Jewish Laws on Illicit Marriage, the Defilement of Offspring, and the Holiness of the Temple: A New Halakic Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:14,” *JBL* 121.4 (2002): 714.

¹⁰ Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 120.

¹¹ D. Instone-Brewer, “1 Corinthians 7 in the Light of the Graeco-Roman Marriage and Divorce Papyri,” *TynBul* 52.1 (2001): 107.

aware that such divorces will occur (and have occurred) and speaks to how the church should handle them. Second, Paul's reference to the "unmarried" in v. 8 is noun ἄγαμος, but in v. 10 he uses a perfect active participle from the verb γαμέω, perhaps to intensify what it means to have come together in marriage. Because he uses "unmarried" (ἄγαμος), we know that though the divorce was not a legitimate or lawful one, still it resulted in the couple becoming "unmarried." This eliminates the sense of being "married" in the church while simultaneously being "unmarried" legally—or as some have phrased it, "still married in God's eyes," while yet being unmarried in the eyes of the state.¹² The divorce might be unlawful (i.e., against God's law), but it is still an actual divorce.

Third, for this illegitimately divorced couple two options are open to them: permanent singlehood or reconciling with (remarrying) the previous spouse. Fee explains, "What is *not* allowed by Paul is remarriage [i.e., to someone other than the previous spouse], both because for him that presupposes the teaching of Jesus that such is adultery and because in the Christian community reconciliation is the norm."¹³ Yet, while Paul is indeed forbidding a certain action here (marriage to another), we need to note the severity of his language—or the lack thereof. As a contrast, 1 Cor 5:9–11 speaks of sins potentially resulting in excommunication. Sins like "sexual immorality" and "reviling" in 1 Cor 5:9–11 can result in disfellowshipping a person in the church, and Paul is emphatic the church must, "Purge the evil person from among you" (citing Deut 17:7; 19:19; 21:21; 22:21–22, 24; 24:7). Additionally, 1 Cor 6:9–10 lists a series of sins, and Paul says those given over to these sins will not "inherit the kingdom of God." These two passages are severe in their tone and in the action demanded of the church. But in 1 Cor 7:10–11 the language does not speak of either excommunication or damnation. Thus, when the church is to let the wife "remain (μενέτω) unmarried or else be reconciled," it

¹² On the way unlawfully divorced couples in the church are sometimes spoken of as "still married in the eyes of God" but should not be, see Jay Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 42–43. It is conceivable that a civil government could be so hostile to Christian understandings of marriage and divorce that the faithfulness of Christians within the church in that region might create situations where a couple could be married in the church and yet unmarried legally or vice-versa. The practice of gay marriage in the United States is such an example. Such couples might be married *legally*, but they are not married *ecclesiastically* (except in church traditions where the Bible's ethics have been severely compromised). Paul is assuming that the Roman laws do not create such a conflict. For Paul, the divorce according to Roman law might be sinful, but it is still an actual divorce.

¹³ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 328.

seems to imply "remain unmarried" *in the church*. But where a typical "unmarried" person in the church can marry "in the Lord" (1 Cor 7:39), this couple would not have that freedom. For them to pursue another spouse would be to "commit adultery" (Matt 19:9), since an illegitimate divorce followed by marriage to "another" is "adultery" (Matt 19:9; 5:32). Jesus calling it "adultery" is not an acknowledgement that the first marriage covenant still exists after the divorce (see the discussion above on "unmarried" in 1 Cor 7:11). Rather, it is a statement that with an illegitimate divorce, though the marriage covenant does not exist, there is nonetheless a remaining obligation to that first spouse such that a person may not marry anyone else.¹⁴ To do so is to "commit adultery," and this subsequent action could invite church discipline and excommunication since "sexual immorality" is clearly excommunicable (1 Cor 5:9–11).

Paul ends v. 11 by addressing the husband in a way complementary to the wife, "the husband should not divorce (fr. ἀφίημι) his wife" (1 Cor 7:11b). Given the way he speaks back and forth to the husband and the wife throughout the passage, we can assume the commands given apply to either spouse and thus the parenthesis for the wife applies equally to the husband. In v. 11 the verb is from ἀφίημι ("put away, divorce"). In 7:10–16, "separate" (χωρίζω) and "put away/divorce" (ἀφίημι) are simply different methods of "disavowing the marriage."¹⁵ Instone-Brewer discusses various terms used for divorce in Paul's day and says it is possible Paul is using ἀφίημι with its "more normal meaning" in view, "release from an obligation or bond."¹⁶ This makes good sense when we turn to vv. 12–13 where both the husband and wife are performing the action of ἀφίημι. The point of the two verbs, then, would be to accent the two sides of divorce, one emphasizing the physical separation that occurs and the other the dissolving of the covenant commitment.¹⁷

1 Corinthians 7:12–14, 16:

Mixed Marriages Where the Unbeliever Stays

In the second and third categories, Paul addresses "the rest" (τοῖς ...

¹⁴ Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage*, 66–68.

¹⁵ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 292.

¹⁶ Instone-Brewer, "1 Corinthians 7 in the Light of the Graeco-Roman Marriage and Divorce Papyri," 107–8.

¹⁷ Below we will examine how 1 Cor 7:15 speaks to the issue of abuse. As will be shown, a spouse claiming to be a Christian but guilty of abuse might move from the category described in 7:10–11 to the one in 7:15, which allows for divorce and remarriage to another.

λοιποῖ), and the only group left to speak to consists of those Christians who are married to unbelievers. In the second category, both spouses in the mixed marriage remain in the marriage. Of the 137 words in 7:10–16 in NA28, Paul devotes almost two-thirds (62%) of 1 Cor 7:10–16 to this second category, which is more than double what he writes about either of the other two.¹⁸ The scenario in these verses is one where a “brother” (ἀδελφός) or “woman/wife” (γυνή) has an “unbelieving” (ἄπιστον¹⁹) spouse and the “unbelieving” spouse is content to stay in the marriage. In such a case, the believer is not to “divorce” the “unbeliever.” The believer in this type of marriage is also to adhere to Jesus’s dictum, “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (Matt 19:6; Mark 10:9). His language is again emphatic: “Let him/her not divorce her/the husband!” (vv. 12, 13). In both of these closing commands he uses a present active imperative with the negative particle, μὴ ἀφίετω. For both the wife and husband the verb used is ἀφίημι, “put away/divorce.” The use of the same verb ἀφίημι here for both the husband and wife underscores the idea that in 7:10–16 the verb used (ἀφίημι or χωρίζω) is less important than the outcome of it: a divorce.

In v. 14 Paul adds a word of hope for such mixed marriages. He says the “unbeliever” in such a mixed marriage is actually “made holy” (ἀγιάζω) by the believing spouse and any children are also “holy” (ἅγιος). Certainly this cannot mean they are “saints” and “holy ones” in a salvific sense (1 Cor 1:2), a fact made clear by v. 16, which speaks of the salvation of the spouse in uncertain terms. Gillihan has explored Paul’s language in this paragraph and persuasively mapped it on to Jewish teaching about ritual purity and access to the temple.²⁰ The claim that the unbeliever in a mixed marriage was “holy” would mean that this marriage was emphatically “licit” and therefore both spouses would be welcomed into “the temple”—no longer the physical construction in Jerusalem but now the community of the “saints” (1 Cor 3:16).²¹ And further, the claim that even the children are “holy” contrasts with contemporary Jewish teaching, which connects their status to the unbelieving/non-Jewish (inferior) spouse and not the believing/Jewish (superior) one.²² Thus, in contrast to what many would have believed and taught in Paul’s day, he

¹⁸ 21 percent of the paragraph is devoted to 7:10–11 and 17 percent is devoted to 7:15.

¹⁹ The adjective is used 23 times in the NT but 11 times in 1 Cor (5 times in Paul, 6 times in the Gospels and Acts, 1 time in Revelation). In other words, it is a significant adjective in 1 Corinthians

²⁰ Gillihan, “Jewish Laws on Illicit Marriage.”

²¹ Gillihan, “Jewish Laws on Illicit Marriage,” 716–18, 727–28.

²² Gillihan, “Jewish Laws on Illicit Marriage,” 719–20.

is saying the holy one in the family marks the whole family as ritually clean and welcome in the temple (i.e., the church)—not converted but welcome to attend with the believing spouse. On this Murray is right to underscore “the potency of the Christian faith” and the powerful way in which “grace” is conveyed by Christians to others, especially within the covenant relationships of a family.²³ John Calvin speaks similarly: “The godliness of the one does more to ‘sanctify’ the marriage than the ungodliness of the other to make it unclean.”²⁴ In no way does this verse condone a believer marrying an unbeliever, for a Christian is only to be married “in the Lord” (v. 39; cf. 2 Cor 6:14–15). Yet, if two unbelievers marry and one of them becomes a Christian, or if two believers marry and one turns out to be a false professor, the passage provides great encouragement for the Christian.

When we turn to 1 Corinthians 7:16, we encounter two challenges. The first is how to read Paul’s rhetorical question regarding the unbelieving spouse’s conversion: “For how do you know, wife, if you will save your husband? How do you know, husband . . .?” Is Paul expressing confidence about what might happen in the future, the conversion of the unbelieving spouse (optimistic view), or is he warning his readers because of the unlikelihood this will occur (pessimistic view)? The language allows for either understanding, but in light of the spiritual benefit articulated in v. 14 and the general optimism in the NT about bearing fruit in evangelism even in marriage (1 Pet 3:1–4), the more positive reading is the likelier option here.²⁵

A second challenge for v. 16 is how it fits into vv. 12–16. The optimistic v. 16 appears as a strange statement to follow the reference in v. 15 to marital separation. A good solution by Fee and the NLT is to see v. 15 as a break in the line of thought that extends from v. 12 to v. 16.²⁶ This can be seen in the NLT, which places v. 15 in parentheses. Read this way, the optimism of v. 16 (hope of conversion) ties to the optimism of v. 14 (family is holy) as compelling reasons to stay in a mixed marriage. Such reasons are gracious since Paul could just as easily have laid out his command without any such encouragements.

²³ John Murray, *Divorce* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1961), 65. See also Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 304–6.

²⁴ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. John Pringle (Grand Rapids: CCEL, 1848), 1:199.

²⁵ On the options for 1 Cor 7:16 and the likelihood of the more optimistic reading, see Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 538–39; Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 338.

²⁶ Fee also sees v. 16 as connected to vv. 12–14, though he does not refer to v. 15 as a parenthesis (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 338).

1 Corinthians 7:15:**Mixed Marriages Where The Unbeliever Divorces**

This third category in the paragraph speaks to a mixed marriage also, but in this case the unbelieving spouse divorces the Christian: “But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace” (1 Cor 7:15). In this mixed marriage between a believer and an unbeliever, the unbeliever chooses to leave the marriage (“separates,” *χωρίζεται*). If this happens, the believer is told to *χωριζέσθω* (“let him separate”). The verb is a present indicative, which BDAG says is a passive with an “active sense,”²⁷ translated by the ESV as “let it be so” to capture the sense of the verb. We might then translate this as, “if the unbelieving partner [wants to] separate, let him separate.” As stated above, “separate” (*χωρίζω*) and “put away/divorce” (*ἀφίημι*) are effectively synonymous, since they are equivalent in their results: both result in a divorce, only possibly with a different nuance on what is happening (physical separation vs. dissolving the covenant). According to verse 15, when the unbeliever leaves the marriage the Christian “is not enslaved” (*οὐ δεδούλωται*), which means “not obligated to continue the marriage.”²⁸ This idea is mirrored in 1 Cor 7:39 and Rom 7:2, where a wife is “bound” to the husband while he is living but “free” to remarry when the husband dies.²⁹ Contemporary divorce certificates of the day mirror this idea. In fact, David Instone-Brewer says,

When Paul says they are “no longer enslaved,” any first century reader would understand him to mean that they can remarry, because they would think of the words in both Jewish and non-Jewish divorce certificates: “You are free to marry.” If Paul had meant something else, he would have had to state this very clearly, in order to avoid being misunderstood by everyone who read his epistle.³⁰

Of the three categories in 1 Cor 7:10–16, this is the only one where Paul presents a freedom to divorce and then remarry.

Paul ends v. 15 by saying Christians in this type of situation are “called to peace.” This phrase in v. 15c is open to a variety of meanings, and Fee says there currently exists “nothing close to unanimity among scholars”

²⁷ BDAG, 1095 (*χωρίζω*).

²⁸ Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 123. For an extensive discussion that lands in a similar place, see Murray, *Divorce*, 69–77.

²⁹ Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 302–3.

³⁰ David Instone-Brewer, “1 Corinthians 7 in the Light of the Jewish Greek and Aramaic Marriage and Divorce Papyri,” *TynBul* 52.2 (2001): 241.

on it.³¹ Scholars connect it to the optimistic v. 16 and not the divorce of v. 15 (Ciampa/Rosner), the peace of being connected to Christ’s body (Hays), overall confidence in what God brings (Thiselton), encouragement that the innocent spouse need not “wait indefinitely” for a spouse unlikely to return (Naselli), and the need for clarity in a marriage and knowing whether a spouse is in or out (Adams).³² The phrase in v. 15c is connected to v. 15a–b with the connective *δέ*, which is translated “but” in NASB, KJV, NKJV, NJB; “for” in NLT, RSV; and is untranslated in ESV, NRSV, NET, CSB, NIV. It is surprising that no English translations opt for the “simple connective” approach with “and.”³³ The connective most naturally joins v. 15c to v. 15a–b rather than v. 16 (contra Ciampa/Rosner). Further, since v. 15a–b is speaking of an action that will free the Christian spouse from being “enslaved” to a spouse unwilling to live with him or her, this connects naturally to the “peace” being encouraged. The “peace” being encouraged, then, could be a peace that comes from not “waiting indefinitely” as Naselli argued, or the peace that comes from clarity in a confusing situation as Adams argued, or a more general peace that is available to a spouse after a season of marital strife. Though it is not possible to be absolutely certain, Paul appears to be saying to the Christian spouse in this case that he/she need not endlessly pursue the abandoning spouse or endlessly wait for them to return.

The Double Criteria of 1 Corinthians 7:15

To properly understand and apply 7:15 we must observe the double criteria it contains: (1) One spouse is an unbeliever; and (2) the unbeliever is the one who initiates the divorce. If both spouses are *believers*, then the couple fits the first category of 7:10–11, which forbids divorce and does not provide a freedom to remarry. If the couple is a mixed marriage, but the unbeliever *does not* abandon (separate from) the believer, then the couple fits the second category of 7:12–14 and 16 and the believer must stay in the marriage. It is only when the double criteria of verse 15 are met that this third category applies to a couple and a Christian is then free to remarry after the divorce. A complete understanding requires a closer look at each of these two criteria.

³¹ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 335.

³² Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 304; Hays, *First Corinthians*, 122; Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 540; Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage*, 48–49; Naselli, “What the New Testament Teaches about Divorce and Remarriage,” 31.

³³ BDAG, 213 (*δέ*).

The 1 Corinthians 7:15 Criterion of “Unbeliever”

The first criterion is that one spouse is “unbelieving” (ἄπιστος). The NT provides three ways this criterion could be met: (1) First is the basic understanding of “unbelieving (ἄπιστος) spouse,” one never converted and never professing faith. In a missionary church like Corinth this was likely not uncommon, where the gospel was preached and one but not both spouses in a marriage is converted.³⁴ Of course, if a Christian chooses to marry an unbeliever this criterion can also be met, though this action is forbidden in the NT (1 Cor 7:39; 2 Cor 6:14–18).³⁵ (2) Second, an “unbelieving (ἄπιστος) spouse” might be one who professes faith when the marriage began but then apostatizes and “abandons the faith” (1 Tim 4:1).

(3) Third, “unbelieving (ἄπιστος) spouse” might refer to one who professes faith but is then excommunicated by the church.³⁶ Now 1 Cor 5:9–11 comes into view, a passage which describes the person who merely “bears the name (ὀνομαζόμενος) of brother” (i.e., would self-identify as a Christian). Yet, this so-called brother is living a life inconsistent with his profession of faith and is committing sins of a particularly grievous kind: “sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler” (v. 11). Such sins are not typical struggles with remaining sin (Gal 5:17) or what are sometimes called “besetting sins” (cf. Heb 12:1). Paul’s use of nouns in 1 Cor 5:11 and not adjectives or verbs tells the reader that these sins define the person in a wholistic manner. It is not one who is *occasionally* reviling others but a λοιδορος, a person *who is* a “reviler”; not one who occasionally struggles with drunkenness but a μέθυσος, one *who is* a “drunkard.” The implication is that the sins are prolonged and unrepentant and define the person. Presumably, such sins are addressed through the steps of church discipline outlined in Matt

³⁴ Hays, *First Corinthians*, 121; Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 294.

³⁵ Do the marital obligations apply to a Christian who sinned by marrying an unbeliever in the first place, violating 1 Cor 7:39? That is, if no adultery has occurred and the unbeliever deserts the believer in such a mixed marriage, is the Christian now under the obligation of v. 11 to “remain unmarried or else be reconciled” because of the initial disobedience? The godliness, integrity, and life of repentance with the Christian spouse would be relevant (including a sincere acknowledgement of the sin of marrying the unbeliever). If these were established then such a marriage would seem to fit into the framework of 1 Cor 7:15, especially since marriage to an unbeliever is not a continual pattern of sin (like being a drunkard, 1 Cor 5:11) but a one-time sin the person has now repented of (like a one-time sin of drunkenness).

³⁶ For a defense for such a reading see Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 780.

18:15–20. If this process is not successful in leading to repentance, then the church is “not to associate with” such a person, “not even to eat with such a one” (1 Cor 5:11). In such a state, the previously Christian couple is now a mixed marriage.

The 1 Corinthians 7:15 Criterion of “Separates”

The second criterion in 7:15 is that the unbelieving spouse “separates” from the believing spouse. As stated above, the verb χωρίζω in 7:15 means “divorce-by-separation” and not “separate in contrast to divorce” as in modern usage. The idea is a physical and literal separation with the intention to end the marriage. Yet, many have recognized that one can “separate” from the marital relationship without separating from the marital home. As Naselli says, “desertion or separation may not be spatial—that is, the spouses may still live in the same home.”³⁷ This is sometimes called a spouse sinning in such a way as to create an “intolerable condition” for the other spouse, but for it “to qualify, a sin must have the same extreme effect as someone’s physical abandonment of his spouse.”³⁸ John Frame argues in a similar way for the potential for such a broken marriage:

The “separation” in verse 15 may or may not be geographical. The important thing is that it is a renunciation of one’s marital vows. So even if Jack remains in the same house with Linda, the question arises whether his actions amount to a *de facto* divorce.... Spousal abuse is inconsistent with marital fidelity. Not every inconsistency is ground for divorce, surely. But sometimes violation of marital vows becomes so severe that no real commitment remains. When the church judges that Jack no longer respects his marriage vows, it may declare that he has divorced Linda, and that she may consider the marriage ended. At that point, she may file divorce papers to make the termination official.³⁹

Such a reading takes into consideration the unique relationship that marriage is. The marital union possesses a singular comprehensiveness: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Gen 2:24; cf. 1 Cor 6:16; Eph 5:28–30). This “one flesh” dynamic speaks to the romantic intimacy, companionship, and the whole array of ways a husband and wife live a

³⁷ Naselli, “What the New Testament Teaches about Divorce and Remarriage,” 36.

³⁸ “Divorce and Remarriage,” 227–28.

³⁹ Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 781.

shared life. Though they remain two individuals, in a real way they are also “one.” If a man and woman live in the same house but have forsaken all romantic intimacy, conversation, and any real shared life; and have added true cruelty in some manner; it is right to ask in what sense they are still “one flesh.” “One flesh” is more than one address. Frame says the key in assessing such a non-geographical separation is “whether the unbeliever makes a credible claim to be upholding his marital vows,” especially “because of physical or verbal abuse, emotional entanglements with people other than the spouse, failure to provide, literal desertion, and so on.”⁴⁰

But again, 7:15 presents desertion as one of *two* criteria. For the innocent spouse to be free to divorce and remarry, it must be determined that the offending spouse is both (1) an unbeliever *and* has (2) deserted the innocent spouse geographically or relationally in the ways Frame is suggesting. The sin patterns which would establish the kind of non-spatial separation of Naselli and Frame would likely qualify a person potentially for church discipline and thus excommunication, but this would occur through the actions of appropriate ecclesiastical authorities through a due process.

Grudem’s Understanding of “In Such Cases” in 1 Corinthians 7:15

Wayne Grudem has recently argued for more than two grounds for divorce, adultery and desertion being two he already accepted as grounds for divorce and remarriage to another. In making this case he looks at 7:15 and the distinctive phrase, “in such cases” (ἐν τοῖς τοιούτοις).⁴¹ He says that by using this phrase, Paul establishes “more than two reasons” for divorce based on his particular syntax. According to Grudem, the phrase does not mean “in such cases where an unbeliever deserts a believer,” but instead the phrase makes desertion one of many situations in a larger category. That larger category he defines as “situations that destroy a marriage as much as adultery or desertion.”⁴² Such behaviors could also include physical/emotional abuse, abuse of children, extreme and prolonged verbal and relational cruelty, credible threats of physical

⁴⁰ Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 781.

⁴¹ His study began as a paper at the 2019 ETS Annual Meeting and then was developed in “Grounds for Divorce: Why I Now Believe There Are More than Two,” *Eikon* 2.1 (2020): 71–79; *What the Bible Says about Divorce and Remarriage* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021).

⁴² Grudem, “Grounds for Divorce: Why I Now Believe There Are More Than Two,” 73.

harm or murder, incorrigible drug or alcohol addiction, addiction to pornography, addiction to gambling.⁴³ Since 1 Cor 7:15 implies remarriage is open to such victimized spouses, this is a significant change in how divorce and remarriage might be envisioned. Given that the phrase is used only here in the NT or LXX, it is not easy to specify how it is being used. To examine Grudem’s argument more fully, I will look first at the adjective τοιούτος and its use in the NT and then how ἐν τοῖς τοιούτοις is used in Philo and Josephus.

In the NT, τοιούτος is used fifty-seven times, both with and without the article (the difference does not appear to be significant). BDAG defines the adjective as a “correlative adjective pertaining to being like some person or thing mentioned in a context” with the possible glosses of “of such a kind, such as this, like such,” and in 1 Cor 7:15 they use the gloss “in such cases, under such circumstances.”⁴⁴ Here is a summary of τοιούτος in the NT:

1. It can mean “such” as in “this type/kind of,” where the antecedent is in the passage itself. An example is Matt 9:8, “When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men.” “Such authority” refers to the immediately preceding display of authority by Jesus, and it is not placing the display of authority into a larger group of diverse displays of authority. For similar uses see Matt 18:5; 19:14; Acts 22:22; 26:29; Heb 7:26; 8:1; 11:14; 12:3; 13:16; James 4:16; 3 John 1:8; in Paul see 1 Cor 5:1; 7:28; 11:16; 15:48.
2. It can mean “such” as in “this type/kind of” but refer to a group outside of the passage itself. An example of this is in Mark 4:33 “with many such parables (τοιαύταις παραβολαῖς πολλαῖς) he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it.” Mark means “parables” *like* the ones Jesus was teaching but not the ones already mentioned (cf. also 7:13). This pattern mirrors what Grudem is arguing for in 1 Cor 7:15. Paul’s writing includes several occurrences of this idea. In Rom 1:32 and 2:2–3 he speaks of “those who practice such things (οἱ τὰ τοιαῦτα πράσσοντες)” as listed in 1:24–31. The implication is that 1:24–31 is a suggestive but not exhaustive list of vices. For similar uses see Acts 19:25; Rom 16:18; 1 Cor 5:11; 16:16, 18 and especially Gal 5:21 and 23.
3. It can mean “this,” as in Acts 16:24, “Having received this order.” This is almost an appositional usage, “this order” referring to “the

⁴³ Grudem, *What the Bible Says about Divorce and Remarriage*, 45–48.

⁴⁴ BDAG, 1009–10 (τοιούτος).

order” in the passage, “this specific one.” In this case it adds emphasis, “the order, *this* one” (for similar uses see 1 Cor 5:5; 2 Cor 2:6–7; 3:4, 12; 10:11; 11:13; 12:2, 3, 5). The difference with category 1 above is that here the pronoun is not speaking of a *category* (“I always get this *type* of order”) but is functioning as a demonstrative pronoun (“I got *this* order yesterday”).

Turning to 1 Corinthians 7:15, it appears we are choosing between options 1 and 2 above, since Paul is not referring to specific couples in the Corinthian church but to a category of marriage. Yet, is the category referred to by “in such cases” the category of a marriage where an unbeliever deserts a believer, or is this just one example of a larger category where there could be many such ways to destroy a marriage? In other words, should we read the passage more like Matt 9:8 (“such authority” as just described) or more like Mark 4:33 (the parable is one of many “such parables”)? Looking at the above examples, 1 Cor 7:15 aligns more likely with option 1 above. More contextual clues would need to be provided to choose option 2.

Yet, Grudem’s argument has to do with the *whole* prepositional phrase (ἐν τοῖς τοιοῦτοις) and not just the adjective. Since the NT and LXX have only this single instance of the phrase, his appeal rests on his research of other Greek literature. Looking at the prepositional phrase he observed that when the *antecedent is singular* then the plural “such cases” is pointing to a *larger category*, which includes the thing specified in the context but also more items besides.⁴⁵ Such a pattern mirrors Mark 4:33 above where the singular antecedent (Jesus speaking in a parable) is presented as being part of a larger grouping that includes the specific example but more besides. Grudem says the singular antecedent in 1 Cor 7:15 is “if the unbeliever departs,” and thus “in such cases” must mean that the unbeliever departing is only one example of many others where “the brother or sister is not bound” and could lawfully divorce and remarry. To evaluate this understanding of the phrase, I will look at the phrase in Philo and Josephus.

Ἐν τοῖς τοιοῦτοις in Philo and Josephus

Philo (20 BC–AD 50) and Josephus (AD 37–100) each use ἐν τοῖς τοιοῦτοις three times in their extant literature. These authors are chosen because they are contemporary with Paul and contain enough of a sample size for some insights to be gleaned. We begin with Philo.

Passage #1: In Philo’s *On the Life of Moses* 1:137–138, he writes of the Egyptians discovering the deaths of their firstborn. On discovering their

⁴⁵ Grudem, *What the Bible Says about Divorce and Remarriage*, 42–43.

tragedies, they immediately run to the palace because “in such cases (ἐν τοῖς τοιοῦτοις)” men assume that their tragedy is but the beginning of more tragedy to follow. In this passage the single incident (Egyptians discovering their tragedy) is said to be one of any number of examples of the category identified (one involving “men thinking that the present evils were the beginning of greater ones”).⁴⁶

Passage #2: In Philo’s *On the Special Laws* 3:37, he describes a troubling evil called “the love of boys,” which is a particular kind of homosexual sin. The whole passage is describing a category of sin and is not referring to a particular instance of it. He says that “in such persons (ἐν τοῖς τοιοῦτοις)” as he is describing, the sense of smell is particularly “seductive.” Where passage #1 was giving a particular instance of a larger category, passage #2 is describing that larger category but with no specific person in mind.

Passage #3: In Philo’s *On Providence* 2:23, the author is describing how a person experiences the “climate” and “atmosphere” of whatever place he inhabits. If that place has pestilence, then he will get sick. If it is raining and he is outside, he will get wet. And if he is in a place “Where slaughters dire and famines might prevail, And all the ills which thus mankind assail,” then “in such places (ἐν τοῖς τοιοῦτοις),” he will experience those “evils” as well. No specific place is being described in the passage but only various *categories* of places. The phrase “in such places” is immediately followed by a description of the category of place the phrase is referring to, namely, the “places” which have various “slaughters” and “famines” and “ills.” As in passages #1 and #2, the category which “in such places” refers to is given *within the passage itself* and is given explicitly. And as in passage #2, no particular instance of the category is described but only the category itself.

Passage #4: In Josephus’s *Jewish Antiquities* 8:379, he retells the story of Benhadad (Ben-Hadad) the Syrian king and his battles against Israel’s King Ahab. After being defeated by the Israelites his “friends advised him” against fighting them “on the hills, because their God was potent in such places (ἐν τοῖς τοιοῦτοις).”⁴⁷ Instead he should fight them “in the plain.” The “places” in view here are places with “hills.” Any “such place”

⁴⁶ For the works of Philo, the English translation is taken from *The Works of Philo, Completed and Unabridged*, trans. by C. D. Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993); and the Greek analysis from *The Norwegian Philo Concordance Project*, eds., Peder Borgen, Kåre Fuglseth, Roald Skarsten (2005).

⁴⁷ For the Josephus passages, the English translation is from *The Works of Flavius Josephus, Complete and Unabridged*, trans. by William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987); and the Greek analysis from *Works of Flavius Josephus*, ed. B. Niese (1890).

will be a poor place for Behadad's army. While no particular "hilly place" is highlighted in the passage, it appears Benhadad and his men had just experienced a defeat in a "hilly place" they would recall.

Passage #5: Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* 13:314–316 speaks of Aristobulus who had killed his brother Antigonus. When Aristobulus suffered from a disease afterward, a servant spilled some of his blood at the very spot where Antigonus was killed. Onlookers thought this was deliberate and cried out. Aristobolus asked why the commotion, but no one would answer him. Josephus said that "in such cases (ἐν τοῖς τοιούτοις)" it is natural for men to be suspicious of such silence and assume "what is thus concealed is very bad." The category would be defined as something like "situations where a group concealed something very bad from a powerful man." As with passage #1, the passage describes one such example of the category, but it also assumes that many other examples have occurred and do occur.

Passage #6: Finally, in Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* 15:127–128, he describes a fight "between Octavius Caesar and Antony, in the seventh year of the reign of Herod" (15:121). In the ongoing battle "the king [Herod] persuaded the commanders by his words" (15:126). In our particular passage he is addressing "many accidents that have put a stop to what we are about," and he says, "in such circumstances (ἐν τοῖς τοιούτοις)," even the most stout-hearted "can hardly keep up their spirits." The context once again tells us what category is being referred to, in this case "circumstances" when "many accidents" have successfully stopped "what we are about." Given that Herod and his soldiers have recently experienced just this kind of setback, the category referred to is not a theoretical one. Yet, the category could be experienced in other ways, and so their experiences are merely one of many "such circumstances."

Overview of the Six Passages

In these six passages, Philo and Josephus are using the phrase ἐν τοῖς τοιούτοις to refer to a category of something. In each of the six passages that category is clearly defined *within the passage itself*. This will be important for interpreting 1 Cor 7:15. What differs in the passages is whether a particular occurrence of that category is in view or simply the category itself. Passages #1 and #4–6 contain a particular occurrence of the category which is in view, while in passages #2–3 no *specific* occurrence of the category is in view but only the category itself. When these passages are compared with 1 Cor 7:15, they create the expectation that *within the passage itself* is a category being defined which ἐν τοῖς τοιούτοις is pointing to. Within 1 Cor 7:15, that category must be cases where an unbeliever

deserts the believer, since that is the only type of divorce in view. Yet, for Grudem's argument to be successful, the *category* must be *inferred* and desertion by an unbeliever is only one example of that category. He defines this *inferred* category as "circumstances similar to but not exactly like desertion."⁴⁸ Yet, our six passages have provided no support for such a view, since all six passages provide some description of the category in view. The passages would rather support a reading which says the category is "marriages where an unbeliever deserts a believer." Paul does not have in mind a specific divorce in the Corinthian church but only a *category* of divorce, and "in such cases" the believer is free to remarry. A better approach is to observe the twofold criteria argued for above, which is consistent with 1 Cor 7:15 but would also allow for lawful divorce in the destructive marriages Grudem has in mind.

Exodus 21:10–11 and 1 Corinthians 7

One additional perspective on 1 Cor 7 belongs in this discussion because it also has the effect of widening the grounds for divorce beyond adultery and desertion by an unbeliever. I think the best solution is to delete this second sentence ("To varying degrees...").⁴⁹ According to this view, behind 1 Corinthians 7 is Exod 21:10–11, "If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights. And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out for nothing, without payment of money." "Food," "clothing," and "marital rights" in the LXX are more literally, "things which are necessary and clothing and her company/conversation (τὰ δέοντα καὶ τὸν ἱματισμὸν καὶ τὴν ὁμιλίαν αὐτῆς)." A man who withholds these can be lawfully divorced by his wife. Instone-Brewer notes that the logic used to interpret this passage can be "inferred fairly easily" to be *qol vahomer*, an argument "from major to minor" or "if that is true, then surely this is also true."⁵⁰ That is, if Exod 21:10–11 is true that for a slave wife one could not withhold these, then surely it is true they could not be withheld from a free wife. Instone-Brewer notes from *mishnah Ketub* 5.5–8 that the framework of Exod 21:10–11 is evident in

⁴⁸ Grudem, "Grounds for Divorce: Why I Now Believe There Are More than Two," 73.

⁴⁹ On this view, see David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 99–100; Naselli, "What the New Testament Teaches about Divorce and Remarriage," 35–37; Rosner, "The Torah and Paul," 159.

⁵⁰ Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, 100–101.

first-century Jewish divorce law.⁵¹ An evident development is that the threefold division in Exod 21:10–11 was compressed into the twofold “material neglect and emotional neglect,” “material neglect” capturing the requirement of the husband to provide food and clothing and “emotional neglect” capturing the requirement to provide “marital rights” (literally “conversation” in the Hebrew and Greek OT but clearly a euphemism for marital intercourse).⁵²

The two clearest places where a connection can be made between 1 Cor 7 and Exod 21:10–11 are in 1 Cor 7:3–5 where each spouse is to give to the other “conjugal rights” (τὴν ὀφειλὴν) and 7:32–35 where each spouse is called to “please” the other and is “anxious about worldly things” in his/her attempt to do this.⁵³ These mirror closely what is demanded of the husband in Exod 21:10–11.⁵⁴ Significant is the verb chosen by Paul in 7:5. In the phrase, “Do not deprive one another,” he uses ἀποστερέω, the same verb as in LXX Exod 21:10, “her marital rights you shall not withhold (ἀποστερήσει).” Given the rarity of this term—used only here in the Pentateuch and only five times in the NT—the connection is noteworthy. Instone-Brewer argues that because Paul uses the same categories in 1 Cor 7 as are presented in Exod 21:10–11, this implies he agrees with the grounds for divorce in Exod 21:10–11.⁵⁵ Naselli argues along different lines, seeing the Exodus text as binding for believers simply because it is a moral command: “There is nothing in the New Testament to suggest that Jesus’s fulfilling the Mosaic law nullifies a wife’s rights and a husband’s responsibilities.”⁵⁶ For Instone-Brewer, neglect as defined by Exod 21:10–11 would extend to categories of abuse as well, since anyone abusing a spouse is certainly neglecting the spouse in significant ways.⁵⁷

This approach to 1 Cor 7 possesses a sound logic, and one who reads

⁵¹ The use of early-second century rabbis like Ishmael b. Elish and Yose b. Halaftha as authorities in *m. Ketub* 5 points to the ideas being in circulation earlier (Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, 104).

⁵² Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, 100–102.

⁵³ Those who identify 7:3–4 with Exod 21:10–11 also include Rosner, “The Torah and Paul,” 159; R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1973), 403.

⁵⁴ Naselli, “What the New Testament Teaches about Divorce and Remarriage,” 35.

⁵⁵ David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church: Biblical Solutions for Pastoral Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 98–99.

⁵⁶ Naselli, “What the New Testament Teaches about Divorce and Remarriage,” 35.

⁵⁷ Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church*, 103.

the OT as possessing a moral law that carries over into the new covenant will be especially sympathetic to it. Further, if one is sympathetic to Frame’s view above, then this approach will not feel too dissimilar. In fact, the connection between 1 Cor 7 and Exod 21:10–11 strengthens the case for Frame’s interpretation, for it shows that already in Jewish culture and likely in Paul’s mind, informed as he was by the OT, there was the understanding that one could violate the marital union without either spouse leaving the house or committing physical adultery.⁵⁸ Yet, a difficulty with tying too much to Exod 21:10–11 is that while some overlap in the topics discussed and the Greek word ἀποστερέω is evident, no explicit connection is made in the paragraph that explicitly discusses divorce (7:10–16).

Conclusion

First Corinthians 7:10–16 is profound in its ethical teaching on marriage, divorce, and remarriage. In looking at its contents, three main ideas arose. First, when two Christians illegitimately divorce, they are not in the position of 1 Cor 7:39, where a person is “free to be married to whom she/he wishes, only in the Lord.” Rather, they must “remain unmarried or else be reconciled” to one another (1 Cor 7:10–11). It was argued that while the divorce itself might not be grounds for church discipline and excommunication, for either spouse to remarry another or pursue remarriage to another is grounds for church discipline. Paul here is not permitting such a divorce or rejecting that it is sinful. He is instead regulating the divorces he knows will occur in a world where sinners marry sinners and do not always endure together. In looking at this first category, important secondary insights were gleaned. For instance, the “separation” discussed in 1 Cor 7:10–16 is *equivalent to divorce* (divorce-by-separation) and is not the modern separation which is *distinct from divorce*. Paul speaks to divorce-by-separation, but he does not speak to separation-that-is-not-divorce. Additionally, an illegitimate divorce makes the two spouses “unmarried” (1 Cor 7:11). The divorce might be sinful, but it is still an actual divorce.

Second, the passage offers great encouragement to Christians who find themselves married to a non-Christian. To them Paul says that the unbelieving family members will be blessed by the believer (“made holy,” 1 Cor 7:14), and the Christian might even “save” his/her unbelieving spouse (1 Cor 7:16). As John Calvin said, “The godliness of the one does

⁵⁸ Heth calls this view “plausible” even if to him it is “not yet a conviction.” See William A. Heth, “A Response to Craig S. Keener,” in *Remarriage After Divorce in Today’s Church: 3 Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 130.

more to ‘sanctify’ the marriage than the ungodliness of the other to make it unclean.”⁵⁹ Such an encouragement needs to be read alongside 1 Cor 7:39, however, which forbids marriage to an unbeliever. It is wrong to marry an unbeliever, but if such a mixed marriage does come to pass, hope and grace remain.

Third, the passage allows for a legitimate divorce in a mixed marriage *when the unbeliever “separates” from the believer* (1 Cor 7:15). The basic situation envisioned is one where an unbeliever decides to be married no longer to the believer and then “separates” (i.e., divorces-by-separation). The believer in such a situation is free to remarry someone else, “only in the Lord” (1 Cor 7:39). It was argued that the criterion of “unbeliever” could be met through typical unbelief, apostasy, or excommunication. With respect to excommunication, at times the sins that lead to excommunication are ones that are equivalent to the person physically abandoning the Christian spouse. In this case, the believer is free to formalize the divorce and to remarry another. This third category allows for grounds for divorce beyond adultery, but because the situation requires the exercise of church authority in a circumscribed manner, Paul is not at all embracing an attitude of “easy divorcism.” As in so many other areas of life, he is carefully charting a course between being either too strict or too lenient.

Few things in ethics are as important for the church to think rightly about as marriage and divorce. Failing here can lead to great damage to Christians, churches, and our gospel witness. First Corinthians 7:10–16 adds important teaching on marriage and divorce to help us better understand and more faithfully live out the overarching biblical attitude toward marriage: “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (Matt 19:6).

⁵⁹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, 1:199.