

Reproving the Doctrine of Divorce after Reconciliation

When it becomes known that a spouse has committed fornication, it is well understood from Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9 that the innocent party has the divine right to divorce and remarry. Suppose a husband so learns that his wife has committed fornication, but he decides not to put her away. They continue on in the marriage, participating in sexual privileges, but later on, perhaps weeks, months, or even years later, he decides he wants to change his mind and divorce her for that fornication after all. Does he have the right to do this, even though his wife does not commit fornication a second time? Suppose the wife starts behaving indecently, perhaps involving herself in pornography or dirty talking with others, but she commits no further fornication. Would he therefore have a right to reinstate the effect of that former fornication and divorce her? What does the Bible actually say about this?

Relative studies are presented that indicate such putting away is contrary to the scriptures. Nevertheless, some oppose, calling those relative studies the "separation doctrine." Attempts are made by those in opposition to validate a doctrine that would permit such putting away, alas, by misapplying scripture, as will become evident. The following is a compilation of actual arguments received in private discussions with some elders, deacons, preachers, and others well respected in the so-called conservative fellowship of the church of Christ.

What is the teaching and practice on divorce after reconciliation at the church with whom you are identified? You will probably need to ask some specific questions to find the answer, because those who hold this doctrine will discourage open Bible study about it. Instead, this doctrine is typically presented only in private meetings. Such secretive introduction of heresy is directly condemned in scripture (2 Pet 2:1-3). The basis of this doctrine is presented here with responses to each point.

1. Reconciliation redefined as repentance, according to the doctrine

In 1 Corinthians 7:11, Paul advises a woman to be reconciled (Gr: KATALLASSEIN) to her husband from whom she is divorced. The subject doctrine therefore claims that the New Testament concept of marriage reconciliation requires that a physical separation or legal divorce must first have occurred.

It further claims that, since every other New Testament usage of this exact word involves the forgiveness of man's sins before God, reconciliation in marriage also necessarily requires the forgiveness of sins. In fact, by this usage, this is the new definition that the Holy Spirit has given to the word KATALLASSEIN. Furthermore, as there is no forgiveness without repentance and its fruits, then the doctrine claims that reconciliation in marriage also requires true Bible repentance with appropriate fruits evidenced over time. Reconciliation means change; repentance is change; therefore, reconciliation in a marriage requires repentance.

Response:

There are several statements in the above argument that simply are not true. Merriam-Webster's definition of "reconcile" includes "to restore to friendship or harmony," and "restore" includes "to bring back to or put back into a former or original state." Combining, it means "to bring or put friendship or harmony back into its former original state." Greek lexicographers and scholars, such as W. E. Vine, Jos. H. Thayer, and Wm. Barclay, all agree that the essential aspect of KATALLASSEIN and its kindred forms in Koine Greek is simply the restoration of a relationship back to its former state by the removal of enmity. Any connection with separation or forgiveness is coincidental to this.

This is the clear use of "reconcile" we see in scripture. Luke records Stephen as saying that Moses was trying to "reconcile" (NAS) or "set at one" (KJV) two fighting Hebrews not acting in a way befitting their relationship as brothers (Acts 7:24-27). Moreover, for the example of reconciling in Matthew 5:23, 24, instead of any indication of physical separation, it simply says "your brother has something against you," for which, apologies might simply be necessary.

In any relationship under duress, reconciliation is facilitated by removing the enmity. The requirements for doing so will depend on the nature of the relationship and nature of the enmity. It is not a forced conclusion that enmity in every relationship always involves a sin that must be repented of and forgiven to affect reconciliation. For example, a woman in 1 Corinthians 7:11 is divorced from her husband, placing them at enmity. She only needs to remarry him to remove that enmity and put their relationship exactly back where

it was before. Neither party would need any remorse, penitence, or forgiveness regarding the divorce in the first place, whatever the grounds, in order to accomplish this.

The removal of enmity to reconcile a relationship is clearly illustrated by our spiritual reconciliation to God. Our sin places enmity between us and God. That which removes the enmity in that relationship works to produce reconciliation. This is accomplished by the blood of Christ (Eph 2:13-19). However, we understand that in order to have the saving benefit of this blood, we must have faith, confess Christ, repent of our sins, and be baptized. It is a mistake to hereby conclude that marriage reconciliation therefore also requires repentance and forgiveness. If so, then the blood of Christ working in faith, confession, and baptism, should also be included. Then, only Christians could reconcile a marriage, which is contrary to principles expressed in 1 Corinthians 7:12-14.

Furthermore, if an adulterous spouse repents, confesses, and asks for forgiveness, the church and her husband cannot deny her forgiveness. However, even with forgiveness full and complete, he still has a right to divorce her. Therefore, forgiveness alone does not speak to the restoration of that relationship. The forced conclusion is that God's word does not actually say that repentance and forgiveness of sin is a required part of reconciliation in a marriage marred by fornication.

A man can decide to reconcile his adulterous wife, regardless of how rebellious she may be. A Christian would certainly consider it unwise, but if it's done, it's done. As a man can marry in the first place any woman he wants (assuming her lawful eligibility), regardless of how vile, ungodly, impenitent, and unrighteous she may be, then he can also reconcile with one just the same. Therefore, penitence and forgiveness, in the final analysis, do not necessarily come to bear in reconciling the marriage bond. After marriage, other than death, only fornication can sever the bond. Likewise, after reconciliation, other than death, only fornication committed again can sever the bond. There is no difference revealed in scripture.

The argument equating reconciliation, change, and repentance is a gross mishandling of terms. There is more to reconciliation than mere change. Additionally, not all change is repentance. A person can stop doing any sinful activity for reasons other than godly sorrow.

This process of redefining "reconciliation" is contrary to sound hermeneutics; it is the spawning ground of false doctrine. When scripture says "reconcile," God means what He actually says, and the readers, then and now, can take God at His word.

2. Fellowship and marriage, according to the doctrine

If two men each have fellowship with God, by necessity they have fellowship with each other (1 Jn 1:3-7). If one falls away from fellowship with God, these two men can no longer walk together (Amos 3:3). Proponents of the doctrine claim that this fellowship has application to the right of divorce in marriage. Specifically, if the wife falls into the sin of fornication, it will require that she again restores and maintains her walk with God in order for that relationship to continue. Only true repentance can rectify that situation and bring reconciliation, according to the doctrine.

Response:

The principles of fellowship are dependant upon the nature of the specific relationship. For example, Christians and non-Christians can share in any kind of otherwise wholesome physical relationship they desire, such as business partnerships or even marriage. Moreover, God's laws are applicable to Christians and non-Christians alike. We cannot put requirements on God's law of marriage that are unique only for Christians. Non-Christians have no divine right to divorce without fornication just the same as Christians, but repentance and an understanding that they need to have God's forgiveness never comes to mind for some non-Christians. If this argument is true, the marriage of a Christian to a non-Christian is completely invalid, since they have no agreement in spiritual matters. Nevertheless, Paul indicates that such marriages are holy just the same (1 Corinthians 7:14).

God reconciling a man to himself in forgiving his sins is a different thing from a husband reconciling a wife to himself. Forgiveness for our sin before God is not to be confused with reconciliation of a marriage. Reconciliation in any relationship is facilitated by abolishing the enmity, whatever it is and however that is accomplished. In our relationship to God, Christ's blood abolishes the enmity (our sin), and He reconciles us when we obey in faith, repentance, confession, and baptism. These are the terms of that covenant. Marriage

is a different covenant with different terms. We should not assume to make repentance a part of the marriage covenant any more than faith, baptism, or confession.

3. Severing the marriage bond, according to the doctrine

The doctrine states that the innocent party indefinitely and unconditionally maintains his divine right to divorce until such time as he chooses, regardless of his actions or his words (Matt 5:32; 19:9). This is based on a claim that the known act of fornication does not automatically loose the bond. Until whatever time when he would actually say "I put you away," or using similar words - at that point - God severs the bond. Moreover, scripture indicates no time limit for him to take this action. Only at such a point in time when he would speak those words, they are no longer bound by God, and any sexual activity between them thereafter would be fornication. Even though the legal divorce would not yet have been completed, they are nonetheless already actually loosed before God the moment the innocent spouse simply says the word, according to the doctrine.

Response:

No scripture is offered to support this "say the word and the bond is severed" argument. When fornication becomes known, it is true that the civil marriage is not automatically ended, but the divine bond is indeed automatically severed. The human acts of marrying and divorcing do not necessarily correspond to the divine acts of binding and loosing. It is possible to be married but not bound (Matt 19:9) or divorced but not loosed (Rom 7:2, 3). Although they are still civilly married, the terms of their relationship have nevertheless changed. By the divine design of marriage, the original terms are that neither party has the right to put the other away. The knowledge of fornication immediately changes this; the innocent party now has the right to put away and is therefore freed from his obligation to her. If the obligation is removed, the bond is removed. This is governed by God's word, not the words uttered by a man.

Moreover, this situation is no longer in accordance with God's intention for marriage as from the beginning (Matt 19:4-6). Whenever an act causes anything to be no longer according to God's ordained pattern, the act is hostile to God (Col 1:21; Rom 8:7; Jas 4:4). This relationship cannot go forward in every aspect as before and have God's approval, unless it is made new and changed back to that which God has appointed, that which it was originally, with the commitment restored, the enmity utterly abolished, and the former things passed away (2 Cor 5:17-21; Eph 2:15, 16). Therefore, if the relationship is made to continue in all aspects, it must also be that the enmity is utterly abolished. If the enmity is abolished, it cannot be "reused" at a later date. This is reconciliation.

4. The aspect of harmony in marriage, according to the doctrine

Advocates of this doctrine point out that there are many more aspects in the marriage relationship other than sex alone. The spouses also are responsible to love, honor, provide, protect, and submit to one another. When fornication is known, the entire relationship is in turmoil; sex is simply a small part of that. Reconciliation is going to take some time to work through repairing all these things step by step to restore the harmony. According to the doctrine, the marriage bond is not completely reconciled until harmony, happiness, love, and trust are judged to reside again in the home. We cannot expect this to happen overnight.

There is something to be said for giving one the benefit of the doubt. We cannot know the heart of a man. If he tries to make the marriage work but after a time says it simply is not working, we have to take him at his word. Though by appearances they may seem to be getting along well, we cannot know what misery might actually lie in their private home life. We are in no position to judge and bind them to the marriage, according to the doctrine.

One who would mock might say the marriage is in "limbo" during this time, but it's no more in "limbo" than a marriage that was "reconciled" two weeks after adultery when no trust or love is really present. That marriage will not perform its purpose, and the temptation of adultery will arise again in time.

Response:

Consider the reconciliation of ourselves to God after sinning (Eph 2:11-19; Col 1:20-22). When we first sin, enmity comes between us and God where was formerly a good relationship. We are not reconciled to God in

a process that must be judged over a period of time. There is certainly a process, but there is no reconciliation until the enmity is removed. We may start praying and reading God's word and even believe, repent, and confess, but this does not remove the enmity. The enmity is only abolished the moment that with this we contact Christ's blood in baptism. That is the point of reconciliation. In a marriage bond, evidence that the enmity has been removed is likewise a clear indication of reconciliation.

True, there is much more to marriage than sex. "One flesh" is not limited to sexual contact but indicates a total sharing of the life experience to it's fullest extent. However, of all the things that husbands and wives do together, only sexual union is unique and exclusive to the marriage bond. Sex is undeniably tied to the marriage bond in scripture like nothing else.

Two different relationships are under consideration here: the physical, civil marriage and the spiritual, covenant bond. Scripture makes a distinction, as has been established. The matter being discussed is not domestic tranquility in marriage but the right to put a spouse away. The "enmity" is that disharmony, specifically, which severs the bond and can lawfully end the marriage.

When a couple marries, the bride vows to honor and obey, the groom vows to love and provide, and they both vow to sexually keep themselves only for one another for life. Couples who do these things are happy; those who don't are in turmoil. However, the vows regarding sexual propriety are not on equal footing with those regarding domestic responsibilities. True, anyone who would commit fornication or otherwise mistreat a spouse sins and stands condemned unless one repents. However, only for fornication does one have the right to put away. This is a different kind of enmity in a different relationship. We are talking about the bond, not the marriage.

More discussion on the marriage bond is needed at this point. It may come as a surprise to some to consider that love, trust, happiness, and fulfillment have absolutely nothing to do with the marriage bond. These things certainly make the physical, civil marriage rewarding, but they in no way affect the formation or the continuation of the covenant bond governed by divine law. Marriage is a rite taken at will; we have the liberty to marry whoever we want, assuming lawful eligibility, no matter what (Luke 20: 34). As ill-advised as it is, we can even marry someone we do not love, do not trust, and who makes us miserable. If we do, we are nevertheless bound in commitment to them, regardless of our personal feelings or later regret (Mark 10: 9). When Adam and Eve met, they were married but did not know each other. Love and trust came afterward; these were things they needed to develop to be happy. In some cultures, marriages were arranged by the parents. No wonder God's word instructs us to learn to love in marriage (Eph 5:25; Col 3:19; Tit 2:4). The same principles apply to a reconciled marriage bond.

To illustrate the difference between the marriage and the bond, suppose a couple has a wonderful, caring relationship for their first year of marriage; then, he begins insulting her or refusing to provide for her. Perhaps she begins neglecting him, not doing her part of domestic chores. What they have is a relationship in turmoil. If they change the way they behave with each other, the relationship is restored back to the way it was originally. We would call this reconciliation, but this is nothing that pertains to the subject matter.

Consider this. When the couple first marries, neither one has the right to put the other away; they are bound before God for life. When they begin mistreating one another (other than by fornication), nothing regarding this changes; they are still bound for life without the right to put away. When they change and begin treating each other again with kindness, still nothing regarding this changes; they are still bound for life without the right to put away. Reconciliation is not involved here because the bond never changed; this relationship does not need to be restored. This changes only with the knowledge that fornication has been committed.

Conclusively, when a couple first marries, domestic disharmony does nothing to affect the permanence of the bond. They have to stick to it for the rest of their lives and make it work regardless how miserable they might be. This is not heartlessness; it is God's law. Likewise, when reconciling after fornication, domestic disharmony, lack of love, mistrust, and personal unfulfillment also do nothing to affect the permanence of the bond, regardless of what they say or think. No scripture indicates anything otherwise.

Incidentally, no mockery is employed in refuting this doctrine. This is not a matter to be taken lightly. The true mockery is to say one is bound but not really bound.

5. The purpose of marriage, according to the doctrine

Some Christians today get so caught up over the Lord's supper second serving or one cup questions that they forget its real purpose: remembering Christ. The Pharisees did a similar thing with the Sabbath. They strained over every detail of Sabbath observance until they imprisoned the people with their traditions, but Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). Advocates of the subject divorce doctrine propose a similar premise that marriage was made for man, not man for marriage.

The reasoning is as follows. Instead of pouring over every facet of regulations at which we all must arrive by inferences, think about why God put the exception of fornication there in the first place. When there is adultery in a marriage, it might have an immediate, profound effect, as the innocent party realizes the marriage can no longer function as it was designed. On the other hand, the adultery might have only a minimal immediate effect, as the couple realizes they can still maintain a sexually functional marriage as designed. However, in this case, the hidden effects of sorrow or mistrust due to the fornication might not surface for months, years, or even decades. At such a time as the innocent party realizes the marriage can no longer fulfill its purpose, he can divorce for the fornication that caused the problem, even though it took place so long ago, according to the doctrine.

Response:

Let's examine what the scriptures actually say about the creation of man. After creating only Adam, God said, "It is not good for man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). The original word here for "man" means "human-kind" (translated ANTHROPOS in the Septuagint). By original design, God created man incomplete, lacking a helper. It was not until God created the wife that the creation was called "good" (Genesis 1:27, 31). Therefore, God most certainly created both man for marriage and marriage for man. It does not have to be one or the other. If we start with a false premise, we will likely end with a false conclusion.

Interestingly, the seventh day is mentioned in the creation account (Genesis 2:2, 3), but the Sabbath observance is not instituted until during the exodus many centuries later (Exodus 16:29). The Sabbath was not required to make man complete and is not comparable to marriage. To draw unforced conclusions about marriage based upon Sabbath law or any other unrelated law or practice is to misapply scripture.

We might wonder why God allows the exception for fornication, but we cannot know the mind of God unless He reveals it in scripture by a statement, approved example, or necessary inference (1 Cor 2:10-16). Nevertheless, the humble servant does not concern himself about why God makes a statute; he simply accepts it and submits (Gen 22:2, 3). With God's reason not revealed in scripture, we are speaking where God is silent if we claim to know. The idea is pure human speculation that God allows the exception for fornication because the marriage can no longer serve its purpose due to hidden effects of love lost and mistrust coming out over time.

Let's now take a close look at God's actual purposes for the marriage bond as revealed in scripture. First, God purposed the marriage bond so that a man or woman does not have to be alone (Gen 2:18). When a couple joins in marriage, they can each rest assured that one will always be there for the other. Whether or not they love or trust is immaterial; God's law binds them together with no right to put the other away (Mark 10:9). That serves the divine purpose. Now if the husband maintains his marriage with his wife after knowledge of her fornication yet also claims to retain the right to put her away if he would ever stop loving or trusting, that already actually violates this true purpose. The doctrine contradicts its own premise.

We could stop there, but we'll go on. Scripture further indicates that God purposed marriage for the lawful fulfillment of sexual urges (1 Cor 7:2, 3) and so that the children produced from such union are not unclean (1 Cor 7:14). "Unclean" warrants some explanation. J. H. Thayer defines the original word, AKATHAROS, as being not cleansed, in a ceremonial or moral sense. It is the opposite of KATHAROS, which Thayer's definition includes "unstained with the guilt of anything." This uncleanness no doubt speaks to the disgracefulness of illegitimacy mentioned in Hebrews 12:8, indicating "one not born in lawful wedlock" (JHT). If the subject doctrine is true, imagine the likely scenario where a reconciled husband and wife both declare they have something to say. The husband says "I have now finally decided to divorce you for your fornication of three years ago," and then the wife says, "I'm pregnant." This is outrageous. God purposed the marriage bond to serve the needs of that mother and her child as well. God's purpose helps avoid children being born into broken homes. This divine purpose is violated by the subject doctrine.

The scripture has not been found that indicates God's purpose for the marriage bond is to make us happy. Our true joy is to be found in Christ (Rom 5:11). A healthy physical marriage relationship will be characterized by trust, and it is nice to be able to find happiness in marriage. However, if we think the reason God created the marriage bond is to make us happy, we are thinking selfishly, and our marriage is destined to fail. An unhappy marriage lacking love, trust, and personal fulfillment can most assuredly fulfill God's purpose for the marriage bond, if only the Lord is given first place. Abigail is a perfect example of this (1 Sam 25).

In the proposed argument, the innocent party is one day willing to continue with his wife in spite of her fornication many years prior but the next day is not willing because he decides that he no longer trusts or loves her and that his personal expectations are no longer being fulfilled. However, Jesus says that putting away is lawful only for the cause of fornication (Mat 5:32). "Cause" is from LOGOS meaning the reason, account, and ground for a thing (JHT). It is the driving force. What is different from one day to the next is not the fornication but the lack of love and the mistrust. These are the true reasons for putting away. However, unhappiness, loss of love, mistrust, or a failure to fulfill our own perceived purposes are not justifiable reasons for putting away.

Incidentally, the Bereans were commended because they searched the scriptures (Acts 17:11). According to Thayer, the original word translated "searched" means to investigate, scrutinize, sift, or forensically interrogate, that is, "pouring over every facet." Shame on anyone who disparages such action.

6. Defrauding sex, according to the doctrine

Before choosing to divorce, as expressed by this doctrine, the rite of sexual activity is to be maintained, as they are still bound in marriage. In fact, defrauding such is expressly prohibited. As the bond yet endures, he must meet those needs of his wife until he would declare his intention to put her away, lest she be tempted to further adultery (1 Cor 7:3-5), according to the doctrine. There is no scriptural basis by which a man would be married and bound to his wife but he not have sexual rights to her.

Response:

First of all, we have already shown that the bond is indeed automatically and immediately severed the moment fornication is known, so the foundation of the argument is invalid in the first place. To explain further, Matthew 5:31, 32 actually says that the innocent husband has the right to "put away his wife." When the exception clause is examined in this text, the innocent party is clearly not responsible for causing her to commit adultery, if she has committed fornication. Since she has committed fornication, violating the covenant in such a way that has been stipulated as causing severance of his bond, he no longer has the obligation to fulfill her sexual urges. She forfeits that by her iniquity; it is the consequence of her actions.

7. Commitment, according to the doctrine

This doctrine explains that, even though he has a right to put her away at the point when he would so decide, he nevertheless maintains the "one flesh" relationship with her and must remain committed to her. Only until such time that he would otherwise decide to divorce for her fornication and express that intent would his commitment to the marriage be terminated.

Response:

Marriage is a dependent covenant (Mal 2:14; Prov 2:16, 17). A dependent covenant is an agreement between parties with its own terms of acceptance and conditions of severance clearly stated. The covenant becomes binding upon ratification, the process by which the participants, witnessed by God and men, make a formal agreement to the matter, as wedding vows in a marriage. The covenant contains obligations, commitments, and responsibilities. In turn, members bound in the contract enjoy rights, benefits, and privileges. No member has a right to the privileges without commitment to the terms and conditions (Heb 13:4). Therefore, in a marriage, if sexual privileges are lawfully enjoined, the participants also assume the commitment for life, which is God's intention in the covenant.

Reconciliation is effectively atonement, which is literally to be set "at one" (Rom 5:10-19). God characterizes the marriage bond as "one flesh:" an indication of profound unity (Gen 2:21-25; Matt 19:5; Eph 5:28-31). This is not limited to sexual union, for Adam and Eve were called "one flesh" the moment God presented her to him, before any sexual union occurred. Rather, "one flesh" is a sharing in the medium through which our

souls experience the physical world (Heb 2:14; 5:7). "One flesh" indicates a full self surrender and a deep commitment that involves sharing life together in every aspect to its fullest extent with mutual trust and dependence. What one experiences, the other experiences, as they live by, with, through, in, and for each other, as a Christian does in Christ and Christ in God (Gal 2:20; 1 Jn 4:9; Eph 2:6; Jn 17:21). They are united in their purpose and goals, their joy and pain, their achievements and disappointments. As yoked oxen, they face the future together, walking side by side through life, each confident that one will always be there for the other, and they cannot free themselves. This is God's appointed design.

The man sexually joining himself to a harlot has no intention of a lifetime "one flesh" commitment with her (1 Cor 6:15, 16, 18). In doing so, he has taken a thing that God has ordained to be exclusively part of a special one-flesh lifetime relationship and profaned it. This indicates that sexual union is much more than merely an expression of love or a means of physical gratification; it also serves as a "one-flesh" declaration from each to the other that they will remain committed and devoted one to the other, cleaving together as long as the flesh of each endures.

Now if the innocent husband so decides not to put her away, he will continue on with her, sharing the intimacy exclusive to those decidedly committed in marriage. However, if he says he is undecided yet shares the intimacy, his actions oppose his words. According to scripture, actions reveal the truth, not mere words (Matt 7:20; 21:28-31). If he takes her back, it therefore says he has reconciled, regardless of what words come from his mouth. Besides, people don't normally have sex with someone against whom they have animosity. Obviously, therefore, if the lawfully married couple are having sexual relations, the enmity that was between them previously is evidently now disregarded. If so, the relationship is reconciled back to its exact former state. We should not think we can fool God about this with words.

This doctrine uses double-talk to explain commitment. There is no real commitment here; this flies in the face of the "one flesh" concept. In this doctrine, people thus continuing the marriage bond after fornication are in a "special case:" different from people in marriages not involving fornication, as follows. In the non-fornication cases, of course, neither one has the right to put away, but in the fornication cases, the marriage privileges continue tentatively and precariously, contingent upon factors pending. There is no way the peace and confidence which God intended can exist in such a relationship. This type of hybrid marriage bond proposed by this doctrine is completely unfounded in scripture. There is only one type of marriage bond God has ordained. The scriptures make absolutely no allowance for such a probation period in the marriage bond. This is God's only plan for the bond of marriage: that each party is obligated to unity for life. God accepts no other arrangement, plan, or agreement. Sexual union is a privilege only for those in a lifetime "one flesh" commitment (Heb 13:4).

8. Forgiveness, according to the doctrine

As God hates divorce (Mal 2:16), it would be deemed preferable for the innocent party, after knowledge of fornication, to try to salvage the marriage if at all possible. According to the doctrine, he makes this attempt by keeping the marriage bed active, yet he maintains his right to divorce her as he is trying to forgive her. If, after a short period, he would conclude that he cannot cope with the situation, though he has tried to forgive, the doctrine allows him still to exercise his right to divorce her on the basis of her fornication.

This doctrine also claims that persistence in various kinds of sins other than fornication indicates insincerity in the guilty party's repentance for the adultery in the first place. If this occurs, this proof of insincerity will make it increasingly difficult for him to forgive her of fornication. There could come a time in such a circumstance, at his discernment, that he may decide forgiveness is not possible for him and so then exercise his right to divorce.

Response:

This point and many to follow are built upon the already refuted false presupposition that repentance and forgiveness are requirements in marriage reconciliation. These points therefore have no actual bearing on the matter, but they are nevertheless considered.

Any marriage without commitment on a "try-and-see" basis is an ungodly arrangement and destined to fail. Furthermore, this doctrine sets forth forgiveness as a thing we try to accomplish over an indefinite period of time and a task we justifiably might not be able to perform. This is as unscriptural a concept as anything ever was. The Lord teaches that when one comes to us penitently seeking forgiveness, we give it to them

immediately, and every time, without hesitation (Matt 6:14; Mark 11:25). Our own forgiveness depends on it. We don't doubt; we don't judge their hearts.

When a wife commits fornication, there is clearly a sense in which it is a sin before God and it is also a serious personal infraction against her husband. The personal infraction, as hard as his feeling of betrayal may be, is to be let go and not held as a grudge (Col 3:13). However, this does not mean he is obligated to reconcile the relationship. Conversely, if he reconciles, some sin which she may later commit other than fornication does not renew her previous fornication. This may indicate insincerity on her part, which God will judge, but insincerity is not just cause for divorce.

Forgiveness does not remove the enmity in a marriage marred by fornication. Being able to forgive is not the same as being able to trust. Adultery betrays trust. Although mutual trust is not a factor in creating or maintaining the marriage bond, it is crucial to finding joy in a relationship (Prov 31:10-12). For example, Paul apparently felt that John Mark was an untrustworthy travel companion (Acts 15:38, 39). That lack of trust kept Paul from going on with him, though he had doubtless forgiven him the offence. Lack of trust will usually keep a man from marrying a woman in the first place. However, if he marries her anyway, the bond is nevertheless created. Likewise, if a man feels he can no longer trust his wife to whom his bond has been severed by her fornication, reconciling with her is not smart. However, if he reconciles anyway, the bond is nevertheless restored.

Reconciliation in marriage occurs when the innocent party, for whatever reasons, decides to disregard the fornication committed and go on with her. (If a legal divorcement has been executed, this will, of course, require a legal remarriage). This abolishes the enmity and allows the terms of the relationship to be put exactly back as they were before. Now, as before, only death or fornication committed again has the power to shake the marriage.

There is certainly no time limit stated in scripture for him to decide, but once he takes her back, reconciling, he has effectively made his decision to keep her. If a man has shared in marriage vows, and he has correspondingly obliged civil law, and he is cleaving unto his wife, and he is lawfully participating in sexual privileges: he is married (or reconciled) and bound for life.

9. Giving time to repent, according to the doctrine

The doctrine further expresses that, while trying to maintain the marriage, he may find that attempts to bring about proper changes in her behavior are failing. Over this time period, she will need to prove herself sincere by demonstrating fruits of true repentance (Luke 3:8). Since fruits of repentance are required to demonstrate evidence of true Bible repentance, forgiveness, and hence reconciliation, cannot therefore be immediate, since a certain amount of time must be allowed for the fruits to be observed. Such a time period given to one while waiting to see if they truly repent and produce its fruit is consistent with the way the Lord gave the woman, Jezebel, time to repent in Thyatira while still holding fellowship with her (Rev 2:20-23). It is also parallel to the way God held the nation of Israel in a covenant relationship while they were in sin, giving them time to repent before severing His covenant with them (Hosea 1, 2).

Response:

In Luke 17:3, 4, Jesus tells of a brother who would sin seven times in one day, each time repenting and asking for forgiveness. According to the subject doctrine, when the brother sins the second time, he has proven that he was insincere in his repentance for the first sin, which sin can now be held against him again. Accordingly, the third sin negates the repentance of the second. This would continue on to the seventh repentance, against which full forgiveness cannot be offered until after a time period to wait for fruits. At the end of the day, not the first forgiveness is offered, though Jesus Himself actually demands it. No one would deny that fruits of true repentance are required, but the reasoning presented here by the subject doctrine is simply contrary to God's word.

Concerning Jezebel in Thyatira, Jesus was wroth with them because they were allowing fellowship with her. If Jesus required them to break her fellowship, it must mean that He had already broken fellowship with her. There is no way that our holy Lord could abide with her while she was continuing in fornication and idolatry (1 Jn 1:5-7). Jesus was not postponing separation in His relationship with her while He was waiting for her to repent; he was merely postponing her punishment.

Concerning the nation of Israel, they continually practiced idolatry. The correct comparison would be that of a wife committing fornication daily. No one would deny that, if a wife commits fornication daily, the husband's right to put away is also renewed daily. However, God's word actually says it is her fornication that gives him that right, not her insincerity or failure to repent of past deeds. In the analogy of the reconciliation of Hosea to his wife, Gomer, she was not to "have a man," not even Hosea, until the covenant was renewed, as in the "last days" (Hos 3:3-5). The analogy actually disproves the subject doctrine.

10. Expiration of divorce rights, according to the doctrine

If the guilty party's behavior does change during the doctrine's supposed probation period, it is claimed by some that there would come a point when she adequately and consistently demonstrates fruits of repentance over a period of sufficient time. This would be the point in time when it becomes clear that she has shown a willingness to submit to godliness in every respect. At this point, his right to divorce would cease. Though the time limit for him to decide is indefinite, it is not necessarily infinite. Determination of this exact point in time must be judged on a case-by-case basis by those with experience, considering the attitudes and situation details unique to each case, according to the doctrine.

Response:

In the subject doctrine, there are many matters not well established. For example, how long is long enough for the guilty party to prove her sincerity in repentance so that the innocent party would eventually lose his right to put away? Moreover, who makes this assessment? Do the elders of the church? If so, on what scriptural basis? Who would decide, if their church had no elders? Who would decide, if they are not Christians in the first place? Since these matters are subject to personal judgment, identical situations in different places with different people will no doubt have different rulings, which is not the character of divine justice. The "case-by-case" idea allows for rulings which are based upon opinion and preference, thus excusing the doctrine of accountability. God's word does not actually say anything about such judgmental rulings.

In contrast, God's true will and pattern in this matter is presented with clarity, detail, and sublime simplicity in scripture. The determination of truth is not so subjective or ambiguous as the subject doctrine portrays it to be. Assessments that must be made in such matters must conform to the divine patterns revealed and are not subject to being modified or affected by personal views, experiences, or one's own perception of the process.

11. The case for non-Christians, according to the doctrine

The doctrine indicates that non-Christians, after engaging in things that are wrong, also repent, that is, turn away from doing wrong, and ask for forgiveness from others. Moreover, non-Christians forgive one another for wrongs done unto them the same as Christians do. Many, assuredly, have no concept of accountability before God nor awareness of a need to have their sins forgiven by Him, but the basic process of turning from wrong, seeking forgiveness, and being forgiven by others is exactly the same. Though they are not Christians and hence there's no remission of sins before God, nevertheless, penitence and forgiveness on the personal basis in the process of reconciling a marriage works exactly the same for them as it does for Christians. As expressed by this doctrine, non-Christians must simply repent to the degree they are capable.

Response:

God's law on the matter should be the same for Christians as it is for non-Christians. However, in all practicality, Christians will no doubt be held to a higher standard. Behavior that is considered common and acceptable among non-Christians, such as going to strip clubs, viewing pornography, or filthy talking, will most certainly be judged as evidence of a lack of godly sorrow and a failure in true Bible repentance for a Christian, according to the doctrine. Conversely, only remorse resulting from worldly sorrow is required for the non-Christian to be reconciled in marriage. This distinction is unfounded in scripture, and such a double standard has no place in God's law on divorce.

12. The effect of common practice, according to the doctrine

Those who support this doctrine will cite known cases in former times and in remote places where such a divorce and remarriage was permitted for some brother or sister. If it was okay for them to do it back then, it

should be okay for people to do it here, today, according to the doctrine. Otherwise, we would need to go back and tell those people they have been wrong all along.

Response:

The most basic study of authority in religion will cite examples of wrong authority sources. One such wrong source is what folks have done in the past. Any sound Bible student will reject such traditions as authoritative (Mark 7:8-13). The real problem here is a profound lack of teaching on this matter in past years, which has resulted in a lack of knowledge today. This is always destructive to God's people (Hos 4:6), and it is exactly what happened coming up to Ezra's time. The nation of Israel had rejected God and His law for many years. When finally they turned again to study the law, many realized, due to their past ignorance, that they were in unlawful marriages. Instead of distorting God's law to meet their own desires (2 Tim 4:2, 3) they all humbly confessed their sin, repented, and put away their unlawful wives (Ezra 10). Some of them had children by those marriages and were no doubt in those marriages for considerable time. This is what should be expected today of people who by the study of God's word learn they are in unlawful marriages.

13. Marriage and sex, according to the doctrine

The "separation doctrine" claims that sexual contact is the only thing that determines the reconciliation. There is no scripture that says it is at the point of sexual contact alone that the right to put away is removed nor that the innocent party must immediately separate himself from sexual contact with his wife until he makes up his mind. The concept of sex consummating a marriage bond originates in Catholicism, not scripture.

Response:

The Bible says the purpose of the marriage bond, most generically, it is so that a man does not have to be alone (Gen 2:18). More specifically and abundantly clear from scripture, it serves as the single lawful means to fulfill the human sex drive (1 Cor 7:2, 9; Heb 13:4). Fornication is physical sexual contact between two not lawfully bound in marriage. The way to avoid this sin is to be bound in marriage. With a woman who is not one's wife, a man can have dinner, take on a trip, take out her trash, put on his insurance policy, hug her, kiss her, or do any other lawful thing. There's only one thing he can't do unless he is bound to her in marriage.

Fundamentally, the marriage covenant bond is that which determines if sex is lawful for a newly wed couple: nothing else. Unmarried couples happily and harmoniously living together have no right to sex because of the lack of lifetime commitment in a marriage covenant. Likewise, the covenant bond restoration is that which determines the right to sex for married couples reconciling after fornication. If lawful sexual contact resumes, it can only mean that the bond is restored and hence the right to put away is ended. If the bond isn't restored, it must be fornication, but it can't be fornication, because they're married. It is intrinsically impossible to commit fornication with someone to whom you are lawfully married. This connection of sex to lifetime commitment is not an arbitrary belief or an opinion but a divine fact clearly revealed in scripture (Matt 19:5-12). You simply can't lawfully have one without the other.

Nothing has been stated to suggest that sex consummates the marriage bond. The argument presented is against something not espoused. Sexual privileges are exclusively the result of the marriage bond, not the cause. Consensual sex is not the reconciliation itself but undeniable clear evidence of it. The privilege can only be enjoyed if the commitment is accepted. This is the teaching of the Bible, not the Catholic church. If fornication is known, the innocent spouse is no longer under obligation. However, he cannot renounce the obligation yet continue to abide in the privileges exclusively reserved for those who would keep the obligation.

It has never been suggested that the decision needs to be made in an instant. This argument, too, is against something which has not been espoused. The innocent party has forever without time limit to decide whether he will keep her; he simply cannot have her and not have her at the same time. He may not know for sure right away if he can trust her enough to stay married to her. One thing he does know is that God has loosed him from his commitment. Let the couple take their time to do whatever they need to learn to trust again. Let courtship rekindle; let them take long walks together; let them spend time with family. All of these things are permissible between people who are not sure lifetime commitment is right for them. However, without commitment, let them not perform that one thing that is reserved only for those who are committed for life. Doing so assumes the commitment, if they are still actually married by all other rights.

14. Scriptural authority, according to the doctrine

The doctrine claims that the full instruction regarding the exception allowing a lawful divorce of a lawful marriage is contained in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 alone. Other ideas that would come by examining peripheral arguments such as covenants, enmity, reconciliation, commitment, and unity in relationships are indirectly obtained, since they must be deduced or extrapolated from scripture. Remarkably, no scholarly written work on this specific subject matter has been found, neither by institutional or non-institutional gospel preachers, theologians, commentators, or Greek scholars. Hence, according to this doctrine, it would be arrogant in the absence of any such literary work to bind any limitations beyond the simple and direct statements in Matthew that say the innocent party has the right to divorce a fornicating spouse. Besides, those peripheral arguments apply to a different divorce dispute and have no bearing on the subject at hand.

This doctrine further claims that, as the scriptures give us sparse actual information on this subject, debating only makes the matter more complicated. Therefore, this needs to be recognized as an area of opinions, for which Romans 14 makes allowance. Brethren ought not try to bind their opinion about this on others or use this as a test of fellowship. They would otherwise need to withdraw from any brother who would view it differently.

Response:

We need to consider "all truth" revealed in scripture on any doctrinal matter (Matt 28:20; Jn 16:13). It is a mistake to conclude that all things pertaining to lawful divorce after fornication are revealed only in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9. The sound Bible student recognizes the "peripheral arguments" as necessary inferences in a hermeneutical process and considers them to be equal in force to direct statements and recorded commands. In truth, the Bible is rich with information on this subject. There is more revealed about this than there is the Lord's Supper, yet we stand firm and draw fellowship lines there. Above all, sound Bible students will renounce any and all writings of scholars, theologians, or any other men (or even the absence of such) as having any bearing whatsoever on determining what is truth in doctrine (1 Cor 4:6; Tit 1:14; 2 Jn 9). Besides, in Matthew's accounts, Jesus never actually directly states "the innocent spouse has a right to put away." This has to be derived from a necessary inference, which is apparently accepted by the opposition because preachers, scholars, and commentators would support it. To any who would look to the commentaries for their authority, know this: reputable Bible scholars have certainly also written nothing about such "case-by-case" rulings, marriage bonds on probation, or anything else to support this doctrine. These things are pure heresies completely formed in the imaginations of men.

Furthermore, truth is a continuum; all truth refutes all error. As a case in point, the fact that the marriage bond is a covenant relationship is true regardless of the specific divorce dispute to which it is applied. It is not reasonable that this would be a viable statement in one dispute but not in another. Truth is truth, and it is not subjective (Psa 119:160; 1 Jn 2:21).

The opinions of Romans 14 are identified contextually as those of weak Christians (Rom 14:1, 2; 15:1), not those of the spiritually mature. Also, those opinions are things that do not matter one way or the other (1 Cor 8:7-13; Rom 14:5, 6). We all have the right to hold various opinions, but only on matters of indifference (Rom 14:22, 23). Paul had some opinions, and he openly expressed them (1 Cor 7:25, 40). However, this does not mean we can all abide by whatever doctrine we want as long as we are sincere and keep it as our opinion; that's denominational teaching. There must be a way of scripturally distinguishing between doctrine and opinion. Otherwise, we could not judge any doctrinal issue, and our faith would be essentially man-made. Standing for truth on anything would be impossible (2 Tim 4:2-4; Tit 2:15).

A thing is not an opinion just because it requires extra study or because someone says it is. Conveniently, once a thing has been decreed to be merely an opinion, a reasonable and sensible scriptural explanation for it is no longer necessary nor is it required that we try to convince all others also. Romans 14 is abused today as a safe haven for false teachers.

Furthermore, the argument affirms that opinions are not to be forced upon others, but when this so-called opinion allowing divorce after reconciliation is taught within the body and practiced by some among them, the church is being forced into fellowship with it along with the other doctrinal distortions designed to make it fit. Note that whether a thing is taught publicly or privately doesn't matter; if it is taught, it is taught. Scripture makes no such distinction in doctrine.

Any complication is only by those trying to make scripture prove what they want to believe (2 Pet 3:16). Though they state that "peripheral arguments" have no bearing, it is only by their own peripheral arguments on repentance, forgiveness, tradition, theology, fellowship, opinion, judgment, purpose, and domestic harmony that scriptural support is attempted. Incidentally, to suggest we consider how we might need to withdraw from those who disagree if we view this not as opinion seems to be an unconscionable suggestion to compromise our convictions. This ought not be the basis by which we stand for truth.

Summary and Conclusion

In brief summary, marriage is a covenant relationship (Mal 2:14). Marriage is a lifetime obligation or bond (Matt 19:5, 6). Sexual intimacy is lawful in the marriage bond exclusively (1 Cor 6:15-18; Heb 13:4). The bond and the marriage are two separate things (Rom 7:2, 3). Nothing other than fornication, besides death, severs the bond, creating the enmity that can also lawfully terminate the marriage (Matt 5:32; Jas 4:4). God has no other pattern for the marriage bond than this; no temporary, trial, probational, or contingent arrangements are authorized (Matt 19:7-12). In any covenant, only those bound to the terms and conditions have a right to the benefits and privileges (Heb 13:10). Therefore, if lawful sexual intimacy is enjoined after the knowledge of fornication without divorce, it can only mean that the lifetime obligation is also enjoined. If there is lifetime obligation, the innocent spouse can no longer put away. If he can no longer put away, the conditions are restored back to the original. If the original conditions are restored, the enmity is abolished. If the enmity is abolished, they are reconciled (Eph 2:15, 16). The truth of God's law in this is quite simple; you don't need to be a scholar to see this.

A study of authority in religion will show that the onus to produce scriptural authority for a thing rests upon the one who would seek to do it. It is not the responsibility of everyone else to prove that it is NOT authorized. Parties on both sides of this issue completely agree that the innocent party does not sin if he does not put away his spouse. Therefore, the one who would put away or teach others to do so is the one that must give an answer for this action (1 Pet 3:15). However, not the first correctly applied scripture has yet been presented in this or any other known work or discussion to validate the doctrine allowing divorce after reconciliation or refute otherwise. Until such validation is presented, this doctrine must be renounced. Nevertheless, some so-called conservative elders and gospel preachers continue teaching this, Christians are following it, and churches of Christ are tolerating it. These things ought not be so.

We are made to wonder why people grasp at such misconstrued arguments to defend this doctrine. The basis of all heresy is that people want to believe what they want to believe. The truth is sometimes hard to accept, difficult to apply, or emotionally painful. Standing for truth sometimes means we have to condemn a brother, withdraw from a friend, confront someone we admire, or rebuke a well-respected preacher, elder, or college professor. Our pride may motivate us to somehow try to find a way out rather than to crucify self and submit.

There is perhaps not a more emotionally charged doctrinal topic than marriage. This presents a great challenge to examine God's will without bias yet with compassion for all parties involved. This writer's sole purpose is only to teach the doctrine belonging to Christ and thereby glorify God. If it can be soundly shown in scripture that this presentation is contrary to God's word, this writer stands humbly prepared to listen, repent, and retract. However, if these things are determined to be true, then teach them to others and openly defend the truth in vigilance.