

# CRITIQUE OF DAVID PAWSON'S BOOK *REMARRIAGE IS ADULTERY UNLESS...*

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David Pawson, *Remarriage is Adultery Unless. . . What the Bible says about divorce and its outcome* (Ashford, ENG.: Anchor Recordings, 2011). Pp. 133.

The author rightly sensed that Jesus was an absolutist when it came to the breakup of lawfully conducted marriages. Fully convinced of this truth he set about to find a way of establishing his conviction from the *New International Version (NIV)*. Unfortunately, this version does not present Jesus as an absolutist because Erasmus, a humanist, convinced that Jesus was not an absolutist, set about to establish his *private* conviction by choosing from the margin of a single, very late copy of the Greek New Testament, words which would establish his theology of what Jesus really taught. Erasmus led Europe astray through a single alteration to Jesus' words when he incorporated into God's Word the small Greek word εἰ before μὴ in Matthew 19:9. The addition of this small word had Jesus saying the opposite to what He taught, and what the universal Church taught right up to the Reformation.

Of the hundreds of extant copies of Matthew's Gospel there is only one, a fifteenth-century copy, which has εἰ before μὴ. This copy is known as Codex Leicestrensis. It is held in the Record Office of the Leicester Public Library, England. But this copy does not have εἰ before μὴ *as its main text*. It is found only in the margin of this codex as a correction to a scribal mistake made by the scribe who wrote out the present copy. It appears that the corrector was making the correction in the margin of this codex from his memory of what the text should read.<sup>1</sup>

Whereas Jesus had excluded any and every cause to break up a lawfully conducted marriage, and this was confirmed by Church practice and tradition up until Erasmus's day, the instinct of Erasmus was to permit any and every cause to break up a lawfully consummated marriage. He set about achieving this by the addition of εἰ before μὴ.

It is to the credit of David Pawson that while all the major denominations that sprang out of the Reformation fell for Erasmus's deception, and have incorporated Erasmus's theology into their confessional creeds, he stood virtually alone against this liberal, humanist, theology. Instinctively, he was correct. However, in setting about to overthrow Erasmus's theology he, like every minister of the Gospel since the Reformation, accepted Erasmus's Greek text as being a faithful copy of what Matthew wrote, because D. Pawson was not in a position to challenge it. He had to follow the crowd in this instance.

On the face of it, D. Pawson had an impossible task to reverse the plain reading of the Greek text behind the *NIV*, which clearly stated that all marriages were for life unless the covenant of marriage was broken by one member through

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<sup>1</sup> Erasmus took two more marginal readings from this codex which likewise have no support from any other manuscript. The first is at Acts 9:5b. Erasmus included the words "it is hard for you to kick against the pricks, and he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what will you have me to do? And the Lord said to him," (Acts 9:5b-6a). These words should not be in our Bibles. The second marginal reading that Erasmus borrowed from this codex is in Acts 10:6, where the words "this one shall tell you what you ought to do." These words should also be deleted from our Bibles. What Erasmus did not realise is that this codex is a representative of the Caesarean text-type, so in effect he was picking readings from different transmission streams. The study of textual criticism was in its infancy at this point in time. The four transmission streams are, Byzantine, Caesarean, Egyptian and Western. All manuscripts belong to one or other of these text-types or they are a fusion of two or more of these text-types, called 'mixed texts,' which are of no value in themselves but they bear witness to the four text-types. The goal of textual criticism is to obtain the purest form of the four text-types and *only then* make a judgment as to which is the most faithful line of transmission of the original texts.

the sin of fornication, but only through this one sin. Initially, no other ground was permitted until Erasmus established another ground, namely, desertion, using 1 Corinthians 7:15.

Paul made it clear that the unmarried state was preferable because it meant more time could be given to Christ and His cause, which should be paramount in the thinking of every new disciple. He taught that if God called a person to follow Him and His appointed Messiah, then if they were single when called they should remain in that state, because that was the ideal state to be in to give everything back to God. Marriage was a distraction *from the service to God*. Marriage meant that God could not have the full attention of each of His male followers, as this had to be divided between Him and his wife. Consequently, the Christian husband was 'bound' in this divided state for the rest of his life. Once married always married. There was no way out for the believer who wanted to be fully devoted to the Lord. He was locked into a life-long, covenant arrangement with his wife. Only the death of his wife could release the husband to be fully devoted to the Lord, and vice versa.

However, Paul, through the Spirit, realised that God did not always call a man *and his wife* to follow Him. In the early days of evangelism, when God called one half of a marriage union to follow Him, the other half might object so strongly to the Christian's union with Christ as to cease to live with him/her. In which case, Paul saw an advantage accruing to the believer, because instead of waiting for death to break the marriage union, the departure of the unbeliever meant that the Christian would be able to be fully devoted to the service of Christ Jesus his/her Lord and Saviour, which s/he would never have been able to be had the unbeliever not departed.

So the departure becomes a blessing *for the Lord* in that He now has the full attention of the believing husband, and the enthusiastic husband can give full expression to his love and sense of debt and gratitude to the Lord for saving him. The last thing on his mind would be a remarriage (which was unlawful anyway), because that would be to shackle himself and limit his freedom to give his all to Christ. So Paul turns round the departure of the unbeliever and encourages the believer to use the new found freedom to the advantage of Jesus, *and not for his own advantage*.

Given that the single state is the one most sought after by the Lord Jesus, it would never dawn on the mind of a true servant of God, who was 'divorced' by his unbelieving wife, to enter into a second marriage. That would be the last thing on his mind. "What a privilege," Paul would point out to him, "that you are no longer bound in a divided state, but free, to serve the Lord without distraction!" As Paul uses them, the terms 'bound' and 'free' do not relate to the marriage bond, but to the measure of devotion that a believer can and should give to the service of Christ. Paul is thinking all the time about Christ's interests. The obligations of the marriage bond are suspended until there is reconciliation.

Jesus said, "And whoever forsook houses, or brothers, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or fields, on account of My name, an hundredfold he shall receive, and life age-during he shall inherit" (Mt 19:29; Mk 10:29; Lk 18:29). So startling was this level of commitment, which included a man 'forsaking' his wife, that some Greek mss (mainly Egyptian) deleted 'wife' from the list,<sup>2</sup> probably in the mistaken belief that they were safeguarding the indissolubility of the marriage bond. In the context of 1 Cor 7:15, Jesus' statement makes very good sense, so that if a man's pagan wife refused to live with the Christian husband, and left him, Jesus says to that man, "Do not worry. You can accept this loss—temporary or permanent—for My sake. Let her go, so that you can follow Me more fully. That is

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<sup>2</sup> All modern English translations are based on these Egyptian texts and so they also omit 'wife' in Mt 19:29 and Mk 10:29, but they could not delete 'wife' in Lk 18:29 because the Egyptian copyists overlooked it there, and let it slip through.

your priority for the rest of your life. Be single-minded to do *My* will and all will be well with you in this life and the next.”<sup>3</sup>

But Erasmus was not thinking along these lines. He was appealing to the selfish nature of unregenerate man. Sex was not to be denied to the Christian man. That was paramount in his thinking.

This appeal to humans to indulge themselves in a continuous sexual relationship, and that it was their right to have sex all the days of their life, tapped into the unregenerate nature of man and was hugely popular, as one can imagine. The appeal to ‘natural justice’ was a very strong one, and too powerful to counter, so the seed of Erasmus’s teaching fell on very receptive soil and his doctrine sprang up quickly all over Europe, until today it is taken for granted among Christians that if your partner is unfaithful, you get a divorce (if you want it), and look around for a replacement.

The idea that a Christian should use the unforeseen single, ‘unbound’ state that an unbeliever’s departure gives him *to the advantage of the Lord Jesus*, is anathema to most Christian leaders. Instead, the sexually deprived Christian man is encouraged to go out and find another sexual partner, because “you’re worth it.” This was not Paul’s teaching. This kind of life-style only feeds the appetites of the carnal body which is destined to pass away. Sex, like food, will pass away. It belongs only to this world. These bodily appetites will pass away. This is how 1 Cor 7:15 had been traditionally interpreted until Erasmus saw in it a way to strengthen his introduction of divorce into Matthew 19:9.

If Erasmus could show that Jesus was not an absolutist in Matthew 19:9, through his alteration of the Greek text at Matthew 19:9, then 1 Cor 7:15 could become a means for further widening the breach he had created in Matthew 19:9. And this is how 1 Cor 7:15 is used today.

Sometimes, however, 1 Cor 7:15 is judged to be clearer than Matthew 19:9 about the justification for divorce and remarriage, and it is used to throw light on Matthew 19:9! But generally, it is conceded that 1 Cor 7:15 is dependent on, and derives its justification from, Matthew 19:9. If Matthew 19:9 does not permit divorce for fornication, then 1 Cor 7:15, *on its own*, cannot permit divorce and remarriage. So much depends on the Greek text of Matthew 19:9.

Unfortunately, D. Pawson reads 1 Cor 7:15 in the Erasmian way to mean that the unbeliever can get a divorce from the believer “if they want one” (p. 87). Yet on p. 85 we read, “Quite simply, divorce is out. It is not an option.” However, this is restricted to Christians, not to non-Christians, because he believed that Christians should accede to their unbelieving spouses’ requests and “give them a divorce if they want one” (p. 87). He believed that refusal to co-operate in a divorce is inappropriate behaviour (p. 88). This is odd, because a Christian can never grant something that has no reality in the life of God. *Divorce is a fiction*. It does not exist.

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, if his wife becomes a Christian (or does not), then he is under an obligation to receive her back again as his wife, if this is her wish, even if she had been remarried in the meantime. Restoration implies that she renounces her remarriage.

D. Pawson is correct in his interpretation of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:31-32, in that the husband is not held responsible for sexual sins which his wife commits *while still married to him*, but he *is* held responsible for her sexual sins once he puts her out of his house. So far so good. D. Pawson, however, departs from Jesus' teaching in his idea that, "Of course it is implied, though not specifically stated, that the divorce was justified in the case of her infidelity, and therefore is permitted. In such circumstances a divorce *can* take place" (p. 61). But once 'divorce' is mentioned then divorce courts must be created to dispense divorce certificates. Jesus never set up any divorce courts, either in His Church or in the State. A State may keep a register of the marital status of its citizens, but it has no authority to dissolve a single, lawfully consummated marriage.

In Matthew 5:32 Jesus limited Himself to address the issue of who is responsible for a woman sleeping with two contemporary men. He is not endorsing any grounds for divorce. That is not the issue in Matthew 5:31-32. Jesus taught that divorce under *any circumstances* is wrong. Full stop. There are no grounds for divorce. Divorce of the 'one flesh' union is illegitimate *under all circumstances*. This is the position Jesus is coming from, and unless we fall in behind Him, we are liable to misunderstand His words.

Coming from an absolutist position, Jesus points out the extreme danger that every divorced husband is in, in the eyes of God, and for which he will be held accountable, if he goes ahead and divorces what God has joined together.

First, Jesus notes that if a wife commits fornication while still married to her husband, and so it was done *without his knowledge and consent*, the offended husband will not be held responsible for *this particular sin of his wife*. This is covered in the exemption clause inserted by Jesus. So far so good.

Second, what Jesus said next surprised His hearers, because He goes on to say that if the offended husband uses his wife's infidelity as a means for breaking up his marriage to her, and he divorces her, and puts her out in the street with the explicit statement that she is free to marry another man (contained in the wording of the Jewish document of divorce), he will be held accountable for all her future sexual sins, because she sinned *with his knowledge and consent*. Jesus makes no exceptions to the husband's *entire* responsibility for all her *future sexual sins*.

Jesus introduced a new level of understanding of what happens when a 'divorce' occurs. It came as a new revelation that after divorce comes responsibility. This was new. The rabbis taught that divorce ended, or dissolved, the marriage bond that united them; that both partners were single again, and it was assumed that if they remarried they were not living in sin, or adultery, or committing fornication. The refusal of Jesus to recognise the dissolution of the marriage bond, even in the case of infidelity within the marriage, was something that astounded the Jews and rabbis of His day, and which they now had to ponder over very carefully.

The logic of Jesus' position now becomes clear. If 'divorce' does not dissolve what God has joined together, then after the secular 'divorce' has been gone through with, Jesus' position is that the whole legal procedure and resulting certificate/decreed is a total sham. It changed nothing. The couple were still a couple. But the couple *think* that by passing a piece of paper across a courtroom table the union has been dissolved. Jesus said "No, it remains, and remains until one of you dies. No man or judge can dissolve what God has joined together. Only God can dissolve a lawfully wedded couple, and the only means He uses to dissolve every marriage bond is death."

The logic of Jesus' position over responsibility also becomes clear in Matthew 5:32. Because the couple are married until death separates them, a divorce document *appears* to dissolve the 'one flesh' union. This is a deception. It does not. We can paraphrase Jesus' warning as follows, "She is still your wife even *after* you have

divorced her. So when you sign a piece of paper giving her her freedom to sleep with another man, you are, in effect, permitting another man to sleep with your wife, because she is still your wife, even though you *think* she is not.”

Then comes the bombshell. He informs them that *all* their divorces are null and void in the eyes of God. The implication of this revelation would not take long to dawn on the minds of the rabbis and His own Apostles. Jesus had effectively abolished their millennia-long custom of divorce overnight. Marriage was for life with no prospect of ending it except through the God-appointed means of death of one of the partners. Remarriage could only occur after a death, not after a divorce.

What Jesus was teaching in Matthew 5:31-32 was accountability for sexual sins. It had nothing to do with the grounds for divorce. That was the last thing on His mind. The so-called exception clause was not related to the circumstances under which a husband could divorce his wife, but was related to his accountability and responsibility for his wife’s sexual activity *after* he divorced her.

But that is not how Christian leaders read this text today. They assume that the ‘exception clauses’ in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 contain crucial information on the grounds for divorce. That is the first thing on their mind. They approach the texts with a different mindset to the one that Jesus expressed through the same texts, and which perfectly reflect His understanding of the permanence of the ‘one flesh’ union once it has been consummated in a lawful marriage.

Unfortunately, D. Pawson misread and misunderstood what Jesus was teaching in Matthew 5:32. He read the ‘exception clause’ as permitting divorce for pre-marital fornication in every bride (Jew and Gentile) to the end of time, and so he has Jesus teaching that marriage is not for life. Jesus is no longer an absolutist. He requires the existence of divorce courts to dissolve these cases of infidelity. All divorce courts are an integral part of this ‘world;’ they all belong to Satan.

In truth, the so-called ‘exception clause’ was, in fact, an ‘exemption clause’ in Jesus’ presentation. This exemption from culpability is fully in accord with our sense of justice, and one which every husband would acknowledge. God the Father, and Jesus the Judge of all men, would be unjust to punish a husband for his wife’s infidelities *before* he divorced her. *This* is what the exemption clause refers to. It has nothing whatever to do with the circumstances under which God will approve a divorce by an aggrieved husband or wife.

D. Pawson is not alone in not discerning sharply the different topics that Jesus is addressing in Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:9. Most commentators think that *both* passages of Scripture impart vital information on the grounds on which a divorce can take place among Jesus’ followers. This is false. Jesus is addressing two different issues, not one, in these two passages. It is the failure to treat each passage separately, and in its own right, that has confused the commentators. The ‘exemption clause’ of Matthew 5:32 was confused with the ‘exclusion clause’ in Matthew 19:9, which is the focus of the next section.

#### *David Dawson on Matthew 19:9*

Since D. Pawson could not get back to the original Greek text—because Erasmus had altered it—he had to assume that Erasmus’s text was a faithful copy of the original text, which, at first glance, did not support his instinct that Jesus was an absolutist.<sup>4</sup>

The solution he adopted was a linguistic one. He took the term ‘fornication’ and held that if this had a specialised meaning, and could be severely restricted to refer to a particular sin, committed by a particular individual, at a particular point in

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<sup>4</sup> However, he could have found the original wording of Mt 19:9 had he consulted the Nestle-Aland 27th edition (1993), or the Majority Text as published by Robinson & Pierpont (2005). By a strange quirk all modern English versions are based on the Nestle-Aland Greek text, *except when it comes to Mt 19:9*, where they *all* follow Erasmus’s Greek text, and then revert to following the NA text!

time, then he could effectively choke it off as a grounds for divorce. So he set about giving the Greek term πορνεία the specialised meaning he required.

The distinction he drew between 'adultery' and 'fornication,' was that the former "refers to illicit sex *after* marriage the other refers to illicit sex *before* marriage" (p. 67). Fornication, he held, "refers to premarital promiscuity" (pp. 70, 127; cf. p. 83). This imposed distinction will not hold up, not only in the LXX, but also as used by classical Greek authors. The truth is that 'fornication' is the general term for sexual misdemeanours, while 'adultery' is specialised and refers to illicit sex by married persons, who ought to remain faithful to one another. *All adultery is fornication, but not all fornication is adultery.* All apples are fruits, but not all fruits are apples. If we draw two circles, the outer one is fornication, the inner one is adultery. It is for this reason that fornication and adultery can appear in the same list of sins (Mt 15:19; Mk 7:21; 1 Cor 6:9; Heb 13:4), because they *together* cover all sexual misdemeanours, both inside and outside the marriage bond.

Justification for severely restricting 'fornication' to pre-marriage sex is linked with the expectation that a Hebrew/Jewish bride had to be a virgin when she married. If she was not she was stoned to death. Since stoning to death is assumed to have been removed by the Roman authorities (p. 35), which is not true, it is assumed that Jesus reduced the punishment to divorce. If so, then D. Pawson has now two grounds for divorce. These are (1) loss of virginity before marriage, and (2) unfaithfulness within marriage (Mt 5:32). Consequently, Jesus taught that divorce was permissible (p. 69) on these two grounds. If so, then Jesus was not an absolutist, because He needed divorce courts to dispense His divorce certificates.

While D. Pawson is keen to present Jesus as an absolutist one comes across statements that undermine this, and in practice deny it. See, for example, pages 61, 78, 80, 102 and 127. Page 78 reads: "Jesus clearly taught that most if not all remarriages after divorce were committing (continuous) adultery!" If Jesus were an absolutist then it cannot be said "most if not all." This should be corrected to "*All* remarriages, without exception, are adulterous relationships." Another statement reads: "A Christian slave has a duty to remain in that bond, which is why Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon. But marriage is quite different" (p. 89). This undermines the indissoluble bond between husband and wife. The bond between husband and wife is a 'one flesh' bond, which the slave-master relationship is not. The latter can be dissolved (manumission), the former can not.

In any case, there is a hidden injustice here. D. Pawson writes, "This chapter is based on the assumption that readers already shared my conviction (that 'fornication' refers to premarital promiscuity disclosed or discovered *at* the time of the marriage) . . ." (p. 127). The virginity of a bride is susceptible of proof, but what of the virginity of her prospective husband? If he is not a virgin on the night of his wedding, can she divorce him? If she learns subsequent to their marriage that her husband was not a virgin when she married him, is this a legitimate ground (i.e., is it in accordance with Jesus' teaching) for her to divorce him? There appears to one law for the bride and another for the groom.

Throughout the LXX, fornication is mostly used as a translation for prostitution. God likens Oholah (Samaria) and Oholibah (Jerusalem) to His wives and they commit fornication while married to Him (Ezek 23:7, 11, 18; Jer 3:7-9; cf. 13:27; Ezek 16:15, 22, 25, 33, 41). Yahweh will make her cease from her fornication/prostitution (Ezek 23:27, 29, 35). Although the term fornication/prostitution is used almost exclusively of female activity, there were also male fornicators/prostitutes (Ezek 43:7,9). The idea that 'fornication' is restricted to pre-marriage activity is ruled out by its application to married women. In addition to the above references see Gen 38:15; 2 Kgs 9:22; Hos 2:2, 4; 4:13; Mic 1:7; Nah 3:3 (4 MT). This evidence does not take into account the secular literature of the Greeks, and it is doubtful if one can impose the proposed extremely narrow definition of 'fornication' on all of Greek literature.

Language is like coinage and each piece has a universal value, recognised by all who use it. To make out a case that ‘fornication,’ when used in the LXX/NT, is different from its use in Greek secular literature is a form of special pleading, and special pleading is not a fit foundation for any doctrine.

The correct translation of the aorist subjunctive in Matthew 19:9 is: “Now I say to you that who, for instance, may have divorced his wife—not *he may have divorced* on account of fornication—and may have married another *woman*, is being adulterous *against his wife*.” In modern English we can translate “not *he may have divorced* on account of fornication,” as “not *even* for fornication,” because ‘even’ is a substitute for the subjunctive verb. Here Jesus categorically rules out fornication (which included adultery) as a ground for divorce. The direct exclusion of fornication in Matthew 19:9 as a grounds for divorce arose because Jesus was asked specifically to name His grounds for granting a divorce. The only ‘cause’ He mentions is ‘fornication,’ and He puts a negative in front of it. This explains why the mention of fornication is omitted in Mark 10:11-12 and Luke 16:18. In His doctrine of forgiveness He made no exception for fornication as an unforgivable sin.

### *Conclusion*

Despite D. Pawson’s desire to label Jesus as an ‘absolutist,’ in practice this is not watertight, for he concedes that even after he has restricted the word ‘fornication’ to mean premarital sex, he believes that Jesus *has made allowance for divorce for unfaithfulness, and a Christian must cooperate in giving their unbelieving partner a divorce certificate if they demand it*. It is one thing to state that Jesus’ exception will be rarely used outside Jewish circles because Jews are extremely careful to ensure that their daughters are virgins on their wedding night, but if you allow divorce on *any* grounds then Jesus is no longer an absolutist.

Logically, if God knows that young men and young women are promiscuous in the West—to focus on just one culture—before they marry, then *all* of these first marriages are defiled relationships. So, potentially, they can all divorce each other at a time they choose to bring up their past promiscuous deeds, or their partner’s past promiscuous deeds.

Another loophole created by D. Pawson in Jesus’ absolutist position is the right of the unbeliever to get a divorce from their Christian spouse (1 Cor 7:15). If the unbeliever does get a divorce, it has to be assumed that the bond has been dissolved, and the unbeliever is free to remarry. That is certainly how the unbeliever would see it, because it was the universal custom of those times.

Everything hinges on D. Pawson’s definition of ‘fornication,’ and since such a narrow definition has been formulated with the express purpose of ruling out ‘fornication’ in its normal usage, the teaching that is built on it collapses with it.

It is not sufficient to argue that one is right for the wrong reason. If the reason is wrong, and contrived, and words are put into Jesus’ mouth which are false, this will undermine that teacher’s credibility to extract the true teaching of Jesus in other areas of His teaching. It is a dangerous argument to use, be it in politics, finance, religion, in the courts, or on the sports field.

The teaching of Jesus on divorce and remarriage cannot be obtained through Erasmus’s Greek New Testament (and so not through the *NIV* or the *KJV*). It can only be obtained through a faithful translation of the Universal Text, also known as the Byzantine or Majority Text, two independent editions of which have been published since 1982.

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