

**A STUDY OF THE PAULINE PRIVILEGE**

by Jess Hall, Jr.

The so-called Pauline Privilege has been discussed by brethren over the years. It is surprising that it needs to be discussed at Memorial since it has been discussed on prior occasions. Many of you will remember when it was discussed with brother James Baird. I still have the autographed copy of his book, And I Say Unto You..., which is dated December 8, 1982. My recollection is that we also discussed it with James Woodruff, the author of The Divorce Dilemma, and that we either canceled an invitation to speak which had been extended to him or declined to extend an invitation to him because of his position on divorce and remarriage.

It is made most surprising, however, because of what these very elders have taught in the past. The material which was presented in the “Year of the Family” was prepared by elders and taught by elders. While each elder was free to teach his own class, no elder reported that he taught that the Pauline Privilege was scriptural; I received no report from any member that any elder taught that the Pauline Privilege was scriptural; I received no report from any elder that he had received such a report from any member. It is presumed, therefore, that each elder taught that the Pauline Privilege was contrary to scripture. This is consistent with the material which was presented to the congregation by the elders, a copy of which is attached. This material does not place the Pauline Privilege in the realm of opinion; it condemns it as unscriptural.

There has been no study of the scripture as far as I am aware which led any elder to change his mind on this subject. The only difference I can ascertain is that what the elders once considered false doctrine has now been taught unchallenged from our pulpit to the flock over which we have

been made overseers. Just as shocking (maybe even more shocking) is the fact that the elders have refused to study the subject even though requested to do so by one of their fellow elders (not me), choosing instead to continue the present course, which can only be construed as a decision to continue doing absolutely nothing about the teaching of what was once considered false doctrine. It would seem logical that either brother Barnes should correct what he taught or the elders should correct what they taught. Either way, something needs to be corrected.

### **THE PAULINE PRIVILEGE IS CONTRARY TO SCRIPTURE**

1. It violates basic principles of interpretation. Basic to the understanding of scripture is the principle that difficult passages are in be interpreted in light of more simple, plain passages, and not vice versa. While the teaching of I Corinthians 7 is not as difficult as some would have it to be, if it is assumed that it is more difficult than, for example, Matthew 19:9, then I Corinthians 7 should be interpreted in light of Matthew 19:9 and not vice versa. This is a long standing principle of interpreting scripture and has been applied to such passages as Revelation 20 in refuting the millennialist who interprets practically all of prophecy in light of a twisted interpretation of Revelation 20. While it may not be immediately clear that this principle is applicable here, it becomes more evident when the sermon “Giving All to Make a Marriage Work” is reviewed closely. While it does not leap immediately to the forefront, it appears that brother Barnes also teaches that Matthew 19 applies only to Christians, and that non-Christians are not subject to its teaching. Read closely:

First of all, he says to those who are married, probably he’s referring to Christians married to Christians in that particular setting because he writes to both of them. And when he says Christian married to the nonchristian, he writes to the Christian

rather than the nonchristian. There is a reason for that. God never did call upon the one who would not submit to His will completely to try to get them to act like Christians in their marriage.

....

But to begin with, when Christians are married to Christians, he said it's not I but the Lord, because the Lord spoke directly about that thing. What did the Lord say? He said, don't separate. Where did the Lord say that? Matthew 19:6.... "Giving All to Make a Marriage Work," p. 2 [emphasis added].

It is necessary for Matthew 19 to be limited to a Christian married to a Christian, and to limit 1 Corinthians 7 to a Christian married to an unbeliever since, if both statements were directed to the same situation, the scripture would contradict itself.

The reason that G.C. Brewer argued that unfaithfulness on the part of the departing unbeliever was assumed by Paul was because he recognized that, if Paul was permitting divorce on grounds other than adultery, Paul was contradicting Christ. Brother Brewer does not extend the Pauline Privilege to cases of desertion; he contends that adultery is still the only grounds for remarriage:

Shall we assume that a heathen who forsakes his companion because of that companion's holy religion will live a holy, celibate life, or shall we know and proceed on the basis that he will form another connection? Paul assumed that he would seek another partner, and, therefore, held the Christian whom he had deserted as free from all obligation and responsibility.

With this conclusion reached, we see that Paul agrees with Christ exactly. When, therefore, he says a woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives, he must be understood to mean that this is true provided he desires to remain her husband, and not forsake her and form a connection with another woman.

Only thus can we escape making the apostle contradict what he said in verse 15. Now, what Paul here says about a heathen would not apply to a person who is a member of some so-called "Christian denomination." Such a person, if true to his creed, believes in the Christian moralities and ideals. He might leave a member of the body of Christ, and still live a celibate life. In that case the marriage bond is not broken. Paul's language should not be interpreted as meaning that the marriage bond is broken, except by unfaithfulness to the marriage vow. When a man or a woman

who is worldly, who lives after the flesh, who makes no claim to Christian living, forsakes his or her companion, and stays away for years, it may be safely assumed that the bond is broken, even as Paul assumes this in reference to a heathen of his day. Contending for the Faith, p. 102, emphasis added.

If one is really interested in seeing whether Brewer contends that Paul permits divorce and remarriage on any grounds other than adultery, he should read page 68 of the same source:

....Bible scholars are agreed on what the Scriptures teach on that issue, except some contend that divorce is not allowed on any ground at all and others say Jesus allowed divorce on the ground of fornication. No Bible scholar, or even Bible student, will say that the Bible allows divorce on any other grounds (By divorce we mean such separation as will allow either party to marry again.)

Or again, on page 71:

....But all gospel preachers stand in the pulpit and tell their audiences that persons who are divorced for any cause except fornication and marry again are living in adultery. What sort of preaching has our brother been hearing? Gospel preachers have always preached that way. [Emphasis in the original.]

If brother Brewer is to be appealed to as an authority, it should be noted that he does not consider permitting remarriage on the grounds of desertion (in the absence of fornication) by an unbeliever to be preaching of the gospel.

While brother Brewer is not the standard by which truth is to be determined, he at least interpreted the difficult passage (1 Corinthians 7) in light of the plainer passage (Matthew 19) and not vice versa, and concluded that Paul assumed without stating that the departing unbeliever would be of such character that he would be guilty of fornication. He did not reconcile Matthew 19 to 1 Corinthians 7 by assuming that Matthew 19 was applicable only to Christians. In fact, concerning that position brother Brewer wrote:

1. The assumption that the language of Christ and of Paul on marriage and divorce

was addressed only to disciples or Christians is erroneous. This is met with often, and it needs to be exposed. The Sermon on the Mount was addressed to the disciples, it is true, and Paul's epistles were addressed to Christians. That far the assumption is correct, but to assume that Christ and Paul did not lay down principles of universal application is both gratuitous and reprehensible. They both often spoke truths that had been applicable to all mankind in all ages and will be perpetually applicable as long as the race endures. The law on marriage that Christ and Paul stated and upheld was the law that God gave to man in the beginning of his life on earth. It applies to all men and women of marriageable age and condition. Furthermore, the language of Christ in Matthew nineteen was not addressed to his disciples, but directed to the unbelieving Jews who were trying to entrap him. There is not one law of marriage and divorce governing Christians and another law governing people of the world. Such a position is not only unscriptural; it is exceedingly hurtful. Contending for the Faith, pp. 64, 65, emphasis added).

2. Paul does not permit the believing spouse who is deserted (in the absence of fornication) by an unbeliever to remarry. 1 Cor. 7:15 simply says that if an unbeliever demands divorce the believer is not obligated [bound, literally, enslaved] to contest the divorce. Paul says nothing in v.15 about the right of the deserted spouse to remarry. Some argue that if the deserted spouse is not free to remarry, then he or she is "bound," or, stated negatively, is not free. Several observations are in order. First, how can the possibility of a second marriage be advocated based upon the passage when Paul himself is silent on the subject? Remarriage is not an issue in Paul's discussion. Arguably, it may be just the opposite, since the context appears to be one in which people are arguing for the right to dissolve marriage. If Paul were discussing remarriage, he likely would have done so in a more direct manner. In light of Matthew 19, it is unreasonable to conclude that Paul is teaching that divorce and remarriage in the case of desertion (in the absence of fornication) is not adultery. If an unbelieving spouse divorces a believing spouse, the unbelieving spouse is no longer bound to the unbelieving spouse, but he or she is still bound to the law of God.

Freedom from the marriage does not imply the freedom to remarry. Why would not the alternatives of reconciliation or lifelong celibacy still apply? 1 Cor. 7:11. To conclude otherwise contradicts Paul's own teaching (Rom. 7:2-3; 1 Cor. 7:39) as well as the teaching of Jesus (Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18).

3. The binding to which reference is made does not refer to the marriage bond. The Greek word, *douloo*, which is translated "bound" in 1 Cor. 7:15, signified "slavery."

"to make a slave of"...held by the constraint of law or necessity in some matter, 1 Cor. 7:15." "Make someone a slave"...be bound (as a slave) 1 Cor. 7:15," "to enslave, bring into bondage."

Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, p. 158.

A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, Arndt & Gingrich, p. 205.

Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament, Abbot-Smith, p. 122.

Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, Vine, W.E., V. 1, p. 139.

The New Testament in Greek, Westcott & Hort, Lexicon, p. 49, 1953.

In 1 Cor. 7:15 the specific word and tense that Paul uses is *dedoulotai*, third person singular perfect indicative passive of *doulco*. The word is used only eight times in the New Testament - Acts 7:6; Rom. 6:18; 1 Cor 7:15, 9:19; Gal. 4:3; Titus 2:3; 2 Pet. 2:19. The noun form of the word is used 125 times. Of these 133 occurrences, not one of them (unless it is in 1 Cor. 7:15) refers to the marriage bond.

In 1 Cor. 7 Paul clearly refers to the marriage bond twice, but in neither instance does he use this word; he uses the word *deo*. Thayer says that *deo*, which occurs 44 times in the New Testament,

means “to bind, tie, fasten...metaphor, to bind, put under obligation; to be bound to one: *andri*, of a wife, Ro. vii. 2; *gunaiki*, of a husband 1 Cor. vii. 27.” He cites the only three times this word is so used, Romans 7:2, 1 Cor. 7:27, 39 as examples of this usage.

Why did Paul use *deo* twice in this context in reference to the marriage bond, but use a different word, *douloo*, in 1 Cor. 7:15? A reasonable answer is that he was not referring to the marriage bond. The tense of the verb confirms this answer. The perfect tense denotes a present state resulting from a past action. Thus, the force of the tense is “was not bound (past action) and is not bound (resulting present state).” Thus, whatever the bondage to which reference is made, the believer was not under it before the unbeliever departed. But the unbeliever was married before the unbeliever departed; therefore, “bound” does not refer to the marriage tie or bond. If in fact “bound” refers to the marriage tie, it would seem that “marriage” could be substituted for “bound.” To do so illustrates the fallacy of the conclusion - “was not married (past action) and is not married (resulting present state).” Paul is simply saying that one is not bound to continue the marriage that the unbeliever wishes to dissolve.

Why would Paul be permitting remarriage here when in v.11, though he permits divorce, he specifically prohibits remarriage? It may be responded that v.11 does not refer to divorce, but to separation. But if that is so, why then does Paul say that the wife should remain “unmarried,” the same word used to describe those who are clearly without a spouse? Further, Greek authorities define the word as:

“a. to leave a husband or wife: of divorce. I. Cor. 7:11,15.” (Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament.)

See also,

A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament, Arndt & Gingrich.  
“Depart. (*Chorizo*), divorce. ‘Oft. in marriage contract in the papyri...1. Cor. 7:1, 11, 15.’“

Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament, Abbot-Smith.

The New Testament in Greek, Westcott & Hort, Lexicon.

If the word *chorizo* does not mean “divorce,” it proves too much, since the same word is used in v.15. If it does not mean “divorce” in v. 11, then it does not mean “divorce” in v. 15.

3. The Pauline Privilege as commonly taught leads to other erroneous conclusions. First, if Mt. 19:9 applies only to believer/believer marriages and 1 Cor. 7:15 is the only passage applicable to believer/unbeliever marriages, a believer married to a fornicating unbeliever cannot leave the unbeliever as long as the unbeliever chooses to remain in the marriage. This is so because 1 Cor. 7:12-13 binds the believer to remain with the unbeliever who desires to stay in the marriage and does not mention the exception of fornication. Only Mt. 19:9 does that. To argue that 1 Cor. 7:12-13 really means “content to dwell in complete sexual fidelity” is adding an unstated condition to the original. [Remember that brother Barnes advises against this in v.15 - “I don’t know what it means; I know what it says.]

Second, the Pauline Privilege as commonly taught makes unbelievers subject only to the civil law of marriage. It teaches that only those in the church are subject to moral law. This position may have been more appealing in our nation before divorce for any cause became popular, and civil law became more of a score sheet to record who is sleeping with whom. But even if divorce were still more restricted in our country, remember that the principle under discussion is a universal principle.

If unbelievers are subject only to the civil law, those who live in countries where polygamy and concubinage are legal may engage in those practices without being in violation of God's moral laws. But see, Col. 3:5-7; Rev. 21:8; 1 Cor. 6:9,11.

Third, this position makes marriage a church ordinance (even though marriage originated in Eden long prior to the church) since God's law of marriage is applicable only to the church or to believers. To be consistent, should not those who teach that God's law of marriage is applicable only to the church insist on having a marriage ceremony for all couples who are baptized? If the laws of marriage are not applicable to aliens, how can marriage itself be?

Fourth, this position has God providing a basis for divorce and remarriage for unbelievers which he does not provide for believers. What is the difference between desertion by an unbeliever and desertion by a believer? I understand the difference in the **cause** of the desertion; the question is, what is the difference in the **effect** of the desertion. What logical reason could possibly exist to permit one deserted by an unbeliever to remarry and to require that one deserted by a believer must remain unmarried? To respond that "God said so" begs the question; why did God say so? Why would God deal unequally and apparently unfairly with people in exactly the same situation? Jesus taught that if a man puts away his wife except for fornication and marries another commits adultery; and one that marries the spouse who has been put away commits adultery. Thus, if a husband and wife cannot get along and they separate or divorce, neither can remarry while the other lives. If Paul gives the deserted believer the right of remarriage during the lifetime of the deserting unbeliever, he spares the deserted believer the hardship which Jesus placed upon believers divorced for a cause other than fornication. Suppose that a believing husband becomes mean to his wife and finally

leaves her. Suppose further that he was not guilty of fornication. Neither of them can remarry. The believing wife is exposed to financial difficulties in supporting her children, and she is exposed to the desire for sexual companionship. According to Jesus, she is not permitted to marry another to rid herself of these exposures. But if Paul teaches that the believer deserted by an unbeliever may marry another before the death of the departing unbeliever, this deserted woman, in exactly the same situation as the divorced woman, does not have to suffer from either financial difficulties or a celibate life. She can marry and be relieved from them both. This certainly has the appearance of unfairness, and that on the part of a God who has said that he is no respecter of persons.

Other difficulties with the Pauline Privilege could be discussed. These should be sufficient to demonstrate that the Pauline Privilege is unscriptural and that those who teach it teach error.