



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 What God Has Joined Together  
(*Marriage*, pp. 73-81)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu)

### Christian Reflection

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# What God Has Joined Together

Thanks to recent research in ancient Judaism, we have a better understanding of the Pharisees' question of Jesus, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?" (Matthew 19:3). Furthermore, we find Jesus and Paul were in perfect agreement on the grounds of divorce and the possibility of remarriage.

## Prayer

**Scripture Readings:** Matthew 19:3-12 and 1 Corinthians 7:7-16

## Reflection

"Jewish rabbis at the time of Jesus were debating a new and very popular form of divorce called the 'Any Cause' divorce," writes David Instone-Brewer. This new no-fault form of divorce was an innovation by Hillelite Pharisees who read the basis for divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1 – "a cause of indecency" (or, "something objectionable," NRSV) – as two grounds for divorce: *indecency* (i.e., adultery) and *any cause*. The Shammaite Pharisees, on the other hand, read this as a single phrase that meant "nothing except adultery." Asked if he agrees with the Hillelite 'Any Cause' view, Jesus responds with the Shammaite slogan.

Jesus and Paul, when interpreted in the context of this debate, can be seen to agree about divorce and remarriage:

- ▶ *Jesus' teachings on divorce.* Not only does Jesus reject no-fault divorce, he departs from common Jewish opinion by objecting to polygamy, denying that divorce is necessary after adultery, saying procreation is not an obligation, and encouraging spouses to forgive and not divorce when marriage vows are broken (Matthew 19:4-12). Jesus does not mention neglect as a ground for divorce. However, since he disagrees with other common views, "his silence on divorce for neglect is deafening," says Instone-Brewer, and he concludes that Jesus agreed with the universal view among rabbis that Exodus 21:10-11 permits divorce for neglect.
- ▶ *Paul's views on divorce.* Paul seems to permit divorce for neglect (1 Corinthians 7:3-5 and 32-34 echo Exodus 21:7-11). This explains why believers who are abandoned (which would be a form of neglect) may regard themselves as divorced (7:15), yet believers should not abandon their spouses (7:11). "Paul and Jesus were against no-fault divorce – i.e., divorce without proper biblical grounds."
- ▶ *Reconciling Jesus and Paul's views on remarriage.* At first glance, Jesus seems to view remarriage as adultery, but Paul, in agreement with Old Testament and Roman laws, allows remarriage. Instone-Brewer reviews this in light of the Any Cause debate. Jesus' claim "that remarriage was adultery was presumably also a reply to [the Pharisees'] question. He was stating, in effect, that anyone with an Any Cause divorce was still married, so if they remarried they were committing adultery." Since Any Cause divorce was so common, "when Jesus criticized those who had remarried after divorce, he implicated virtually all remarried Jews. Therefore, when Luke and Matthew wanted to abbreviate Jesus' teaching into a couple of sentences, they were able to



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present the conclusion that ‘any man who remarries commits adultery’ and, because most divorced people remarry, ‘he causes his wife to commit adultery’ (Matthew 5:32; Luke 16:18). Jesus was not saying remarriage per se was adulterous, but that remarriage after an invalid divorce (such as an Any Cause divorce) was adulterous, because the person was still married.”

### Study Questions

1. Discuss Instone-Brewer’s summary of Jesus’ teaching: “When Jesus spoke about ‘those whom God has joined,’ he used the imperative to order them ‘do not separate,’ or possibly ‘you should not separate,’ but it is impossible to translate this imperative as ‘you cannot separate.’”
2. How did the rabbis use Exodus 21:10-11 to define “neglect”? How should this biblical basis for divorce be applied today?
3. Do you agree with Instone-Brewer’s view that “In the modern world where believers can also be unresponsive to the demands of church discipline, Paul presumably would extend this provision [of not requiring a believer to return to his or her spouse] to all victims of divorce against their will”?
4. How might your congregation answer Richard Hays’ call “to provide deep and satisfying *koinōnia* and friendships to those divorced persons who choose not to remarry in order to devote their lives to the service of God outside the married state.... In other words, within the church we need to shatter the power of the myth that only married people are normal and that only marriage offers the conditions necessary for human fulfillment” (quoted, *Marriage*, p. 67)?
5. Should remarriage be discouraged or prohibited for a Christian for any reason today?

### Departing Hymn: “Lead Us, Heavenly Father”

Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us  
o’er the world’s tempestuous sea;  
guard us, guide us, keep us, feed us,  
for we have no help but thee;  
yet possessing every blessing  
if our God our Father be.

Savior, breathe forgiveness o’er us;  
all our weakness you do know;  
you did tread this earth before us,  
you did feel its keenest woe;  
lone and dreary, faint and weary,  
through the desert you did go.

Spirit of our God, descending,  
fill our hearts with heavenly joy,  
love with every passion blending,  
pleasure that can never cloy<sup>†</sup>;  
thus provided, pardoned, guided,  
nothing can our peace destroy.

James Edmeston (1821), alt.

Suggested Tunes: MANNHEIM or LAUDA ANIMA

<sup>†</sup> Cloy = be too filling or sweet.

# What God Has Joined Together

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Readings	Scripture Readings	Scripture Readings	Scripture Readings
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Discuss biblical grounds for divorce	Discuss remarriage and attitudes toward divorced Christians
Questions 2, 3, and 5	Questions (selected)	Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions 4 and 5
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To interpret Jesus' teachings on divorce in light of the first-century rabbinical debate of Any Cause divorce.
2. To compare Jesus' and Paul's teachings concerning divorce and remarriage for believers.
3. To examine congregational attitudes toward divorced Christians.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Marriage (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Lead Us, Heavenly Father" locate a tune, MANNHEIM or LAUDA ANIMA, in your church's hymnal or on the web at [www.cyberhymnal.org](http://www.cyberhymnal.org).

## Begin with a Comment

David Instone-Brewer is studying a remarkable set of documents at Cambridge University. "The treasures found by Indiana Jones are boring compared to the fabulous discoveries made by two elderly widowed sisters in the 1890s, Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson," he says. "After unexciting marriages to Scottish lawyers, during which they passed the time by learning ancient languages, they decided to set out on adventures in the Middle East. Their knowledge of Syriac, Aramaic, and other languages helped them gain entrance to St. Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai where they found more valuable manuscripts than the monks knew what to do with. The butter dish at one meal turned out to be fashioned from a fifth-century Syriac Gospel!

"Such discoveries spurred them to seek out other neglected manuscripts, and after following several leads they went to an old synagogue in Cairo where they found a Geniza (a rubbish room for sacred manuscripts) that had not been cleared out for a thousand years. They gained permission to take the oldest manuscripts to Cambridge University, where they arrived in several tea chests—so many, that scholars have only recently finished the work of identifying and cataloging them all.... These and other such discoveries have now enabled us to understand the question that the Pharisees asked Jesus about divorce, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?'" (*Marriage*, p. 73).

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to guide our Christian love for friends who suffer the pain and loss of divorce.

## Scripture Reading

Ask two members to read Matthew 19:3-12 and 1 Corinthians 7:7-16 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

Do not miss the forest for the trees in this study! Instone-Brewer invites us to understand Jesus' and Paul's teachings on divorce and remarriage through the eyes of a first-century Jewish reader who was aware of the rabbinic debates about Any Cause divorce. This chart summarizes Instone-Brewer's fresh reading of some key passages:

	<i>Issue</i>	<i>Instone-Brewer's reading</i>
Matthew 19:3; Mark 10:2-9	Does Jesus permit divorce?	Yes, on biblical grounds of adultery (stated in text) or neglect (based on Jesus' not opposing the universal rabbinic opinion). Jesus opposes 'Any Cause' divorce. Mark's wording on this is abbreviated.
Matthew 5:31-32; 19:9; Mark 10:10-11; Luke 16:18	Does he permit remarriage?	Not after 'Any Cause' divorce (use this explicit context of Matthew 19:9 to read other passages). Jesus wasn't asked about other cases.
1 Corinthians 7:12-16	Does Paul allow divorce?	Yes, if abandoned by unbelieving spouse (equals neglect). Don't initiate a no-fault Roman divorce. Paul wasn't asked about adultery.
1 Corinthians 7:15	Does Paul allow remarriage?	Yes, after neglect (context of 1 Corinthians 7:15; Paul wasn't asked about adultery). Divorcees must remarry under Roman law.

For more information about this helpful research, see David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002).

You might extend this discussion to two sessions. In one session, consider how to apply Jesus' and Paul's teachings on divorce today. In the other session, discuss how to reconcile their teachings about remarriage and examine attitudes today toward Christians who are divorced.

### **Study Questions**

1. Jesus urges reconciliation, for God's intention is that marriages be lasting. Instone-Brewer writes, "Jesus taught forgiveness rather than hasty divorce, though he agreed that a hard-hearted partner who repeatedly broke marriage vows unrepentantly could be divorced."
2. Exodus 21:10-11 requires that a slave wife who has been neglected in regard to "food, clothing, or marital [love]" must be permitted her freedom. The rabbis reasoned "that if the lowest of society had these rights, then the rest of society certainly shared them. Therefore anyone (man or woman) who suffered neglect could demand a divorce." How would these three criteria of neglect apply today? Should other criteria (e.g., unwarranted limits on communication, emotional support, medical care, educational or social opportunities, or information about finances; or lack of care for one's children) be added to the list?
3. When a believer abandons an unbeliever, Paul tells the believer to return to the marriage partner (1 Corinthians 7:10-11); yet when an unbeliever abandons a believer, Paul says "let it be so" and that the believer "is not bound" to the marriage (7:15). Why this difference? David Instone-Brewer suggests the reason is pragmatic: "Paul could command a believer to return to his or her spouse, but he could not command an unbeliever." Now suppose the departing partner is a Christian who does not respond to the congregation's discipline – should the abandoned partner be treated as free from the marriage on the grounds of neglect?
4. How are divorced men and women integrated into the life of the congregation? Are they fully accepted, chosen as leaders, and employed by the church? What restrictions are placed on their service based on their experience during or responsibility for the divorce? Hays is concerned that even when divorced persons are spiritually mature, we think they must remarry. In my experience, this especially is true when they have been pastors or other leaders of the congregation. Why is this? How can we encourage divorced men and women in fulfilling lives of service if they choose not to remarry?
5. Paul says believers who abandon their spouses (without the biblical grounds of adultery or neglect) should not remarry (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). He says the Lord commands this. Might a believer today abandon his or her spouse in a manner or for an unsupportable reason that would make remarriage impermissible for the believer? (What might such a reason be?) If the believer repents, should he or she be allowed to remarry another person, or should the believer be urged to reconcile (if possible) with the spouse?

### **Departing Hymn**

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.