

DIVORCE AND THE MEANING OF PORNEIA

The following is an excerpt from the minutes of the Church of God conference of 2002.

Jamie McNab led the next portion of the conference, which was a review of our understanding of divorce and remarriage, but with a closer look at the meaning of the Greek word porneia.

We have looked in considerable depth at the subjects of divorce and remarriage at the past two conferences. The Church of God Newsletters issued at the time record much of the discussions. In addition, Don Roth has given two sermons on the subject.

Our understanding has been that for those married **IN THE CHURCH** — or where both married partners are subsequently converted — marriage is till “death does them part.” Separation may sometimes occur, but there can be **NO REMARRIAGE**.

However, some have been troubled by the so-called exception clause given by Jesus. For example, in Matthew 19:9, Jesus says, “And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication (Greek word: porneia), and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.”

Is Jesus giving permission here for divorce in some circumstances? What is the meaning of porneia? Does it mean sexual immorality — unfaithfulness? Is it acceptable to divorce for sex sins or immoral conduct — with the freedom then to remarry? Just what was Jesus referring to?

Foundational Understanding

As we begin to seek understanding of what Jesus could be referring to here, let us once again lay the foundations of what we believe, and why. Then, hopefully, the meaning of porneia in this passage will be easier to arrive at.

There are a number of basic scriptures that are **TOTALLY CLEAR**, with no trace of ambiguity. For example, “And they twain shall be one flesh: so then they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore **GOD HATH JOINED** together, **LET NOT MAN PUT ASUNDER** ...whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her. And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery,” Mark 10:9-12.

This passage in Mark is very clear. Remarriage of anyone bound in marriage by God is **ADULTERY**. Jesus is quoted saying the **SAME THING** in Luke 16:18.

In Romans 7:2-3, the Apostle Paul states, “For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband **SO LONG AS HE LIVETH**; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. So then **IF**, while her husband liveth, she be

married to another man, she shall be CALLED AN ADULTERESS: but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man.”

It would be many years after the time of Christ before the New Testament scriptures were collected together for everyone to read. Up till then, many of those in the early New Testament church would only have a part of the scriptures. Those who only had access to, say, the books of Mark, Luke or Romans, would read the very plain commandment — DO NOT DIVORCE.

To those converted in Corinth, Paul wrote, “And unto the married (in God’s Church) I COMMAND, yet not I, but the Lord, LET NOT the wife depart from her husband: But and if she depart, let her REMAIN UNMARRIED, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife,” 1 Corinthians 7:10-11. So the position was clear to those in Corinth, too. No divorce. If separation occurs, the options are only to remain unmarried, or to seek reconciliation — there is no option to REMARRY!

But did Jesus mean something different to the readers of the gospel written by Matthew? Was Jesus CONTRADICTING HIMSELF when He allowed the putting away for porneia? Did the Apostle Paul not know of Christ’s teachings?

Problems in Marriage

We all know that, as human beings, there are times when we do not get along. That occurs in marriage all too often. Sometimes, a husband and wife just “grow apart.” At other times, one partner can become abusive, and make life difficult — almost intolerable — for the other. Sometimes, alcohol wrecks a relationship. Sometimes there is infidelity, and one partner has one, or more, “affairs” with someone else.

From a human perspective, it seems kind and considerate to give those involved in such difficult relationships “another chance” at happiness — freedom to divorce and remarry if the marriage has “irretrievably broken down.”

Out of such feelings of kindness, many have sought to find biblical reasons to allow such second chances at marital success. But once that first step is taken, there seems no end to the reasons that are eventually given to permit divorce. Consider, for example, the teaching of the Worldwide Church of God. In its Special Policy Statement of April 20, 1993 the WCG reaches the incredible conclusion that divorce is acceptable “... if either party informs the Church in the earliest months of the marriage that he or she REGRETS his or her marriage!” Unbelievable! The young wife discovers that she has to wash too many smelly socks, and “regrets” getting married? The young man discovers that his wife complains if he wants to go out with his buddies every week to a football match, and “regrets” losing his “freedom?”

The question we need to answer is not what WE think would be a kind and caring way to deal with marriage difficulties, but what does GOD SAY.

The instructions in Mark, Luke, Romans and First Corinthians are very plain. NO DIVORCE.

Jesus Rejects the Pharisees Views

So what, then, does the exception clause in Matthew 19:9 (and chapter 5:32 of the same book) mean? Does porneia mean you can get a divorce if you “regret” getting married? Does it mean you can get a divorce if your wife or husband commits adultery? What if your spouse turns out to have homosexual leanings?

Let’s now look more closely at this word porneia, and see if we can determine HOW Christ meant it to be understood.

We pick up the story in Matthew 19:3. The Pharisees came to Jesus testing Him about divorce. “Can you get divorced for just any reason?” they asked.

The Pharisees all agreed that divorce was permissible, but disagreed among themselves as to what was an acceptable reason for divorce. Two of the major schools — or groups — of Pharisees at that time were the school of Hillel, and the school of Shammai. Those of the school of Shammai taught that divorce was only permitted when there was unchastity, or adultery, involved. The school of Hillel was of the opinion that divorce was in order if, for any reason, the husband was dissatisfied with his wife — even if, for example, she burned his dinner one night!

The Pharisees wanted Jesus to pick sides. Which school of the Pharisees was right?

Jesus reply was PLAIN. “Have ye not read, that He which made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be ONE FLESH?

Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, LET NOT MAN PUT ASUNDER,” Matthew 19:4-6. This is exactly what we have read in Mark 10, Luke 16, Romans 7 and 1 Corinthians 7; one-hundred per-cent consistency!

But this rather took the Pharisees aback. They had assumed divorce was acceptable, and just wanted Jesus to specify the conditions (then no doubt they would have tried to tangle Jesus further with their devious arguments). However, Jesus stopped them in their tracks — those whom God binds are one flesh, and men are to STOP SEPARATING! This was NOT what the Pharisees expected to hear!

“But what about what Moses said,” cried the Pharisees? “Didn’t he permit divorce?” Jesus explained that Moses may have made certain concessions because of people’s hard hearts, but “from the beginning it was not so.” It was certainly not God’s intention or purpose. And, irrespective of what Moses may, or may not have said, Jesus continued “I

SAY, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication (porneia), and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery,” Matthew 19:9.

Now just what was Jesus referring to here? If Mark 10, Luke 16, Romans 7 and 1 Corinthians 7 all state that there can be NO DIVORCE, is Jesus now contradicting the teaching given elsewhere? Having said plainly in verses 4-6 of Matthew 19 that there can be no divorce, is He now contradicting Himself a mere three verses later?

Some would say that porneia means adultery or other sex sin, and Jesus was here permitting divorce for such immorality. However, if that were the case, Jesus need only say that He agreed with the teaching of the Pharisaic school of Shammai — because that is what they taught. But Jesus had not accepted the Pharisees’ views at all. He had told them bluntly, “Get in line with God’s purpose from the beginning and STOP SEPARATING!”

The Disciples are Shocked

If we think about it, most of us would agree that sex sin in marriage would be very difficult to come to terms with. It would no doubt strain a marriage relationship to the very limit. From a purely human perspective, many (even in the Churches of God) would feel that divorce might well be the best way to deal with infidelity. So IF Jesus had said, “Divorce is permissible where the marriage has broken down through immoral behaviour and unfaithfulness,” most would probably say, “Yes, it’s sad, but that’s a very reasonable and understandable response to human weakness.”

However, that is NOT how the disciples responded to what Jesus said! They did not say, “Yeah, we always thought Shammai was on the right track, it’s only when your wife’s been unfaithful you can dump her. Right on, Jesus!” On the contrary, they were ASTONISHED by what Jesus said! “His disciples say unto him, If the case of the man be so with his wife, IT IS NOT GOOD TO MARRY!”

The disciples understood that Jesus had virtually closed the door on divorce. To all practical intents and purposes, Jesus was teaching that divorce was not available! And if you couldn’t get divorced, no matter how bad your wife turned out to be, it was better NOT TO GET MARRIED thought the disciples! So whatever Jesus meant by His so-called exception clause, it clearly wasn’t an easy exit from an unhappy marriage. And the disciples were shocked by the very limited nature of this “exception.” They lived among a “wicked and adulterous generation” where divorce was common. Jesus had just ended such human options!

So, if Jesus was not siding with Hillel or Shammai, and had stunned the disciples with His comments, just what did He mean by the term porneia? And how could ANY exception be consistent with the plain teaching in Mark 10, Luke 16, Romans 7 and 1 Corinthians 7 that there is NO DIVORCE?

There is one other passage where Jesus mentioned the same exception, Matthew 5:32. There we read, “But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication (Greek: porneia), causeth her to COMMIT ADULTERY: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.”

This passage appears in the so-called Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has been explaining how we are to live by the SPIRIT of the law, not just by the LETTER. In leading up to His comments about divorce, Jesus SETS THE STANDARD for us as Christians — as His followers. He states, “For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall EXCEED THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THE SCRIBES AND PHARISEES, ye shall in NO CASE enter into the kingdom of heaven,” Matthew 5:20. Jesus is quite blunt here. If we live only according to the standards and values of the Pharisees and scribes WE WON’T BE IN GOD’S KINGDOM!

Jesus then takes a number of illustrations, to show EXACTLY WHAT HE MEANS.

Firstly, He mentions how “in olden times” they were told not to murder. Now, says Jesus, I AM SAYING to you not even to GET ANGRY without a good reason! A much higher standard than taught by the Pharisees!

Then Jesus refers to adultery. That was forbidden “in olden times,” but now, says Jesus, I AM TELLING you, don’t even LOOK LUSTFULLY at a woman. Again, a much higher standard than would be taught by the Pharisees.

Then Jesus comes to the topic of divorce. You heard, “in olden times,” said Jesus, that any divorce had to be acknowledged with formal, legal documentation, but now I AM TEACHING you there is to be NO DIVORCE (unless for porneia). Whatever Jesus meant, it must obviously be a MUCH HIGHER STANDARD than the Pharisees taught.

The whole point of Jesus’ teaching in verses 21-32 of Matthew 5 is to illustrate, with real examples, just HOW His teachings far exceed the “righteousness” of the Pharisees. Many of the Pharisees taught that divorce was permissible only for adultery and sex sin in marriage (the school of Shammai, for example). Whatever Jesus’ teaching was, it was clearly of a far higher standard than this.

Mr. Armstrong Explains

Mr. Herbert Armstrong looked into these puzzling passages many years ago, and concluded there was ONE EXPLANATION that allowed ALL these scriptures to perfectly harmonise.

Mr. Armstrong concluded that the word porneia — in both Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9 — referred to PRE-MARITAL SEX. Or, in the words of the King James Version, fornication. Mr. Armstrong taught that where a man discovered that his new wife was not a virgin — had been involved in pre-marital sex — he would be entitled to PUT HER

AWAY upon discovery of the facts (most likely on the wedding night). In this situation, God — knowing that the man was being defrauded — would NOT BIND the marriage. However, the man would have to take action immediately. He could not choose to “overlook” the situation, live with his wife for some time, and then decide at some later point to invoke her unchastity, and seek a belated annulment of the wedding.

However, Mr. Armstrong’s view was that we all live in a world which has long since lost the true values. Many young men and women have “made mistakes” in their lives. They have few decent role models, and face huge pressures to conform to the “ways of this world.” Mr. Armstrong felt the “Christian response” to finding that one’s wife (or husband) had been involved in pre-marital sex would be TO FORGIVE — to accept the other as one’s partner — and to enter wholeheartedly into the marriage. And God, of course, would then BIND — or YOKE — that marriage, which would be binding until death.

If, however, the one partner was only willing to accept a virgin as a husband or wife, and had made that plain, then clearly there must be an element of deception or concealment or fraud if things turned out otherwise subsequent to the wedding. In that situation, if forgiveness was not going to be available, Mr. Armstrong recognised that Matthew 19:9 permitted a putting away. In reality, this did not represent the breaking of a God-bound marriage. God would not yet have bound this couple.

This explanation of Jesus’ teaching provides us with complete consistency. There can be no divorce and remarriage for ANY marriage which has been BOUND BY GOD. Matthew 5 and Matthew 19 are in complete harmony with the various other passages we looked at earlier.

But some object to this explanation of porneia in Matthew 5 and 19. They point out that the scripture says “whosoever shall put away his WIFE.” If Jesus calls the woman a WIFE, then surely, they say, the couple must have been bound as husband and wife? Otherwise, she wouldn’t be a wife, would she?

Mr. Armstrong pointed out that this overlooks the custom of the day among the Jews (and some others) that treated a couple as legally husband and wife FROM THE TIME OF THEIR BETROTHAL — which might be up to a year before they were actually married!

There is a Biblical example of this in Jesus’ own physical family, as we see in Matthew 1:18-20. “Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused (betrothed or engaged) to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. Then Joseph HER HUSBAND, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily. But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary THY WIFE: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.”

Joseph and Mary are said to be HUSBAND and WIFE, even BEFORE they were married!

This principle can also be seen in the teaching given to Old Testament Israel. In Deuteronomy 22:23-24 we read, “If a damsel that is a virgin be betrothed unto AN HUSBAND, and a man find her in the city, and lie with her; then ye shall bring them both out unto the gate of that city, and ye shall stone them with stones that they die; the damsel, because she cried not, being in the city; and the man, because he hath humbled his NEIGHBOUR'S WIFE: so thou shalt put away evil from among you.” Here, even at betrothal stage, the affianced couple are referred to as husband and wife.

So, it is quite in order, scripturally, to interpret Jesus' instructions in Matthew 5 and 19 as referring to the putting away of a betrothed wife who has been found guilty of fornication — pre-marital sex — porneia.

Was Herbert Armstrong Wrong?

Many now disagree with Mr. Armstrong's explanation of these passages which deal with the exception clause. They believe Mr. Armstrong did not understand the meaning of porneia (just as the WCG came to believe Mr. Armstrong didn't understand the meaning of “born again” or gennao!). Many among the Churches of God want to find that porneia can mean there are MULTIPLE REASONS for divorce.

Rather than following Mr. Armstrong's approach — coming to understand the purpose and meaning of MARRIAGE, and then interpreting a potentially unclear scripture by its overall context in the meaning of marriage — these people choose to focus on the “technical” meaning of the Greek word, then attempt to build their doctrine on what they think the word “should” mean.

Here is a typical example of how Mr. Armstrong's understanding is discredited. Mr. Frank Nelte, writing in The Journal of 30 November 2001, states:

* “So porneia includes all forms of sexual transgressions, including sex between unmarried people and adultery and homosexuality and other perversions. It is not a specific and limited term, AS MR. ARMSTRONG USED TO BELIEVE, WHEN HE ATTEMPTED TO LIMIT PORNEIA TO SEX BETWEEN TWO UNMARRIED PEOPLE.”

* “It is vital to understand that IN NO WAY can porneia be limited to sex before marriage.”

* “Porneia ... MOST EMPHATICALLY CANNOT BE LIMITED TO SEX BEFORE MARRIAGE, AS MR. ARMSTRONG ATTEMPTED TO DO.”

These comments by Mr. Nelte are, however, inaccurate. Mr. Armstrong NEVER attempted to LIMIT the meaning of porneia to “sex before marriage.” Mr. Armstrong happily acknowledged that porneia has a number of different meanings, but stated that, IN THE CONTEXT OF MATTHEW 5 & 19, it could ONLY mean fornication — as any

other meaning in Matthew 5 and 19 would CONTRADICT the many scriptures relating to the permanence of marriage.

Here is what Mr. Armstrong actually wrote:

* “The Greek word porneia has a BROAD RANGE OF MEANINGS. It means sexual immorality in general, sexual intercourse by an unmarried person, harlotry. It includes sexual deviations, homo sexuality, bestiality, perversion.” Marriage and Divorce booklet, 1973.

* “Granted the Greek word porneia has MORE THAN ONE MEANING ...we determine by its use in the sentence, IN THE CONTEXT OF THAT SENTENCE, which meaning of the word applies.”

So, as far as the meaning of the word porneia is concerned, Mr. Armstrong is in complete agreement with the Greek lexicons. He is in complete agreement with Mr. Nelte, as far as the technical meaning of the word is concerned.

The All-Important CONTEXT!

The big difference is that Mr. Armstrong understands that the PRECISE MEANING of this very general word must be derived from the CONTEXT in which it was used.

One of the meanings of porneia is sexual immorality. However, for Jesus to say in Matthew 5 that one can divorce for sexual immorality is TO CONTRADICT many other plain scriptures, and to have a standard of righteousness no different from the Pharisees.

Here are some illustrations that show how porneia can have different meanings, which need to be understood IN CONTEXT:

* “It is reported commonly that there is fornication (porneia) among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife,” 1 Corinthians 5:1. Here porneia obviously does not mean homosexuality ... or bestiality ... or harlotry. If the couple were “married” it would be an example of incest, a close family relationship such as forbidden in Leviticus 18:8. If the young man were not married, then he would be guilty of fornication.

* “It is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, to avoid fornication (porneia), let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband,” 1 Corinthians 7:1-2. In this context, Paul is telling the unmarried to get married. In other words, to avoid the temptation of pre-marital sex. In this passage porneia clearly means FORNICATION.

* “They answered and said unto him, Abraham is our father. Jesus saith unto them, If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham. But now ye seek to kill me, a man that hath told you the truth, which I have heard of God: this did not Abraham. Ye do the deeds of your father. Then said they to him, WE be not born of fornication (porneia); we have one Father, even God,” John 8:39-41. Here the Jews are denying that they are illegitimate — the offspring of an unmarried woman who had committed

fornication. Some commentators (including Mr. Armstrong) believe that the Jews were actually making a veiled reference to the circumstances of Jesus' own birth. In other words, WE weren't born of fornication — as YOU WERE; we all know your mother was pregnant before she got married!

* “And the rest of the men which were not killed by these plagues yet repented not of the works of their hands, that they should not worship devils, and idols of gold, and silver, and brass, and stone, and of wood: which neither can see, nor hear, nor walk: Neither repented they of their murders, nor of their sorceries, nor of their fornication (porneia), nor of their thefts,” Revelation 9:20-21. In the CONTEXT, the term porneia here must apply to sexual immorality in its widest sense.

So the point is clear. Porneia has a range of meanings, and it is the context that gives us the understanding.

Is Porneia Adultery?

Some want to say that Jesus was really referring to adultery in Matthew 5 and 19. Adultery, they say, is the exception for which one can be divorced.

Whilst the term porneia can include all types of sexual sin, as we have seen, there is in fact an entirely separate Greek word for adultery — moicheia. There are a number of passages where both terms are used, showing that they have different meanings.

* “For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries (moicheia), fornications (porneia), thefts, false witness, blasphemies,” Matthew 15:19.

* “Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators (porneia), nor idolaters, nor adulterers (moicheia), nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God,” 1 Corinthians 6:9-10.

* “Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery (moicheia), fornication (porneia), uncleanness, lasciviousness,” Galatians 5:19.

* See also Matthew 5:32, Matthew 19:9, Mark 7:21, Hebrews 13:4.

The Conclusion

In the final analysis, we have to determine which meaning of porneia is appropriate FROM THE CONTEXT. The context means not just the IMMEDIATE CONTEXT, but also the intent and purpose of the WHOLE OF SCRIPTURE and God's overall purpose. EVERYTHING must fit together in perfect harmony.

The intent is clear. Jesus said, DON'T PUT AWAY!

IF we accept that a God-bound marriage is binding till “death does them part,” then there is ONLY ONE meaning of porneia that CAN be correct — pre-marital sex, concealed from the husband (or wife), where God will allow the partners to separate — provided

they act immediately upon discovery.

Any other explanation — allowing termination of a God-bound marriage after ten or twenty years — contradicts the PLAIN TEACHING of Mark, Luke, Romans and 1 Corinthians. It becomes acceptable to be a covenant-breaker.

In his booklet Marriage and Divorce, Mr. Armstrong concluded:

* “What is the meaning of the Greek porneia in this passage (Matthew 19)? The Church of God for 40 years has said it relates to an illicit sex act committed PRIOR to being bound in marriage, undisclosed to the husband until AFTER the marriage ceremony.”

* “The word porneia in Matthew 5 and Matthew 19 does not, and cannot mean in this context, adultery ...porneia can, and more often does mean fornication by an UNmarried person — prior to marriage. THIS IS THE ONLY MEANING THAT FITS THE CONTEXT IN MATTHEW 5 AND 19, CONSISTENT WITH GOD’S LAW AND ALL THE OTHER SCRIPTURES, AND CONSISTENT WITH GOD’S PURPOSE!”

* “Matthew alone mentions ‘except it be for porneia’ because only he has explained the incident of Joseph thinking to put away Mary his betrothed. When Jesus said these words, recorded in Matthew 5 and 19, He was very conscious of the fact that this very ‘exception clause’ INVOLVED HIS OWN CONCEPTION AND BIRTH.”

There was considerable discussion of all these points after Mr. McNab’s presentation. Many felt that Mr. Armstrong’s explanation of porneia harmonised completely with the understanding of marriage and divorce that we had arrived at in our past two conferences. Some, however, believed that there was still more to the meaning of porneia than had been covered, and that it may have to be looked at further at some future time.