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# The Reformers' Interpretation of Jesus' Teaching on Divorce and Marriage

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## The Reformers' Interpretation of Jesus' Teaching on Divorce and Marriage

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### Introduction

One glance at the headlines for any U.S. newspaper/ news site at the end of June 2015 makes it clear that marriage, and specifically the “definition of marriage” is a hotly contested contemporary debate. In the questions asked by the Supreme Court justices in their initial hearing of the *Obergefell v. Hodges* and in their decision (e.g. majority and particularly in the minority), the question of a “traditional” view of marriage was raised, though ultimately dismissed. Many evangelicals rightly noted, that for the church, the question was not just one of the “traditional” view, but one of a “biblical” view.

During the Reformation, questions related to “traditional” view of marriage and a “biblical” view of marriage were commonplace. The theological discussion often gravitated around the topics of clerical marriage and marriage as a sacrament. These discussions often included references to Jesus' teaching on divorce, marriage, and celibacy found in Matthew 19.

Partly due to the pattern of commenting on the biblical texts established by Erasmus' *Annotations*, which accompanied his publication of the New Testament in 1516, the reformers often explained their theological views through explicit comments on the biblical text.<sup>1</sup> Among the vast amount of religious documents in the Reformation era, arguably the most influential on biblical interpretation was Erasmus' *Novum*

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<sup>1</sup> See Jason K. Lee, “Theological Interpretation in the Reformers: A Case Study of ‘Son of Man’ Texts in Matthew” in *Aspects of Reforming*. Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2013.

*Instrumentum* (1516)<sup>2</sup> was intended to be a revision of and improvement on the Latin Vulgate with its outdated and incorrect grammatical constructions.<sup>3</sup> Erasmus added two other features to justify his revisions to the approved Latin text. In parallel columns with his Latin text, Erasmus provided the Greek (Byzantine) text. Later in the work, he included his *Annotations*, which often explained why his translation revised the Latin of the Vulgate and clarified his translation's connection with the Greek text. These secondary features were to provide the textual (the Greek text) and grammatical/ theological (*Annotations*) rationale behind Erasmus' Latin translation. Erasmus may have intended to provide a better quality Latin text, but it was his secondary features of the Greek text and his *Annotations* that would most dramatically affect the Protestant reformers, even those that rejected Erasmus' humanist program.

Like many other portions of the reformers' platform for change, their marriage views needed to flow from the biblical text if they were going to upend contemporary religious views or civil practices. Matthew 19 serves a crucial text in the Reformers' discussion because it provides one of the longest canonical presentations of Jesus' teaching on marriage. This text is crucial for them, because it draws on three other biblical texts. In contemporary parlance, Matthew 19 contains two usages of intertextuality (Ge 2 and Dt 24) and one use of inner-textuality (Mt 5). In Matthew's account, Jesus' reply to the Pharisees' first question includes an extended quotation of Genesis 2 and a concluding interpretation that emphasizes God's intention of a lifelong union in marriage. The Pharisees' second question includes a quotation and a brief, slanted interpretation of Deut. 24. Jesus' corrective reply includes a thematic overlap with his discussion of marriage and divorce in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5.

Appropriately, this paper will navigate some of the reformation comments on Matthew 19, but will also reflect some of Reformation

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<sup>2</sup> Erasmus' first edition published in Basle in 1516 was entitled *Novum Instrumentum*. Subsequent editions in 1519, 1522, 1527 and 1535 were entitled *Novum Testamentum*.

<sup>3</sup> Henk Jan De Jonge, "Novum Testamentum a Nobis Versum: The Essence of Erasmus' Edition of the New Testament," *Journal of Theological Studies* NS 35.2 (Oct 1984): 395-396. Cf. De Jonge, "Erasmus' Method of Translation in His Version of the New Testament," *The Bible Translator* 37.1 (Jan 1986): 135-138.

commentary on the other three texts as well. So, after an all too brief example of one reformer's description of marriage and how these texts provide a crucial textual framework for the discussion, this paper will turn to the reformers' interpretations of the background texts (from elsewhere in Matthew and in the Pentateuch) before focusing on some of the Reformation exegetical insights into Matthew 19. The heavy dose of Reformation selections in this essay is intended to let the reformers "speak" to a contemporary, biblical view of marriage.

### **Luther as an Example of Reformation Views on Marriage<sup>4</sup>**

Luther provides a useful and lively example of the reformers' discussions of marriage in his *Estate of Marriage*. Throughout the work, Luther interacts with various biblical texts and yet Gen 1-2 and Matt 19 figure prominently. The German reformer finds these texts foundational for a "biblical view" of marriage. Genesis 1 provides the appropriate candidates for marriage according to Luther. He writes:

In order to proceed aright let us direct our attention to Genesis 1 [:27], "So God created man... male and female he created them." From this passage we may be assured that God divided mankind into two classes, namely, male and female, or a he and a she. This was so pleasing to him that he himself called it a good creation [Gen. 1:31].<sup>5</sup>

Luther identifies the sexual identity of the male and female as essential to God's creative design and for His ordinance of marriage. Their physical differences are to stimulate mutual appreciation between the male and female for God's creation of sexual identity as a God-honoring characteristic of His design. God's creative design of human bodies as

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<sup>4</sup> This brief survey of Luther's view is not intended to introduce all of the concepts that arise in Luther's discussion on marriage. See Michael Parsons, "Luther and Calvin on Marriage" for more on Luther's perspective overall. The introduction in this paper is simply to note a pattern of Luther referring in polemical pieces to the key biblical texts covered in this paper, especially Matthew 19.

<sup>5</sup> LW 45:17.

particularly male or female removes any gender confusion or transition in gender. Luther continues to reflect on Genesis 1:

Therefore, each one of us must have the kind of body God has created for us. I cannot make myself a woman, nor can you make yourself a man; we do not have that power. But we are exactly as he created us: I a man and you a woman. Moreover, he wills to have his excellent handiwork honored as his divine creation, and not despised. The man is not to despise or scoff at the woman or her body, nor the woman the man. But each should honor the other's image and body as a divine and good creation that is well-pleasing unto God himself.<sup>6</sup>

Luther explains the reason that the “male-ness” and “female-ness” are essential to God’s design for humans is that God pairs His creation of humans with the ordinance of multiplication and filling the earth. In short, for Luther, the Bible teaches that God made man and woman sexually distinct so that He could unite them in marriage for the purpose of having children. He stresses this point in saying, “For it is not a matter of free choice or decision but a natural and necessary thing, that whatever is a man must have a woman and whatever is a woman must have a man. For this word which God speaks, “Be fruitful and multiply,” is... more than a command, namely, a divine ordinance [*werck*] which it is not our prerogative to hinder or ignore.”<sup>7</sup>

Luther then turns his attention to Matthew 19:12 to indicate that there only three exceptions given by Jesus to this ordinance of God of a man and woman marrying and having children. The “exempted” categories are “eunuchs who have been so from birth”, those made so by men, and those who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom. Luther adds, “Apart from these three groups, let no man presume to be without a spouse. And whoever does not fall within one of these three categories should not consider anything except the estate of marriage. Otherwise it is simply impossible for you to remain righteous.”<sup>8</sup> Luther transitions from these textual comments about the types of eunuchs identified in the Matthew text to a polemic on how the vows of chastity made by monks and clergy provide no power to withstand the ordinance and intent of God’s creative design. The human body was made male or

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<sup>6</sup> LW 45:17-18.

<sup>7</sup> LW 45:18.

<sup>8</sup> LW 45:18-19.

female and was made for the marriage union to produce children. No amount of resolve can withstand the inevitable force of God's creative design. A chastity vow only reroutes this design for sexual union to illicit channels of fulfillment. Luther contends that not only should priests and monks not make such vows, but if they have made such vow, then they should forsake the vow in light of God's greater ordinance.<sup>9</sup>

For Luther, this recognition of God's creative design of male and female and the need for the marital, procreative union leads to contentment and joy in marriage. If someone (married or single) does not value God's design for marriage then they are destined to malign the marital relationship or seek some inappropriate expression of its design. Luther challenges:

For this reason young men should be on their guard when they read pagan books and hear the common complaints about marriage, lest they inhale poison. For the estate of marriage does not set well with the devil, because it is God's good will and work. This is why the devil has contrived to have so much shouted and written in the world against the institution of marriage, to frighten men away from this godly life and entangle them in a web of fornication and secret sins.<sup>10</sup>

If Luther scholars read Luther like some people read Nostradamus, then they would have a field day with a "web of fornication" and "secret sins" as if Luther was able to foresee the heinous nature of internet pornography or an Ashley Madison account.

### **Biblical Commentary on Marriage Texts**

From the example of Luther's *The Estate of Marriage*, one can see that the reformers' tendency when reflecting on Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce in Matthew 19 to utilize other key biblical texts. Since Jesus' own comments draws readers back to Genesis 2, the reformers often followed a similar hermeneutical path. Often when describing a biblical view of marriage, the reformers drew on Genesis 1-

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<sup>9</sup> LW 45:19.

<sup>10</sup> LW 45:19.

2 in their discussions. Specifically, the textual connection between Mt 19:5 and Ge 2:24 is essential to the reformers' positions. In the dialogue with the Pharisees in Mt 19, Jesus or the Pharisees draw on two Old Testament texts (Ge 2 and Dt 24) explicitly. The reformers value this intertextuality and contemporary readers will better understand the Reformation commentary on Mt 19, if there is an understanding of the reformers' comments on Ge 2:24-25 and Dt 24:1-4.

### **Genesis 2:24-25**

In commenting on Ge 2, the reformers note some essential characteristics of God's creative design for marriage. The marriage is union between a man and a woman that is intended to be permanent, exclusive, and procreative. Defining marriage according to God's original design for it, gives the potential for peaceful and productive lives that glorify God in spite of the ravages of sin in human relationships. God's design for marriage includes the male and female recognizing God-given roles of leadership or submissiveness.

Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt describes the complementarian relationship between a husband and a wife. This ordered relationship fulfills the human desire for unity and yet accomplishes the purposes of the distinction of the sexes. Karlstadt explains:

God created a helpmeet for Adam who was his equal, yet different. He therefore created Adam first and Eve after, ward and gave the man authority and the woman submissiveness. Just as he created Adam to the glory of God so that he might fully cling to God's will, praise, counsel, and help. Spouses retain their equality if they remain in the instituted unity, with the woman being obedient and submissive to her husband, holding him in honor and treating him well, always mindful that she has been taken from the man and is called she-man. A husband, on the other hand, must not forget that woman is his bone, flesh, and blood. He ought always to love her and never hate or envy her. He ought to refrain from anything that might separate him from his wife, as Adam says, "On this account a man shall leave his father and mother and cling to his wife." When married people

pervert the instituted order so that she becomes man and he she-man, it is inevitable that conflicts and tensions arise. For wherever God does not govern there unrest and the devil's play take over. Man is the head on the basis of the divine order. This order is perverted when the woman rules and the man is being ruled.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, as Karlstadt reflects on Ge 2, he sees not only a description of the original relationship between Adam and Eve, but he also sees prescriptive ideal for all future marriages. He refers to a loss of the male headship- female submission unity as a perversion that inevitably brings conflicts and turmoil rather than blessing. Later in the text, he clarifies that a woman has much to add to the order and organization of the family, but should not exert herself in the “governing of the will” of her husband.<sup>12</sup>

Peter Martyr Vermigli also extols the exclusive unity that occurs with the marriage relationship. By drawing on imagery from Ge 2, Vermigli notes the creation of woman from man as a sign that the purpose of this form of creation is to indicate that the woman and the man belong together. This union occurs in the marriage relationship. Vermigli writes:

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<sup>11</sup> Andreas Karlstadt, *Regarding Vows*, in John L. Thompson (editor), *Reformation Commentary on Scripture: Genesis 1-11*, IVP Academic (2012), 106, (hereafter RCS: *Genesis*).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. Since the subject of this essay relates to Mt 19 and its use of these preceding texts, there is not room to pause and discuss the theme of complementarity in the reformers' comments. This complementarity is notable in Karlstadt's comments above but also in this quotation from Wolfgang Capito's *On God's Work of the Six Days* (as cited in RCS Genesis p.54), “if the matter is borne in orderly fashion, a pious woman is also the glory of God, no less than a faithful man... Nonetheless, she is subjected to the man for the sake of order as well as the sequence of creation: for she was taken out of the man, not only on account of sin and the deceptions of the serpent that were allowed in before the man's fall. Wherefore in a marriage that is pious and restored to its first state, you should understand that a woman be underneath the man no less than in a common marriage. For Eve was blameless when taken from the man and given to him as a helper.” Other similar comments from Ge 1-2 can be found in Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Musculus, et al.



By the woman's formation from a rib, it is declared that in a marriage there ought to be a union of the whole to the part (and therefore a man pines for a wife) and of the part to the whole, so that the part may be preserved there (and therefore a woman seeks a husband). A husband therefore seeks a part of himself and gets back the member that was taken from him. It is also noted here that it is Christ's own teaching that marriage ought to be an indissoluble bond. You would recognize this so long as they are able to be one flesh, but it is destroyed by fornication, as well as by all those obstacles by which spouses are unable to be one flesh in such a way that they may both require and provide mutual kindness and service to one another.<sup>13</sup>

Vermigli depicts the virtue and permanence of the "indissoluble bond" of marriage. He also notes the devastating effect that sexual infidelity has on a marriage union. The stresses and obstacles of marriage can only be overcome by "mutual kindness and service to one another." Vermigli's biblical and theological basis for a permanent, marital union is God's method of creating the woman from the man, and the practical reality of a permanent, marital union is the need of regular grace and mutual forgiveness from each of the marriage partners.

While Vermigli emphasizes permanence from the Ge 2 text, Johannes Brenz stresses that the exclusive nature of the marriage relationship as being between one man and one woman. Brenz clearly indicates that God's creative design to marriage does not include polygamy or polyamory. Brenz writes:

When Adam says ... "The two shall be one flesh," and Christ thus explains, "They are no longer two, but one flesh," it signifies without obscurity that it is not licit according to the natural law of marriage for one man to have two or more wives at the same time. Indeed, when God was going to give a wife to Adam, he created from his rib not two women but only one. And he says that two, not three, shall be one flesh... He clearly teaches that whoever takes one wife cannot, while she lives, pledge his troth to another spouse, because that is beyond his right. So what

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Vermigli, Commentary on Genesis 2, in RCS: Genesis, 109.

should we say about the patriarchs, who, though they were the holiest of men, still possessed more wives than one. My response is that this custom among the holy patriarchs was more tolerated by God than approved.<sup>14</sup>

So, for Brenz, God's creative intention for marriage is the bond of one man and one woman for life. The OT narratives that describe the patriarchs with more than one wife often indicate that all is not well with these unapproved marital arrangements. Calvin, likewise, describes how God created exclusive marriage to be a blessing and a part of human flourishing. He indicates that there a multitude of ways that contemporary marriages fall short of God's original design and that marital struggles are indication of the corruption of sin. Calvin contends:

I confess, indeed, that in this corrupt state of the human race, the blessing of God that is described here is neither perceived nor flourishes. However, the cause of this evil must be considered, namely, that the order of nature appointed by God has been inverted by us. For if our integrity had remained to this day such as it was from the beginning, that divine institution would be clearly discerned and the sweetest harmony would reign in marriage: because then the husband would look with reverence to God, the woman would likewise be a faithful assistant to him, and with one accord they would both cultivate a mutuality that was no less friendly and peaceful than it was holy. But now, by our own fault and by the corruption of our nature, it has come to pass that this happiness of marriage has in large part been lost, or at the least is now mingled and stained with many difficulties.<sup>15</sup>

Wolfgang Musculus also describes how polygamy or other corruptions of the exclusive marital relationship of a husband and a wife are going to fall short of God's intention in marriage. Like many of the reformers, Musculus grounds the validity of marriage in God's creative design and for the purpose of procreation. After affirming the procreative role of

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<sup>14</sup> Johannes Brenz, Commentary on Genesis 2, in RCS: Genesis, 109-110.

<sup>15</sup> Calvin on Gen.2:24, in RCS: *Genesis*, 110.

marriage and God's creation of both male and female sexuality for this "conjunction", Musculus comments on Genesis 2, "In this matter, neither a man without a woman nor a woman without a man avails for anything. That is precisely why marriage was established by God, and it was for that very reason God created and blessed not men alone nor women alone, but male and female together...."<sup>16</sup> Musculus indicates the fullness of God's blessing comes to men and women united in the marital relationship.

In his comments on Gen 2, Musculus explains that one reason that the fullness of the blessing to humanity comes only through the marriage union comes from how the woman was created to be a "fitting" companion with the man. Musculus explains:

This word *kenegdo* signifies that a woman is prepared for the man and placed alongside him so that the companionship and intimacy that they living together may be undivided, not like that of animals who come together but once a year for procreation and afterwards wander off separately and unrestrained. A wife ought to be so yoked to her husband that she is inseparable from him."<sup>17</sup>

Musculus drives home his point of the created intention of companionship that comes through the exclusive design of marriage. He describes the physical union that happens in marriage and was later indicated by the apostle Paul draws on the fact that the woman is created out of the body of the man. He even adds a rhetorical flair about the woman coming from the man's side. He continues:

God did not form woman from the dust of the earth as he formed Adam, but from Adam's own body: and even then, not from a lock of hair or a patch of skin, but from his flesh and bone. He took her from the inner-most parts of the man because he formed her to be united to him. Who does not see that God wished the man and the woman to be bound together tightly and to embrace one another in mutual love? To be sure, he joined every kind of

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<sup>16</sup> Musculus' Commentary on Genesis, in RCS: Genesis, 105.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 104.

animal in pairs, but of none do we read that they take females that have sprung from their own flesh; rather, it was enough that they should have the same bodily form, similar in appearance but differing in sex. Here, however, there appears the unique relationship of having the same flesh, indeed, the very same, on account of which the apostle says, "He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it." Note also that when God wished to form the woman from Adam's own body, he took her to be formed not just from any part of Adam but from his side: not from Adam's head, lest the woman grow haughty on account of her origin; nor from his feet, lest she seem to be demoted to the worthlessness and insignificance of a slave; but rather from Adam's side, so that he would know she was made to be his partner and the inseparable companion of his life, and so that she might legitimately cleave to his side, whence she was taken. This consideration argues against the inhumanity of those who treat their wives no differently than as if they had been acquired for a price along with other possessions, so that you would regard them as scarcely differing at all from handmaids. Such is especially the case for the marriages of those who practice polygamy.<sup>18</sup>

Having established the typical exegetical comments on Ge 2:24, we now turn our attention briefly to other main background text that figures into the reformers' understanding of Mt 19. In their rebuttal to Jesus' response affirming marriage along the lines of Ge 2, the Pharisees raise the teaching of Moses in De 24. The reformers recognize the textual connection and often interplay the Gospel text with the Pentateuch text regardless of whether they are explicitly commenting on Deuteronomy or Matthew.

### **Deuteronomy 24:1-3**

In the legal material collected throughout Exodus through Deuteronomy, there are many commands given as stipulations to the various iterations of the covenant that the Lord is making with Israel.

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<sup>18</sup> Musculus' Commentary on Genesis, in RCS: Genesis, 107.

Some of the commands are worded positively to encourage the people to aspire toward moral behavior and proper religious practices. However, some of the legal material carries the purpose of prohibiting or curbing inappropriate behaviors or practices. This “restraining evil” function is what most reformers see in the stipulations for divorce found in De 24.

Though the textual context of the Deuteronomy text has Israel wondering in the wilderness, like many Reformation exegetes Calvin connects the text with Jesus’ later teaching on the matter in Mt 19. In commenting on De 24, Calvin writes:

Although what relates to divorce was granted in indulgence to the Jews, yet Christ pronounces that it was never in accordance with the Law, because it is directly repugnant to the first institution of God, from whence a perpetual and inviolable rule is to be sought. It is proverbially said that the laws of nature are indissoluble; and God has declared once for all, that the bond of union between husband and wife is closer than that of parent and child; wherefore, if a son cannot shake off the paternal yoke, no cause can permit the dissolution of the connection which a man has with his wife. Hence it appears how great was the perverseness of that nation, which could not be restrained from dissolving a most sacred and inviolable tie. Meanwhile the Jews improperly concluded from their impunity that that was lawful, which God did not punish because of the hardness of their hearts; whereas they ought rather to have *considered*, agreeably to the answer of Christ, that man is not at liberty to separate those whom God hath joined together. (Mt 19:6)<sup>19</sup>

Calvin affirms the marriage union in its permanence, even more so than its intimacy. He affirms that “no cause can permit the dissolution of the connection,” which was established between man and woman in God’s first institution of marriage (Adam and Eve), serving as a “perpetual and inviolable rule” for future marriages. In his comments on divorce in De 24, Calvin draws on the pattern of marriage in Ge 2, following Jesus’

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<sup>19</sup> John Calvin, Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony, reprinted in Calvin’s Commentaries, Baker Books (2003), 3:1:93 (volume 3: part 1: page 93).

example. Though Calvin affirms that the provision of divorce in De 24 does not superintend God's original design for marriage, the reformer recognizes the need to explain why God made such a concession. Calvin explains:

Still, God chose to make a provision for women who were cruelly oppressed, and for whom it was better that they should at once be set free, than that they should groan beneath a cruel tyranny during their whole lives. Thus, in Malachi, divorce is preferred to polygamy, since it would be a more tolerable condition to be divorced than to bear with a harlot and a rival. (Mal 2:14.) And undoubtedly the bill or scroll of divorce, whilst it cleared the woman from all disgrace, cast some reproach on the husband; for he who confesses that he puts away his wife, because she does not please him, brings himself under the accusation both of moroseness and inconstancy. For what gross levity and disgraceful inconstancy it shows, that a husband should be so offended with some imperfection or disease in his wife, as to cast away from him half of himself! We see, then, that husbands were indirectly condemned by the writing of divorce, since they thus committed an injury against their wives who were chaste, and in other respects what they should be.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, Calvin makes a close textual observation pertaining to the conditions of the certificate of divorce as Moses describes it. Calvin observes the callous nature of the husband who would issue the certificate of divorce because his wife is not physical pleasing to him. Calvin observes:

Some interpreters do not read these three verses continuously, but suppose the sense to be complete at the end of the first, wherein the husband testifies that he divorces his wife for no offense, but because her beauty does not satisfy his lust. If, however, we give more close attention, we shall see that it is only one provision of the Law, viz., that when a man has divorced his wife, it is not lawful for him to marry her again if she have

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<sup>20</sup> Calvin, *Harmony of the Law*, 3:1:94.

married another. The reason of the law is, that, by prostituting his wife, he would be, as far as in him lay, acting like a procurer. In this view, it is said that she was defiled, because he had contaminated her body, for the liberty which he gave her could not abolish the first institution of God, but rather, as Christ teaches, gave cause for adultery. (Mt 5:31, and 19:9.) Thus, the Israelites were reminded that, although they divorced their wives with impunity, still this license was by no means excused before God.<sup>21</sup>

So, in his comments on De 24, Calvin points to both the callous nature of the hearts of the Israelite husbands that would make such a provision necessary. He also points out that the connection of divorce and remarriage would make the wife of an adulterer. Both of Calvin's points from De 24, he also sees in Jesus' teaching in Mt 19.

Similar to Calvin, Luther connects his exposition of Mt 19 to De 24. In his *Sermons on the Gospel of St. Matthew*, Luther explains on how Moses' provision for divorce sheds light on the low view of marriage held by the Israelites in the wilderness.

That was Moses' law concerning the certificate of divorce, and the Jews made full use of this law, taking wives, and then chasing them away and taking others. They regarded marrying and taking a wife as no different than trading horses. If someone took a wife and she did not please him, he cast her out. And when he had sent away his first wife and the second also did not please him, he was sorry he had made the switch and soon wanted to have another or to have his first wife back. So they divorced abundantly, but Moses puts a limit on this and prohibits anyone from taking back his first wife. He wanted to prevent this so that they would not divorce so lightly. And on account of this stipulation in the law, many of them kept their first wife. For they thought: "If you get one who is worse, you will be unable to take back the first." Now, since the Jews were a very arrogant and wicked people, Moses permitted them the certificate of divorce so that they would not kill their wives or poison them to death.

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<sup>21</sup> Calvin, *Harmony of the Law*, 3:1:94-5.

And divorces abounded so much that they themselves were offended by this.<sup>22</sup>

Luther uses a device typical of his preaching as he takes on the persona of Jesus and speaks as if he were Jesus preaching the sermon. As Jesus, Luther releases strong vindictives against Jesus' Jewish contemporaries. Jesus (Luther) says:

The Lord Christ replies to this and says, "Moses allowed you to divorce your wives because of the hardness of your hearts" [Matt. 19:8]. It is as if He wanted to say, "What? Moses?" He cuts through like a master and says: "Moses this, Moses that! God is above Moses. Since you are such scandalous Jews, wicked and wretched knaves, and cannot keep what God has commanded, Moses did not command you to do this but allowed it, so that no offense would take place and so that you would not strike your wives dead or poison them. Thus Moses did not give you this law because of your righteousness, honor, and piety; rather, he allowed you and was lenient because of the hardness of your hearts. He did not command it. Instead, Moses thought: 'This is such a proud and wicked people that they may well commit one murder after another. If they do not want to keep God's commandment, then let them divorce in order to prevent murder and poisoning. If anyone does not want to keep his wife with him in kindness, let her go so that nothing worse comes of it, and have a nice life! If you do not want to be married in God's name, then be whores and fornicators in the devil's name. You are such hypocrites, such stubborn, scandalous, and hard-hearted people, that no one could soften you up even with a hammer.'"

Obviously, in his presentation as Jesus, Luther indicates that the "divorce exception" based on De 24 is more of a sign of unrighteousness among the Jews, not a standard of righteousness. Another text in Matthew also interacts with the divorce text in De 24, there in Mt 5 as a

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<sup>22</sup> Sermons on the Gospel of St. Matthew, LW 68:7.



part of the Sermon on the Mount, righteousness is also the overall concern.

### **Matthew 5:31-32**

In the typical Reformation comments, the writers point out that most of Jesus' teaching on marriage in Mt 5 recurs in his longer teaching in Mt 19. However, because Mt 5 does provide an unique context for the teaching, some of their commentary keys on the theme of righteousness in the sermon.

In the Sermon on the Mount in Mt 5-7, Jesus provides a selection of examples of kingdom righteousness. Jesus' third example of kingdom righteousness links with his second one. The English reformer, John Carter (d.1634) notes how the theme of adultery connects the two examples. Carter explains:

The remote occasion, which participates with adultery and so comes to be forbidden in the Seventh Commandment is causeless divorce (Now Christ allows of none to be just and warrantable, except in the case of fornication, whereby the marriage band is broken). The Scribes and Pharisees taught that Moses made it lawful for men to put away their wives for every cause and that he commanded to give her a bill of divorce which made her free to marry any other; but Christ, here and elsewhere, teaches far otherwise; that for the hardness of their hearts, this was only tolerated, not allowed; and that by such putting away, the hasty and furious husband occasioned both his wife and him that should marry with her to commit adultery, besides the temptations which he should put himself upon. So that by such divorces, a great many transgressions of this Law, both his own and of other folks were set upon this score.<sup>23</sup>

Not only does lust equate with adultery but so does marrying a divorced person. The exception clause here is that if a wife has already committed adultery then to divorce her does not make her an adulterer, since she

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<sup>23</sup> John Carter, *A Plaine and Compendious Exposition of Christ's Sermon in the Mount*, 902-03.

already is. Carter encourages that Christians should value the bond of marriage, in keeping with the Lord's design. Divorce does not help a person, but instead exposes them to multiple dangers and temptations.

The Genevan reformer, Theodore Beza also connects Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on Mount with that of Mt.19, saying that in both cases Jesus is correcting the sinful hearts of the husbands who had taken solace in the false interpretations on this issue by contemporary religious leaders.

For here the scribes were not [merely] blundering [by adding] another adjective to the words of the law; but in this they were misrepresenting the law to a certain extent by a false interpretation. As it were, the husband clearly thought that when he handed over a certificate of divorce, his conscience would be absolved before the tribunal of God. Christ denies this. For it is one thing to teach it as a right, and another to soften as much as possible what they are not able to change. For that obligation of giving a certificate of divorce was no doubt keeping back many men, who were shameless inside, from having their wives sent away, because a certificate of this sort was more of a warning about the frivolity or dishonesty of the husbands than about the dismissed woman who was sent away for a flaw. This is supported below by [Matthew] 19:8. From this passage, it also appears that the consciences of some had been put at rest by this false interpretation of the Scribes, and that it had been disputed in the synagogues whether a certificate of divorce could be given for any cause you like. The husband had been sufficiently warned by conscience, about which Christ responded openly in this passage.<sup>24</sup>

Beza continues by noting further how Jesus' corrective comments are particularly aimed at husbands. As a biblical theme from Deuteronomy 24 and Malachi 2, since the husband is the head of the home, he bears special guilt in the dissolution of the marriage relationship. The wife is not given this right, but also does not carry the heavier burden of guilt. Beza writes:

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<sup>24</sup>Beza, *Annotationes majores*, 35-36.

Christ, however, did not allow the wife to go away from her husband, or to give a certificate of divorce to her husband, which appears from the context of the law itself (Deut 24:1), then especially from Malachi 2:16. But, the husband was separating himself from his wife, so that this certificate is able to be seen not as the dismissal of the wife, but the leaving of the husband from the wife in the aspect that is called “apostasy,” and in fact there is no infamy in divorce without the husband sending his wife away from himself. Although God doubtless did not approve of this sort of act of husbands, it was tolerated by the Magistrate because of their hardness of heart.<sup>25</sup>

Much like his Genevan successor, Calvin indicates the same corrective tone in Jesus’ words in Mt 5 (and those in Mt 19). After noting that Mt 19 provides the greater details of Jesus’ teaching and thereby deserves a longer discussion, Calvin provides some “brief” comments on Mt 5. In these comments, Calvin makes a key distinction between the national or civil laws of Israel and the intention of the Lord’s original standards. Whatever is allowed by the state in terms of civil laws that does not change the force of God’s law on the nature and duration of marriage. Calvin explains:

As the Jews falsely imagined that they discharged their whole duty toward God, when they kept the law in a national manner, so whatever the national law did not forbid, they foolishly supposed to be lawful. Divorces, which husbands were wont to give to their wives, had not been prohibited by Moses as to external order, but only, for the sake of restraining lewdness, he had ordered that “a bill of divorcement” should be given to the wives who were put away, (De 24:1).

In this selection, Calvin makes a distinction between the “national law” (i.e. civil law) and the original intention of God’s design or commands. The purpose of the civil laws was often to restrain particular expressions

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 36.

of evil rather than to promote the beauty of God's design. Calvin continues by noting that:

But they did wrong in viewing as a matter of civil law, the rule which had been given them for a devout and holy life. For national laws are sometimes accommodated to the manners of men but God, in prescribing a spiritual law, looked not at what men can do, but at what they ought to do. It contains a perfect and entire righteousness, though we want ability to fulfill it. Christ, therefore, admonishes us not to conclude, that what is allowed by the national law of Moses is, on that account, lawful in the sight of God. That man, (says he,) who puts away his wife, and gives her *a bill of divorcement*, shelters himself under the pretense of the law: but the bond of marriage is too sacred to be dissolved at the will, or rather at the licentious pleasure, of men. Though the husband and the wife are united by mutual consent, yet God binds them by an indissoluble tie, so that they are not afterwards at liberty to separate.

Calvin notes that Jesus' teaching echoes the higher ideal of God's original design, even if the higher ideal simply points out the human inability to fulfill it, another typical theme of the Sermon on the Mount. Calvin concludes that since the marriage bond is indissoluble in the sight of God, then divorce and remarriage to another spouse amounts to adultery.

### **The Reformation Insights on Marriage from Matthew 19**

Though the reformers defined biblical marriage drawing on many biblical texts, central to them was Jesus' extended teaching on marriage and divorce in Matthew 19. In this chapter, Jesus continues to minister to large crowds and the opposition of the religious leaders to his ministry grows. Pharisees continually try to trap Jesus with their questions. Jesus' thoroughly biblical correction of the Pharisees' question on divorce draws on God's original, creative intent for marriage as expressed in Genesis 2. Thinking that they might have snared Jesus, the Pharisees try to oppose Him by citing Moses in Deuteronomy 24. Jesus' reply draws on the narrative context of the Deuteronomy passage to show that the juxtaposition is not Jesus against Moses, but Moses'

concession due to their unbelief and God's creative intent. Jesus' high view of marriage, in that the vow is only broken through sexual immorality, causes the disciple to wonder if anyone can match this high esteem for marriage. While valuing marriage, Jesus established celibacy as a viable option to marriage, but only if that singleness is ordained for that individual by God.

The reformers highlight three sections of this narrative text in their commentaries. First, the reformers note Jesus' affirmation of the original design for marriage. Second, the reformers explain Jesus' response to the Deuteronomy text and His only stipulation for divorce. Third, the reformers comment on what it means to be an eunuch, and thereby be excluded for the marriage ordinance. In general the reformers indicate that Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce highlights the sanctity of marriage and the stubborn unbelief that is drawn to a casual view of divorce.

### **Original design for marriage**

As the humanism of Erasmus contributed to the growing interest in commenting on the biblical text, other humanists were pointing to the source text in their comments. Jacques Lefevre d'Étaples, the French humanist, extols the divine initiation of marriage in his comments on Matthew 19. In his *Commentary on the Four Gospels* D'Étaples writes:

Although the Lord knew that the Pharisees had come to Him, not out of a desire to learn, but to tempt and reprehend Him, still He did not refuse them kindness, and instead with all modesty He gave satisfaction to their inquiry, using the example of Genesis chapters one and two, where it is read thus in chapter one: And God created man in His image and likeness; in the image of God He created him, He created them male and female. And in chapter two like this: "And the Lord God fashioned the rib, which He had taken from Adam, into a woman, and He brought her to Adam, and Adam said, "This now is bone from my bones, and flesh from my flesh; she will be called woman, since she was taken from a man. Wherefore a man will leave his father and mother and will cling to his wife and the two will be one flesh." These words, "Wherefore a man will leave his father," and those

that follow, the Gospel seems to attribute to God. And rightly so, for, even if in the story of Genesis Adam appears to speak these things, nevertheless he was speaking in the Spirit, and the Spirit of God was saying these things. For, when the mystery of which he spoke happened, he was sleeping. Rightly then these are understood to be words of God, who was proclaiming both what was done and what will happen in the future. From these things the Lord truly gathers that a man and a woman are one flesh, and that the Lord said it and did the joining, and since that is the case, since God joined together the man and woman, it follows that no one should separate them, nor is it permitted to divorce one's wife for any reason. Christ drew this teaching of His from the words of God and from His work. Against that no rationale coming from a human being can prevail. Nevertheless, the Pharisees offer a human rationale, as if Moses counts more than God.<sup>26</sup>

D'Étaples notes that not only the first marriage (Adam and Eve), but also all marriages since are by divine institution. It was God's speaking that set the pattern for all future marriages to be between a male and a female in permanent union.

In his commentary, Calvin recognizes that as the Pharisees attempt to snare Jesus, they actually set the context for Him to unpack His biblical view or "fixed law" that marriage was a "sacred and indissoluble bond." Calvin also comments on how Jesus recognizes the scheming of the Pharisees, but also deftly handles the Law. He writes:

They ask, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause whatever?" If Christ replies in the negative, they will exclaim that he wickedly abolishes the Law; and if in the affirmative, they will give out that he is not a prophet of God, but rather a pander, who lends such countenance to the lust of men. Such were the calculations which they had made in their own minds; but the

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<sup>26</sup> Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples, *Commentarii Initiatorii In Quatuor Evangelia: In Euangelium secundum Matthaeum, In Euangelium secundum Marcum, In Euangelium secundum Lucam, In Euangelium secundum Ioannem*. Basileae: Cratander, 1523, 84r.

Son of God, who knew how to *take the wise in their own craftiness*, (Job 5:13) disappointed them, sternly opposing unlawful divorces, and at the same time showing that he brings forward nothing which is inconsistent with the Law. For he includes the whole question under two heads: that the order of creation ought to serve for a law, that the husband should maintain conjugal fidelity during the whole of life; and that *divorces were permitted*, not because they were lawful, but because Moses had to deal with a rebellious and intractable nation.

Calvin summarizes the two key elements of this text, with the first being Jesus' appeal to the design of marriage in creation as crucial for understanding marriage's ongoing form. The second element is that divorce reveals a culture's rebellion against God's design.

In his comments on verse 4, Calvin says that Jesus' teaching assumes that His hearers know that since God brought the man and woman together in marriage, to separate them would be as unnatural as self-mutilation. He writes, "Now Christ assumes as an admitted principle, that at the beginning God joined the male to the female, so that the two made an entire man; and therefore he who divorces his wife tears from him, as it were, the half of himself. But nature does not allow any man to tear in pieces his own body."<sup>27</sup>

Calvin also explains that in Jesus' reference to Genesis 2:24, He affirms that the bond between a husband and wife is "more sacred" than the relationship between parents and their children.<sup>28</sup> The sacred bond of marriage means that there is an exclusive relationship between a husband and wife, which has implications for polygamy and divorce. Calvin pairs divorce and polygamy together and says that they are both forbidden by God's original design in marriage. In commenting on how in marriage the husband and wife become one flesh, he says:

This expression condemns polygamy not less than it condemns unrestrained liberty in divorcing wives; for, if the mutual union

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<sup>27</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists: Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, reprinted in *Calvin's Commentaries*, Baker Books (2003), 16:2:378 (volume 16: part 2: page 378).

<sup>28</sup> Calvin, *Harmony of the Evangelists*, 16:2:378-379.

of two persons was consecrated by the Lord, the mixture of three or four persons is unauthorized. But Christ, as I stated a little ago, applies it in a different manner to his purpose; namely, to show that whoever divorces his wife tears himself in pieces, because such is the force of holy marriage, that the husband and wife become one man. For it was not the design of Christ to introduce the impure and filthy speculation of Plato, but he spoke with reverence of the order which God has established. Let the husband and wife, therefore, live together in such a manner, that each shall cherish the other in the same manner as if they were the half of themselves. Let the husband rule, so as to be the head, and not the tyrant, of his wife; and let the woman, on the other hand, yield modestly to his commands.<sup>29</sup>

The fashioning of husband and wife into an union not only helps understand marriage, but it also helps explain the prohibition of divorce in Christ's teaching. In noting the impropriety of human's separating what God has joined, Calvin adds:

By this sentence Christ restrains the caprice of husbands, that they may not, by divorcing their wives, burst asunder the sacred knot. And as he declares that it is not in the power of the husband to dissolve the marriage, so likewise he forbids all others to confirm by their authority unlawful divorces; for the magistrate abuses his power when he grants permission to the husband to divorce his wife. But the object which Christ had directly in view was, that every man should sacredly observe the promise which he has given, and that those who are tempted, by wantonness or wicked dispositions, to divorce, may reflect thus with themselves: "Who, art thou that allowest thyself to *burst asunder what God hath joined?*"<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Calvin, Harmony of the Evangelists, 16:2:380.

<sup>30</sup> Calvin, Harmony of the Evangelists, 16:2:380.



## Divorce

For the reformers, the positive affirmation of the permanence of marriage in Jesus' teaching also meant that they were critical of divorce as a threat to God's design. Luther encourages gospel preachers to know and handle the Law like Jesus does, when He "clearly expresses what the meaning of the Law is and says that there can be no divorce-with one exception, namely, on account of adultery."<sup>31</sup>

In somewhat similar terms, the Strasbourg reformer, Martin Bucer describes how Jesus is not interested in establishing a legal or social structure for divorce, but in preaching repentance to those whose hardened hearts are exposed by their views on divorce. He writes:

Our savior came to preach repentance and remission; seeing therefore those who put away their wives without any just cause, were not touch with conscience of the sin, through misunderstanding of the law, he recalled them to a right interpretation, and taught that the woman in the beginning was so joined to the man that there should be a perpetual union both in body and spirit; where this is not, the matrimony is already broke, before there be yet any divorce made or second marriage.<sup>32</sup>

The English Puritan, Richard Taverner adds that the unbelief among Jesus' contemporaries had similarities with the stubbornness that caused Moses to allow divorce certificates in his day. He also indicates that if Moses wanted to provide open and free divorces then he would have granted the same license to the wives. However, the fact that the divorce certificates were only issued by the husbands indicated:

the hard heart of the Jews, which for every light cause and trifle would put away their wives and for this cause the law of Moses gave commandment, that such stubborn and hard husbands which would needs for such light occasions put away their wives or else do worse and commit further inconvenience, to give them

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<sup>31</sup> LW, 69:7.

<sup>32</sup> Martin Bucer, *Judgement of Martin Bucer Concerning Divorce*, 11.

the said libel of divorcement for a certain record and witness that she is now free from his yoke and at her liberty.<sup>33</sup>

Erasmus notes that Jesus appeals to the original intent of marriage in order to hearken their minds back to God's creative design for marriage before the depth of sin corrupted human hearts and convoluted their view of marriage. Erasmus summarizes Jesus' words to mean that Moses was pressed by his surroundings:

He did not permit you this because it was right and good of nature, but knowing the hardness of your heart, he suffered the lesser ill, that you should not commit the greater.... And the book of divorce does not make that the divorce is right and good, but it witnesses your hardness... But from the beginning, whereas the malice of man was not yet increased nor the nature of men was not yet infected with so many vices, because there was not so cruel hatred that poisoning or murder should be feared, there was no license of divorce, and the same law shall not now be loosed and set at liberty, after that the doctrine of the gospel does renew and make perfect the sincerity of the nature. Moses wished the same that I do teach, but your manners bent over much unto murder, put him in fear that he does not require this of you. I who do not abolish the law but make it more perfect plainly say to you that it is unlawful and against the mind of God and against the will of Moses which you do commonly, refusing your wives for every cause.<sup>34</sup>

The early Anabaptist reformer, Michael Sattler says that Jesus does not intend to compensate for the hardened hearts in His teaching on marriage, but allows for divorce in the case of adultery because the marriage vow is already broken. Sattler insists as the mediator of a new covenant, Jesus will not allow the divorce concessions that Moses did (due to Israel's apathy). Sattler explains, with the new covenant, Jesus

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<sup>33</sup> Richard Taverner, *The Gospels with Brief Sermons*, fol. liiii-lv.

<sup>34</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, *Paraphrases*, Folio 78v.

No longer makes concessions to hardness of heart, but rather renews the ordinance of his father, Gen 1 and 2, saying, "From the beginning it was not so." Since then God so created, that there should be one husband and one wife, and what God has united, that let man not separate. Therefore any minor cause—anger, which is hardness of heart; displeasure, contrariety, faith or unbelief—may not separate, but only fornication. He who divorces without fornication, the only reason, and remarries, commits adultery; and he who takes a divorced woman causes her to commit adultery; for Christ says, "These two are one flesh."<sup>35</sup>

In his comments, Calvin asserts that Jesus is calling for a mutual commitment and fidelity in marriage. It must also be observed, that the right belongs equally and mutually to both sides, as there is a mutual and equal obligation to fidelity. For, though in other matters the husband holds the superiority, as to the marriage bed, the wife has an equal right: for he is not the lord of his body; and therefore when, by committing adultery, he has dissolved the marriage, the wife is set at liberty.<sup>36</sup>

When sexual sin breaks the marriage bond, the exception to divorce extends not only to the dissolution of the first marriage but even allows for a limited place for remarriage. Calvin recognizes that his position represents something of a minority view when he speaks of Jesus' comments on the remarriage clause:

This clause has been very ill explained by many commentators; for they have thought that generally, and without exception, celibacy is enjoined in all cases when a divorce has taken place; and, therefore, if a husband should put away an adulteress, both would be laid under the necessity of remaining unmarried. As if this liberty of divorce meant only not to lie with his wife; and as if Christ did not evidently grant permission in this case to do what the Jews were wont indiscriminately to do at their pleasure. It was therefore a gross error; for, though Christ condemns as an adulterer the man *who shall marry a wife that has been divorced*,

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<sup>35</sup> Michael Sattler, "On Divorce," in *The Legacy of Michael Sattler*, 102-03.

<sup>36</sup> Calvin, *Harmony of the Evangelists*, 16:2:384.

this is undoubtedly restricted to unlawful and frivolous divorces.<sup>37</sup>

## Eunuchs

The third section of Jesus' teaching on marriage in Matthew 19 focuses on eunuchs. The Reformation exegetes would caution against reading too much cultural background into one's understanding of the word "eunuch". The reformers treat the term as those who have vowed to remain single, with its related chastity. The reformers focus on Jesus' comments as pointing to the high standard for the marriage union and for those who commit to celibacy (singleness). Both, though in different ways, recognize God's design for marriage.

The Swiss reformer, Huldrych Zwingli explains Jesus' comments on eunuchs in selections from two different works. In the first selection, Zwingli argues that Jesus releases His disciples from being bound to remain single (or to marry) by not imposing a punishment on those who cannot "receive" the disciples' comment on remaining single. In the second selection, Zwingli emphasizes that only God grants the ability for certain persons to remain single, an ability not given to all.

For weighing more carefully Christ's words and the custom of our predecessors in this matter, we found that the whole question was far easier than we had thought. For when he says, "All men cannot receive this saying," and again, "He that is able to receive it, let him receive it," he prescribes no punishment for them that cannot receive it. Nay, either because of the vastness of the thing which he did not wish enjoined up each and all, or on account of our weakness, which he know better than we ourselves, he did not want this thing laid up against us, and so left it free. Therefore our souls which had been nigh unto despair were mightily refreshed when we learned those who were unable to receive the saying were threatened with no punishment by him who can send both body and soul into hell.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Calvin, *Harmony of the Evangelists*, 16:2:384.

<sup>38</sup> Huldrych Zwingli, *Petition Concerning the Marriage of Priests*, in *The Latin Works and the Correspondence of Huldreich Zwingli*, 1:157.

Also, Zwingli recognizes that Christ promises no punishment to someone who does not choose celibacy, as long as the default is then to marriage. Elsewhere, Zwingli writes:

Christ speaks again in the same place (Matt 19:12), “whoever can keep chastity, let him keep it.” Here he makes it free, since he says, whoever can keep it, let him keep it. Thus, if he can keep it, let him keep it; if he cannot keep it, then let him marry. But now the keeping of it depends not upon our ability, but upon God; else why does he say, He who can keep it, let him keep it? Not that we should understand “ability,” as if it came from ourselves, but as given by God, the meaning is, to whom God has given the power to keep it, let him keep it; to whom ability is not given, he is not bound to keep it. How then have men ventured to forbid it since God did not wish to forbid it on account of its difficulty? But he gave it to whom he would. And those to whom he gave it became bound to keep it. He to whom it is given, feels it very well, needs no such subtle question as, “How can I know whether it is given to me or not?” Now the sum of this article or words of Christ is, to whom is given by God the ability to keep it, let him keep it; and those to whom it is not given are not bound by any divine law to keep it.<sup>39</sup>

As Zwingli encourages, Christians can submit to God’s design for marriage through an exclusive union between a man and a woman or through celibate singleness, enabled by divine power.

## Conclusion

As if written as a blog post for a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience, John Calvin warns that even if the law of the land changes to accommodate vices that are contrary to the biblical design of marriage, the church gives account for faithfulness to the biblical teaching and not to “tradition” or “civil law”.

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<sup>39</sup> Huldrych Zwingli, *Priests to Preach and to Marry*, in *The Latin Works and the Correspondence of Huldreich Zwingli*, 1:179.

.... Besides, political and outward order is widely different from spiritual government. What is lawful and proper the Lord has comprehended under the *ten words*. Now as it is possible that many things, for which every man's conscience reprove and charges him, may not be called in question at a human tribunal, it is not wonderful if those things are connived at by political laws.

.... For here the Lord indirectly reprove the Jews for not, reckoning it enough that their stubbornness was allowed to pass unpunished, if they did not implicate God as defending their iniquity. And if the rule of a holy and pious life is not always, or in all places, to be sought from political laws, much less ought we to seek it from custom....<sup>40</sup>

In spite of a culture or legal system that allows otherwise, the church must uphold the biblical view of marriage.

While there is some colorful diversity in the reformers' comments on marriage and divorce in Matthew 19, there is also a notable consistency. The Reformers would affirm that the "biblical view" marriage is that God has designed human beings as male and female for the purpose of intentional union, the blessing of children, and permanent unity as husband and wife. Marriage exists by God's creative design and gracious ordinance. It should not be avoided or corrupted, nor should it be ended by human whim.

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<sup>40</sup> Calvin, *Harmony of the Evangelists*, 16:2:381-382.