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## Evangelical Review of Theology

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readership interpreting the Christian faith for  
contemporary living.*

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Thus, if one is to understand and learn from Orthodox missiology, it is imperative to begin with a holistic approach to Orthodox theology. The framework of Orthodoxy provides the starting point for mission. The richness of the Orthodox tradition, obscured from the West by long centuries of theological isolation and historical separation, offers a vital contribution to Christian knowledge.

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# **Gospel Definitions of Adultery and Women's Rights**

**G. J. Wenham**

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*This article argues that Jesus taught that remarriage following divorce is adultery. A number of important corollaries follow.*

(Editor)

Christian readers of the OT are usually surprised to learn that in pre-Christian times the seventh commandment applied only to married women and not to married men. If a married man indulged in sexual relations with a single girl or patronized a prostitute, that did not count as adultery against his wife. If on the other hand a married, or even a betrothed, woman had sexual intercourse with anyone except her husband that counted as adultery, so she and her partner were liable to be put to death ([Lev. 20:10](#), [Dt. 22:22–24](#)).

This definition of adultery, which sees it essentially as an offence against a husband, was not peculiar to ancient Israel. It was common to the legal traditions of the ancient Near East, Greece and Rome. This view of adultery tied a woman exclusively to one man, whereas men were legally free to contract several unions. Hence polygamy was possible under Mesopotamian and OT law, while Roman law allowed men to keep a concubine as well as a wife. But women could not be polyandrous.

However it should not be supposed that in OT times polygamy was common: the cost of marriage effectively made polygamy the prerogative of kings and rich patriarchs. Nor did the law encourage married men to have affairs with single girls, as the penalties for such behaviour show ([Ex. 22:16–17](#), [Dt. 22:28–29](#)). Nor was resort to prostitutes approved by wisdom teachers or prophets ([Prov. 5](#), [Jer. 3](#), [Am. 2:7](#), etc.). Nevertheless

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which therefore is alien to the feelings of world love and justice—be really “Orthodox”? (Anastasios Yannoulatos, ‘Orthodox Spirituality and External Mission,’ *IRM* 52 [1963]: 300). For a review of recent mission work, see Alexander Veronis, ‘Orthodox Concepts of Evangelism and Mission,’ *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 27 (1982): 44–57.

none of these acts counted as adultery, which was a capital offence under Near Eastern, OT and early Roman law. So there was built into this husband-orientated view of adultery a fundamental inequity between spouses: the wife had to be totally loyal to her husband on pain of death, but the husband would suffer at most financial loss or social stigma if he was disloyal to his wife.

## TEACHING OF JESUS

It was the teaching of Jesus that revolutionized this situation, that put both man and wife on an equal footing as regards conjugal rights, so **P. 152** that both had to be totally loyal to each other. He makes his points in the dispute with the Pharisees ([Mk. 10:2-12](#), [Mt. 19:3-9](#)) and in his new definitions of adultery scattered throughout the gospels ([Mt. 5:27-32](#), [19:9](#), [Mk. 10:11-12](#), [Lk. 16:18](#)). It is these definitions I wish to focus on here.

Form critics generally regard [Lk. 16:18](#) as the earliest and most demonstrably authentic form of Jesus' logia about divorce. 'Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.' Its authenticity is vouched for in that it presupposes a Palestinian setting, because it envisages only the man taking the initiative in divorce, yet it totally transcends first-century Jewish views of marriage. For while ostensibly regulating in typical case-law fashion marriage after divorce, Jesus' new definitions of adultery imply also a revolutionary approach to polygamy and extra-marital affairs.

To appreciate the magnitude of this revolution, both parts of [Lk. 16:18](#) must be examined in turn. Verse [18b](#) is closely paralleled by [Mt. 5:32b](#) 'Whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.' To a first-century Jewish audience such a statement would have sounded fantastic, for the principal purpose in writing a certificate of divorce (*gēṭ*, cf. [Dt. 24:1](#), [Mt. 19:7](#)) was to free a divorced woman from the charge of adultery if she remarried. Indeed the Mishnah says that a divorce certificate is not valid unless it explicitly states, 'Thou art free to marry any man' (*Gittin* 9:3).

Jesus is not therefore simply condemning divorce. He says it does not achieve what it purports to, namely, give freedom to remarry. Remarriage despite the legal form of divorce is adultery. This new definition of adultery implies the indissolubility of marriage, a point Jesus argues theologically on the basis of [Gn. 1:27](#) and [2:24](#) in his debate with the Pharisees ([Mt. 19:3-9](#), [Mk. 10:2-9](#)). Dupont aptly sums up what Jesus has done by redefining adultery in this way.

Note the way Jesus puts it. He does not say in a general abstract sort of way: 'divorce does not dissolve the marriage'. He describes a concrete situation, that of a divorced woman, and declares to him who wants to marry her that this marriage is adultery. The affirmation is so much more striking in going right to the consequences. This woman whom a divorce has liberated is not free. Contradictory? Not at all, but a way of making us feel more vividly a quite new teaching, which deprives divorce of its essence. Jesus keeps the term, but changes its content. This freed woman is not really free: the dissolved marriage still exists. In speaking as he does, Jesus makes his hearers realize that divorce has no effect on the marriage bond: although separated, the spouses remain united by the marriage. That is why a new marriage would be adultery.<sup>1</sup> **p. 153**

Thus the new definition of adultery in [Lk. 16:18b](#) serves to give married women some protection against male caprice. A wife cannot simply be turned out at the whim of her

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<sup>1</sup> J. Dupont, *Mariage et divorce dans l'évangile* (Bruges, Desclée de Brouwer [1959], 57.

husband. In the eyes of Christ at any rate she is still bound to her husband even after divorce.

## RIGHTS OF WOMEN

But more striking from the point of view of women's rights is [Lk. 16:18a](#): 'Every one who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery'. In v. [18b](#) it is the woman's second husband who commits adultery, that is, he sins against her first husband. But here in v. [18a](#) it is the first husband who commits adultery by divorcing and remarrying. But who is he sinning against? His second wife could well be a spinster or widow. Evidently by marrying a second time the man is committing adultery against his *first* wife. [Mk. 10:11](#) makes the point explicitly by adding 'against her'. And it is a very great innovation to say a man can commit adultery against his own wife. The OT knows of men committing adultery against other men by having intercourse with their wives, and of women committing adultery against their husbands, but not *vice versa*. By this pronouncement Jesus binds husbands to their wives with the same exclusiveness as wives were bound to their husbands under the Old Covenant. A real reciprocity between spouses is thereby implied by Jesus' teaching.

It is this new definition of adultery condemning remarriage after divorce as a sin against one's first wife which carries with it the implication that polygamy and extra-marital affairs are wrong for men too. A divorce was regarded as securing the right of both parties to remarry without being stigmatized as adulterers. As we have seen Jesus denied that divorce gave freedom to remarry. Now it follows that if he held that it was adultery to take a second wife *after* divorce, which in first-century eyes entitled one to take a second partner, how much more adulterous must it be to take a second partner *without* the legal form of divorce. Thus bigamy and polygamy are ruled out by [Lk. 16:18](#) and parallels. Furthermore married men who had affairs with unmarried girls must by analogous reasoning be guilty not just of fornication but of adultery against their wife. In this very brief statement then is encapsulated a revolution in the rights of married women: Jesus expects every husband to be completely faithful to one woman. Where his new definition of adultery is respected, a wife cannot be discarded by divorce, demeaned by polygamy, or outraged by her [p. 154](#) husband's extra-marital affairs or his resorting to prostitutes. All these sins now count as adultery by the husband against his wife, just as any infidelity on her part counted as adultery against him under OT law. Thus full reciprocity between spouses was introduced by Jesus' remarks.

## MALE CHAUVINISM

According to Mark and Luke, Jesus' new definition of adultery turned it from being primarily an offence by married women against their husbands into a sin by either spouse against their partner. But the prime target of Jesus' redefinition is male infidelity. His attack on male chauvinism is taken even further in Matthew's gospel. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus condemns men who lust for committing 'adultery in the heart' ([5:28](#)). He further implies that divorce by itself may be adulterous ([5:31-32](#)) not just divorce followed by remarriage as Mark and Luke insist. That this is clearly Matthew's understanding is shown firstly by his arrangement of the material.<sup>2</sup> [5:31-32](#) continues the

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<sup>2</sup> See F. W. Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew. A Commentary* (Oxford, Blackwell [1981]), 153-54.

R. H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans [1982]), 89.

exposition and application of the seventh commandment begun in [5:27](#). The unusually brief introductory formula, 'It was also said' ([5:31](#)) compared with the long formulae introducing the other antitheses in [5:21](#), [27](#), [33](#), [38](#), [43](#) shows that Matthew understood [5:31–32](#) to follow on from [5:27–30](#). Secondly, 'everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress' ([5:32a](#)) shows Jesus putting the blame for the breach of the seventh commandment on the husband, a feature that is prominent in the rest of the synoptic tradition. Only where a man has been forced to divorce his wife because of her own unchastity is the husband exempt from being blamed as adulterous for initiating divorce.<sup>3</sup> **P. 155**

## CONCLUSION

To sum up. There are a variety of definitions of adultery in scripture ranging from the narrow OT husband-centred view to the broad definitions of the Sermon on the Mount. They may be tabulated as follows:-

OT	adultery is	infidelity by a married woman
<a href="#">Lk. 16:18</a>		infidelity by a married
<a href="#">Mt. 5:32b</a>		man or woman,
<a href="#">Mk. 10:11–12</a>		polygamy, and remarriage after divorce
<a href="#">Mt. 5:32a</a>		divorce alone (except for unchastity) <sup>4</sup>
<a href="#">Mt. 5:28</a>		lust is 'adultery in the heart'

Though the definitions of [Mt. 5:28](#), [32a](#) are broader than those in [Lk. 16:18](#) and parallels, it would seem unnecessary to posit that they must represent Matthaean expansions of the primitive dominical statement. All the divorce logia attributed to Christ exhibit a concern with the rights of women. If he could say that remarriage after divorce and therefore

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J. J. Kilgallen, 'To What are the Matthaean Exception Texts (5:32 and 19:9) an Exception?', *Biblica* 61 [1980], 102–5.

<sup>3</sup> It seems that unchastity (*porneia*) means any sexual immorality, most frequently adultery. Although Matthew allowed divorce in this situation, there is no indication that he permitted remarriage even then. See E. Lövestam, 'Divorce and Remarriage in the New Testament', *Jewish Law Annual* 4 [1981], 47–65. J. Dupont, *Mariage et divorce*, 136–157. R. H. Gundry, *Matthew*, 90–91. For further discussion see W. A. Heth and G. J. Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce* (London, Hodder & Stoughton [1984]).

[Mt. 19:9](#) apparently brings together the common synoptic definition that remarriage after divorce is adultery, and [Mt. 5:32](#)'s definition that divorce by itself, except for unchastity, is also adultery. See G. J. Wenham, 'Matthew and Divorce', *JSNT* (forthcoming).

polygamy and any male infidelity is adulterous, it seems quite feasible that he might have condemned unwarranted divorce equally forthrightly.

These dominical innovations were maintained by Paul and by the majority of the early Christian fathers, who insist on the mutuality of conjugal rights between married couples and forbid Christians to remarry after divorce.<sup>5</sup> For them the loving husband totally loyal to his wife whatever her faults was a powerful image of the devotion of Christ to his church. And to this day married women still hope for the same loyalty from their husbands as their husbands expect from them, even though they are usually ignorant of who first formulated their expectations.

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Dr. G. J. Wenham lectures at The College of St. Paul and St. Mary, Cheltenham. p. 156

# **The Power and the Powerless The Pastoral Vocation of the Hispanic Church in the USA**

**A. William Cook**

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*This lecture was delivered during the Hispanic Emphasis Week October 17–20, 1983 at the annual Convocation of the Hispanic Studies and Ministry Programme of the Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary. The purpose of the week's activities was to highlight the importance of Hispanic culture in North America and the missional challenge which Hispanics posed for the Christian church in the United States during the last quarter of the 20th century.*

*The Hispanic Studies and Ministries Programme of Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary has been designed for students who either out of ethnic origin and/or vocational commitment want to minister to Hispanics in the Americas. Its aim is to develop competency for an effective ministry with evangelical passion and ecumenical outlook. The programme includes theological, cultural and field studies. It seeks to create within the entire Seminary community an awareness of the challenge of Hispanics to the church as a whole, the beauty and depth of their spiritual and cultural traditions, the relevance and breadth of contemporary Hispanic theologies.*

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. [1 Cor. 7:3–4, 10–11](#). For the evidence of the fathers see H. Crouzel, *L'Église primitive face au divorce* (Paris, Beauchesne [1971]).