

NOT UNDER BONDAGE

R. L. Whiteside

What is the bondage mentioned in I Cor. 7:15? Does the language mean that the injured, or innocent, party is so released from the marriage bonds as to be free to marry again? How would we contrast this verse with Matt. 19:9?

The verse reads: "Yet if the unbelieving departeth, let him depart: the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us in peace." The passage seems plain enough; yet opinions differ as to its application. This difference of opinion grows out of the notion that its plain meaning does not seem to harmonize with Matt. 19:9. If a person did not already have his mind made up, he would have no trouble in understanding this verse. It can refer to nothing else than the marriage bonds, or vows. If either husband or wife becomes a Christian and the other is so bitter, against Christianity as to refuse to live with the believer, the believer is not under bondage in such cases—is completely released from the marriage vows, and as if no marriage had ever taken place. If this be not so, the believer, is still under bondage. But does that contradict Matt 19:9? It does not, any more than Matt. 19:9 contradicts God's original marriage law.

In the beginning God made a male and a female. The one female was suited to the needs of the one male (Gen. 2; 24). This is evidently the original law of marriage for the whole human family, and would have continued to be the law with no exceptions had not sin entered into the world.

The first and permanent marriage law is found in Gen. 1:27, 28; 2:24. This law made no provision for divorce—not even for a separation. But the authority that makes a law can abolish it, or he can amend it, as circumstances or occasions demand. Notice carefully what led up to the things Jesus said in the verses in question: "and there came to him Pharisees, trying him, and saying, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? And he answered and said. Have ye not read, that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh? So that they are no more two, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder. They say unto him, Why then did Moses command to give a bill of divorcement, and put her away? He saith unto them, Moses for your hardness of heart suffered you to put away your wives; but from the beginning it hath not been so. And I say unto you, whosoever shall put away his wife, except for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery." It will appear plain from what Jesus says that the original law made no provision for any separation for any cause; yet the law of Moses suffered a man to put away his wife, but commanded him to give her a bill of divorcement when he did so. That bill of divorcement was required when the separation took place (Deut. 24:1). Because God added this amendment to his own marriage law, will someone accuse him of contradicting his own law. And when Jesus gave fornication as grounds for divorce and remarriage, will someone accuse him of contradicting God's marriage law? And when the inspired apostle gave another cause for the complete annulment of the marriage vows, he did not contradict that law. Therefore, "if the unbelieving departeth", let him depart; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases." If the believer, in such cases, is not entirely free from the marriage vows, he is still under bondage.

We usually have argued that as the apostles were the last and final revelators of the will of Christ, all that went before should be understood in the light of their teaching; but when we seek to bend First Corinthians to fit Matt. 19:9, we reverse the principle of interpretation. Besides, the two passages deal with different angles of the matter. Jesus speaks of the man who shall put away his wife for other reasons than adultery; Paul speaks of man or woman who has been forsaken by the wife or the husband. The man must not put away his wife and marry another, except for fornication; but if an unbelieving husband or wife leaves the believer, what then? "The brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases." As long as the unbeliever was content to dwell with the believer, the believer was still under bondage (Verses 12, 13). The believer must not put the unbeliever away. "Yet if the unbelieving depart, let him depart: the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases." If his future actions are in any way limited by his former marriage, then he is still bound by that marriage — is still under bondage. To me the language means that the brother or sister is as free as if he or she had never been married. What else can the passage mean? If we did not have our minds made up another way, the passage would mean to us just what it says.
(Reflections, pp. 414-417)