

Tertullian on Adultery

By WmTipton

Tertullian 150ad - ~230ad

This page isn't to prove that I agree with these ECFs on any matter. It is solely to show that there were teachings like ours today that do not forbid all remarriage just because the person is divorced.

It is notable that Tertullian did at some later point get involved with a heretical group called the Montanists who did believe that remarriage is forbidden. Tertullian also seems to have adopted the view that even the widow(er) isn't in God's will if they remarry. This seems to have been a ploy to prevent his wife from remarrying after his death.

The Writings of Tertullian

Part Fourth

IV. To His Wife.

Book II.

Chap. I. - Reasons Which Led to the Writing of this Second Book

"Very lately, best beloved fellow-servant in the Lord, I, as my ability permitted, entered for your benefit at some length into the question what course is to be followed by a holy woman when her marriage has (in whatever way) been brought to an end. Let us now turn our attention to the next best advice, in regard of human infirmity; admonished hereto by the examples of certain, who, when an opportunity for the practice of Contenance has been offered them, by divorce, or by the decease of the husband, have not only thrown away the opportunity of attaining so great a good, but not even in their remarriage have chosen to be mindful of the rule that "above all they marry in the Lord."

Hardly sounds like a prohibition against remarriage after divorce....only to marry 'in the Lord' after death or divorce..

Tertullian

The Five Books Against Marcion

Book 4

"But Christ prohibits divorce, saying, "Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery; and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband, also committeth adultery."
(Luk_16:18)

In order to forbid divorce, He makes it unlawful to marry a woman that has been put away. Moses, however, permitted repudiation in Deuteronomy: "When a man hath taken a wife, and hath lived with her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found unchastity in her; then let him write her a bill of divorcement and give it in her hand, and send her away out of his house." (Deu_24:1)

You see, therefore, that there is a difference between the law and the gospel- between Moses and Christ To be sure there is! But then you have rejected that other gospel which witnesses to the same verity and the same Christ.

There, while prohibiting divorce, He has given us a solution of this special question respecting it: “Moses,” says He, “because of the hardness of your hearts, suffered you to give a bill of divorcement; but from the beginning it was not so” (Mat_19:8) - for this reason, indeed, because He who had “made them male and female” had likewise said, “They twain shall become one flesh; what therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” (Mat_19:4, Mat_19:6)

Now, by this answer of His (to the Pharisees), He both sanctioned the provision of Moses, who was His own (servant), and restored to its primitive purpose the institution of the Creator, whose Christ He was. Since, however, you are to be refuted out of the Scriptures which you have received, I will meet you on your own ground, as if your Christ were mine.

When, therefore, He prohibited divorce, and yet at the same time represented the Father, even Him who united male and female, must He not have rather exculpated than abolished the enactment of Moses?

But, observe, if this Christ be yours when he teaches contrary to Moses and the Creator, on the same principle must He be mine if I can show that His teaching is not contrary to them.

I maintain, then, that there was a condition in the prohibition which He now made of divorce; the case supposed being, that a man put away his wife for the express purpose of marrying another.

His words are: “Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery; and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband, also committeth adultery,” (Luk_16:8) - “put away,” that is, for the reason wherefore a woman ought not to be dismissed, that another wife may be obtained.

For he who marries a woman who is unlawfully put away is as much of an adulterer as the man who marries one who is undivorced.

Permanent is the marriage which is not rightly dissolved; to marry, 905 therefore, whilst matrimony is undissolved, is to commit adultery.

Since, therefore, His prohibition of divorce was a conditional one, He did not prohibit absolutely; and what He did not absolutely forbid, that He permitted on some occasions, when there is an absence of the cause why He gave His prohibition.

In very deed His teaching is not contrary to Moses, whose precept He partially defends, I will not say confirms.

If, however, you deny that divorce is in any way permitted by Christ, how is it that you on your side destroy marriage, not uniting man and woman, nor admitting to the sacrament of baptism and of the eucharist those who have been united in marriage anywhere else, unless they should agree together to repudiate the fruit of their marriage, and so the very Creator Himself?

Well, then, what is a husband to do in your sect, if his wife commit adultery? Shall he keep her? But your own apostle, you know, does not permit “the members of Christ to be joined to a harlot.” (1Co_6:15)

Divorce, therefore, when justly deserved, has even in Christ a defender.

So that Moses for the future must be considered as being confirmed by Him, since he prohibits divorce in the same sense as Christ does, if any unchastity should occur in the wife. For in the Gospel of Matthew he says, “Whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery.” (Mat_5:32) He also is deemed equally guilty of adultery, who marries a woman put away by her husband.

The Creator, however, except on account of adultery, does not put asunder what He Himself joined together, the same Moses in another passage enacting that he who had married after violence to a damsel, should thenceforth not have it in his power to put away his wife.

(Deu_22:28-29) Now, if a compulsory marriage contracted after violence shall be permanent, how much rather shall a voluntary one, the result of agreement! This has the sanction of the prophet: “Thou shalt not forsake the wife of thy youth.” (Mal_2:15)

Thus you have Christ following spontaneously the tracks of the Creator everywhere, both in permitting divorce and in for-bidding it. You find Him also protecting marriage, in whatever direction you try to escape.

He prohibits divorce when He will have the marriage inviolable;

He permits divorce when the marriage is spotted with unfaithfulness.

You should blush when you refuse to unite those whom even your Christ has united; and repeat the blush when you disunite them without the good reason why your Christ would have them separated. I have⁹¹⁵ now to show whence the Lord derived this decision of His, and to what end He directed it. It will thus become more fully evident that His object was not the abolition of the Mosaic ordinance by any suddenly devised proposal of divorce; because it was not suddenly proposed, but had its root in the previously mentioned John.