

## FIRST CORINTHIANS 7:15, THE MARRIAGE COVENANT, & THE NATURE OF DESERTION

by  
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Divorce is a difficult topic to address on both theological and practical levels. Even when this topic is carefully studied by the best of Christian scholars, conclusions on the topic and their practical applications can yield a spectrum of beliefs and practices. When discussing divorce, charity is essential.

Realizing the varied beliefs that many have on the topic of divorce, this article seeks to investigate a difficult issue that exists within the position that allows for divorce in certain circumstances, the majority position on divorce within evangelical theology today.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, this article will carry out this investigation from the understanding that marriage is a covenant relationship, a position to be surveyed briefly below.<sup>3</sup> Whether a reader approaches this article to better research his own position or that of his fellow Christian, all may be edified along the way.

Though Christians who allow for divorce vary as to what circumstances they believe allow for a divorce, all within this position agree that Paul commands a believing spouse to allow the unbelieving spouse to leave a marriage: “if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so” (1 Cor 7:15).<sup>4</sup> This allowance is commonly termed either the *Pauline privilege* or *desertion* in that Paul “privileges” the believer to allow the unbeliever to “desert” the marriage through divorce. What is sometimes unclear, however, is whether the term *desertion* may refer to circumstances beyond the situation that Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 7:15.

The purpose of this article is to review the Pauline privilege in 1 Corinthians 7:15, examine the marriage covenant by means of brief

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<sup>2</sup>For a concise but thorough survey of the various positions on divorce, see Andreas J. Köstenberger and David W. Jones, *God Marriage and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 223–38 and 363–69. For a longer work, see William A. Heth, Craig S. Keener, and Gordon John Wenham, *Remarriage after Divorce in Today's Church: 3 Views*, ed. Mark L. Strauss (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006). For an older work, see *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*, ed. H. Wayne House (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990).

<sup>3</sup>For a brief overview of marriage as contract, sacrament, or covenant, see Köstenberger and Jones, *God Marriage and Family*, 69–76.

<sup>4</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001).

survey of the Old Testament, and explore whether or not a theology of the marriage covenant allows for further definition of *desertion* in 1 Corinthians 7:15.

### FIRST CORINTHIANS 7:15 AND THE PAULINE PRIVILEGE

In 1 Corinthians 7:1–16, Paul addressed the Corinthians' view that "it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman" (1 Cor 7:1).<sup>5</sup> The Corinthians were apparently advocating that spouses should divorce in order to avoid sexual relations and that a believing spouse would have all the more justification to do so if the other spouse was an unbeliever.<sup>6</sup> Paul's statements were guided by the rule of remaining in one's present circumstances (cf. 1 Cor 7:17),<sup>7</sup> whether as an unmarried believer (1 Cor 7:6–9), a married believer (1 Cor 7:10–11), or a believer who is married to an unbeliever (1 Cor 7:12–16). For the last of these three groups, Paul commands a believer to remain married to an unbelieving spouse if the spouse is content to remain married (1 Cor 7:12–14). Paul then offers the "privilege" of an exception to his rule in 1 Corinthians 7:15 and states, "But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so."<sup>8</sup>

Examining Paul's exception further, it is clear that the topic of divorce is in view. He uses the verb χωρίζω ("to separate") to speak of divorce between the believing and unbelieving spouse, an act which results in an unmarried state for both the believer and unbeliever.<sup>9</sup> The middle voice of χωρίζω (χωρίζεται) indicates that the subject (i.e., the unbeliever, ἄπιστος) carries out an action towards himself (or herself), indicating that the unbeliever is the one to divorce and thus remove himself or herself from the marriage.<sup>10</sup>

The believer is then commanded with the imperative, "let it be so,"

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<sup>5</sup>William W. Combs, "Greek Exegesis of 1 Corinthians 1–7" (course notes, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, Fall 2012), 154–55. Combs points out that the translation "to have sexual relations" is the proper understanding of what could be literally rendered "to touch" (ἅπτω), a euphemistic way of describing sexual relations.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 153.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>A literal rendering of the Greek (εἰ δὲ ὁ ἄπιστος χωρίζεται, χωρίζεσθω) would be, "But if the unbeliever divorces, let him divorce" (author's translation).

<sup>9</sup>John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 629–31. In 1 Corinthians 7:10–11, a believing husband and wife who had divorced (χωρίζω) were consequently "unmarried" (ἄγαμος). One may logically conclude that a believer and unbeliever who divorce (χωρίζω) according to 1 Corinthians 7:15 are unmarried as well (in contrast to remaining married while physically separated).

<sup>10</sup>Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 534.

which, literally rendered, is, “let the separation take place” (χωρίζεσθω). This instance of χωρίζω is also in the middle voice and again indicates that the subject carries out an action towards himself (or herself). Thus, in response to the act of divorce by the unbeliever, the believer is to allow the divorce to take place and passively permit the termination of the marriage.<sup>11</sup>

However one understands Paul to justify his statements in 1 Corinthians 7:15b–16,<sup>12</sup> and however one understands this passage’s potential (or not) for the permissibility of remarriage after such a divorce, it may at least be said that Paul allows for a believer to remain passive when an unbelieving spouse divorces and deserts their marriage.<sup>13</sup>

### THE MARRIAGE COVENANT

A review of the Pauline privilege in hand, this article will now examine a biblical marriage covenant by means of surveying the primary Old Testament passages that show marriage to be a covenant relationship. Though the constraints of this article do not allow for a detailed theology of a marriage covenant, the basic nature and obligations of a marriage covenant may be seen by a survey of five Old Testament passages: Exodus 21:10–11; Deuteronomy 24:1–4; Malachi 2:14; Ezekiel 16:8, 59, 60, 62; and Proverbs 2:16–17.<sup>14</sup> The final section of this paper will use this survey to conclude whether or not the marriage covenant has any bearing on the nature of desertion in 1 Corinthians 7:15.

#### *Exodus 21:10–11*

If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights. And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out for nothing, without payment of money.

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>For a helpful survey of the interpretive options on this matter, see both Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 534–40, and Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 302–306.

<sup>13</sup>It should be noted that this is a very specific understanding of the action of *desertion*, namely, when an unbeliever chooses to formally divorce and leave the believing spouse. Absence from the marriage in any way apart from the formality of divorce is not intended with the term *desertion* in this instance. Perhaps it is best to use the term *divorce* when referring to an unbeliever’s termination of a marriage to a believer in 1 Cor 7:15.

<sup>14</sup>For a thorough exegesis of the texts in Proverbs, Ezekiel, and Malachi, see Gordon P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1994), 280–94 and 296–309. Hugenberger also discusses the implicit indicators of marriage as a covenant in Hos 2:18–22 and suggests 1 Samuel 18–20 as a supporting passage as well, showing David’s marriage with Michal to be a covenant relationship in light of its literary parallels and contrasts to David’s covenant with Jonathan (294–96 and 311–12).

Exodus 21:10–11 instructed the Israelites in what to do when a man married to a slave-wife married another woman. If he did not provide the slave-wife with food, clothing, or sexual relations, she was no longer obligated to remain in the marriage. She was free to divorce him and leave.<sup>15</sup>

Though this passage addresses a unique situation, which may seem to discount its value for a broader theology of divorce, it was applied to marriages in general.<sup>16</sup> What is lacking for the discussion at hand is any explicit identification of either of the man's marriages being a covenant in some way. However, as will be seen below, at least one of the passages that identifies marriage as a covenant relationship (Ezek 16:8) uses Exodus 21:10–11 in its theology of marriage and its three requirements of food, clothing, and sexual relations as obligatory to the marriage relationship in general.<sup>17</sup>

Assuming the explanation below of Ezekiel 16:8 to be correct, it may be said for the moment that a marriage covenant includes the husband's obligation to provide food, clothing, and sexual relations to his wife. Moreover, a husband's failure to uphold these three obligations allowed for the wife to divorce and terminate the marriage.

#### *Deuteronomy 24:1–4*

When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the Lord. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance.

Deuteronomy 24:1–4 instructed the Israelites that a man may not marry a woman that he had previously divorced if she had married another man after the first marriage. What is pertinent to the discussion at hand is that Moses clearly allowed for an Israelite man to divorce his

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<sup>15</sup>See David Instone-Brewer, "Three Weddings and a Divorce: God's Covenant with Israel, Judah and the Church," *Tyndale Bulletin* 47 (May 1996): 7–12. In ancient Rabbinic literature, only one of these three provisions needed to be broken in order for a divorce to take place. Instone-Brewer states, "Along with the rights to these three types of support went the right to a divorce if any of these three terms of the contract were broken" (11).

<sup>16</sup>Ibid. Quoting again the discussion of the application of Exodus 21:10–11 in Rabbinic literature, Instone-Brewer states, "The rights of the slave wife in Exodus 21 were applied to free wives and also to men." See also David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 26.

<sup>17</sup>Instone-Brewer, "Three Weddings and a Divorce," 7–8.

wife in the event that “he has found some indecency in her,” likely some kind of sexual sin (Deut 24:1).<sup>18</sup>

As with Exodus 21:10–11, Deuteronomy 24:1–4 addresses a unique situation and does not explicitly identify marriage as a covenant. Nonetheless, this passage allows for a divorce in the event of sexual sin, an underlying assumption below that helps to explain the covenantal nature of marriage.<sup>19</sup> Assuming the explanations of the passages below to be correct, it may be said for the moment that a marriage covenant may be broken in the event of sexual sin. In such an instance, if the innocent spouse chose to divorce the sinning spouse, the requirement of “a certificate of divorce” indicated that the marriage must be formally dissolved.

### ***Malachi 2:14***

But you say, “Why does he not?” Because the Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.

Malachi 2:14 records Judah’s question and God’s explanation to Judah as to why he had rejected their offering at the altar (cf. Mal 2:13). This rejection was God’s response to an unlawful type of divorce that had been practiced by some of Judah’s men. They had divorced their wives after some time of marriage in order to marry women who were each “the daughter of a foreign god” (Mal 2:11), presumably for their beauty and perhaps for the marriage’s financial benefit as well.<sup>20</sup>

What is helpful to the discussion at hand in Malachi 2:14 is that “the wife of your youth” is also described as “your companion and your wife by covenant,” clearly indicating that the marital relationship was understood to involve a covenant in some way. It is clear from this text that one obligation of this covenant was marital and sexual fidelity, that is, to remain faithful to one’s spouse, especially when tempted to divorce and marry another without due cause (cf. Mal 2:11).

Another aspect of the marital covenant from this text is that God himself “was witness between you [i.e., the divorcing husband] and the wife of your youth” (Mal 2:14). From the context of Malachi 2:10–16, God was not a witness in the sense of mere observation. Rather, he held the married man and woman accountable for honoring the marriage

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<sup>18</sup>Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, 156–59.

<sup>19</sup>In addition to the passages below, Jeremiah 3:8 records God’s action towards an idolatrous Israel, “I had sent her away with a decree of divorce.” This decree would have been in keeping with the requirement in Deuteronomy 24:1. See Instone-Brewer, “Three Weddings and a Divorce,” 13–14. For a larger discussion of these passages, see also William F. Luck, *Divorce and Remarriage* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 68–85.

<sup>20</sup>Robert V. McCabe, “Haggai and Malachi: English Bible” (course notes, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, Summer 2009), 71–72.

covenant with the fidelity that it required.<sup>21</sup> In carrying out this obligation, when the men of Judah sinned by divorcing and marrying foreign wives, God barred them from the altar and refused to accept their worship.<sup>22</sup>

Malachi 2:14 explicitly identifies marriage as a covenant relationship. Additionally, Malachi 2:14 identifies God as the witness of the marriage covenant, which involves holding the spouses accountable for their fidelity to this covenant. Finally, Malachi 2:14 implies that a divorce should not take place if the marriage covenant has not been broken.

### *Ezekiel 16:8*

When I passed by you again and saw you, behold, you were at the age for love, and I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness; I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord God, and you became mine.

Ezekiel 16:8 records one of many statements by God whereby he reminded Jerusalem of his care and faithfulness for her despite her repeated idolatry (cf. Ezek 16:1–5).<sup>23</sup> The imagery of God using his garment to cover Israel's nakedness was symbolic of his pledge to care for Jerusalem, which would include giving her love, clothing, and food (Ezek 16:8, 13).<sup>24</sup> In keeping with Exodus 21:10–11, a text that underlies the theology of Ezekiel 16, these three provisions were essential to the marriage relationship, a relationship Ezekiel identifies as a covenant.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, Jerusalem gave these provisions to “any passerby” (Ezek 16:15) and committed adultery against God her husband (Ezek 16:16–19).<sup>26</sup>

Ezekiel 16:8 also described God's marriage covenant with Jerusalem as having taken place after “I made my vow to you,” a vow that was essential to the marriage covenant. In context, this vow was a pledge of fidelity by God to provide Jerusalem with food, clothing, and love. Because of her idolatrous use of these provisions, Jerusalem was charged

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 76.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ezekiel 16:59–60 refers back to this covenant as well: “you who have despised the oath in breaking the covenant, yet I will remember my covenant.”

<sup>24</sup>Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 482–83. Ezekiel 16:13 states, “Thus you were adorned with gold and silver, and your clothing was of fine linen and silk and embroidered cloth. You ate fine flour and honey and oil.”

<sup>25</sup>Instone-Brewer, “Three Weddings and a Divorce,” 7–12.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 9. Ezekiel 16:16–19 specifies that Jerusalem used God's provisions for idolatrous purposes and “played the whore”: clothing for “colorful shrines”; “gold and...silver” to make “images of men”; clothing “to cover them”; and “bread,...fine flour and oil and honey” to “set before” these images as “a pleasing aroma.”

with having “despised the oath in breaking the covenant” (Ezek 16:59), apparently responsible for having broken her vow and oath to be faithful to the terms of her marriage.<sup>27</sup>

Like Malachi 2:14, Ezekiel 16:8 identifies marriage as a covenant relationship. Ezekiel 16:8 also refers to an oath necessary to a marriage covenant, a pledge by each spouse to uphold the obligations of the marriage. From the context of Ezekiel 16 and its underlying theology of Exodus 21:10–11, these obligations primarily involve love, clothing and food. As it pertains to the marriage covenant in general, just as the husband was to give these three provisions to his wife according to Exodus 21:10–11, so also was the wife responsible to use them for their intended purposes in the marriage according to Ezekiel 16. When the husband fails to give such provisions, he breaks the marriage covenant. When the wife uses these provisions for adulterous purposes, she breaks the covenant as well. In such instances, the innocent spouse is free to divorce and end the marriage.

***Proverbs 2:16–17***

So you will be delivered from the forbidden woman,  
 from the adulteress with her smooth words,  
 Who forsakes the companion of her youth  
 and forgets the covenant of her God.

Proverbs 2:16–17 describes the “adulteress” as the one “who forsakes the companion of her youth,” a phrase parallel to what immediately follows, “and forgets the covenant of her God.” From this text, the statement of the adulteress forsaking her companion (i.e., her husband) is parallel to the statement of her forgetting the covenant of her God, that is, the covenant between her and her companion (husband) that involves God in some way. As described above in Malachi 2:14, God’s involvement in a marriage covenant is to function as its witness, which is to hold the married man and woman accountable for fulfilling their marital obligations.<sup>28</sup>

Though Proverbs 2:17 does not necessarily add new information to what has already been discussed, the explicit identification of marriage as a covenant reinforces the notion that marriage is indeed a covenant

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<sup>27</sup>Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant*, 305–06. The verb for “vow” (שבט) in Ezekiel 16:8 and the noun “oath” (אָהַב) in Ezekiel 16:59 both refer to the oath necessary to the marriage covenant identified in each verse. The parallelism indicates that the vow made in Ezekiel 16:8 and the oath broken in Ezekiel 16:59 are one and the same. For the concept of the marriage oath (*verba solemnia*), see also McCabe, “Haggai and Malachi,” 76–77.

<sup>28</sup>Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 1–15*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 231. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant*, 305, points out that, just as Malachi 2:14 identifies God as the witness and implies the presence of an oath to which he is witness, so also does Proverbs 2:16–17 state that the covenant is “of her God,” implying his role as witness, which in turn implies he is witness to an oath as well.

relationship. This passage likewise reinforces that a marriage covenant includes the obligation to be sexually faithful to one's spouse.

### *Other Texts and Summary*

All of the texts above are from the Mosaic Law and later writings which sought to uphold this Law. Added to their theology of marriage would be Leviticus 18:9, which specifies that one may not marry an immediate relative related by blood.<sup>29</sup> Essential to any theology of marriage would also be Genesis 2:18, 24–25, which shows the basic obligations of marriage to be “trans-dispensational,” that is, true of marriage at any time by virtue of its being an ordinance instituted at creation.<sup>30</sup> Though the New Testament does not identify marriage as a covenant relationship, neither does it abrogate the concept, allowing one to assume that its authors understood marriage as did the authors of passages examined above.<sup>31</sup>

Though the survey above is admittedly brief, a sufficient amount of biblical data has been examined to sketch the basic nature and components of a marriage covenant. From the foregoing, a marriage covenant may be defined as a formal agreement (Ezek 16:8) between an unrelated man and woman (Lev 18:9) before God as witness (Prov 2:17; Mal 2:14) to faithfully carry out their marital obligations to one another. At the least, the husband is obligated to provide his wife with food, clothing, and sexual relations (Exod 21:10–11). Likewise, the wife is obligated to use these resources responsibly within the home and be sexually faithful to her husband (cf. Ezek 16:8, 16–19, 59). If the marriage covenant is broken by the husband (cf. Exod 21:10–11) or wife (Ezek 16:59), divorce is permitted by God (Exod 21:10–11; Deut 24:1–4).<sup>32</sup> With this definition in hand, this article can now explore whether or not the marriage covenant allows for further definition of the concept of desertion in 1 Corinthians 7:15.

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<sup>29</sup>McCabe, “Haggai and Malachi,” 78. Leviticus 18:9 states, “You shall not uncover the nakedness of your sister, your father’s daughter or your mother’s daughter, whether brought up in the family or in another home.”

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 77. See also Köstenberger and Jones, who acknowledge that “others have noted that marriage transcends the notion of covenant, since it is rooted in God’s created order, which precedes the establishment of covenant relationships later in biblical history. This should not minimize the importance of considering marriage as a covenant, though it does mean that marriage as conceived at creation is even more than a covenant” (*God, Marriage, and Family*, 76).

<sup>31</sup>Köstenberger and Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family*, 76.

<sup>32</sup>Though this definition of a marriage covenant with its permissibility for divorce may be somewhat dry and technical, it should be remembered that God showed himself faithful to Israel time and again, even promising to be everlastingly faithful in the midst of her repeated adultery. In the event that a marriage suffers from one spouse being unfaithful, the faithful spouse should look to God as an example of forgiveness and try to make the marriage endure.

### THE MARRIAGE COVENANT AND THE DEFINITION OF DESERTION IN 1 CORINTHIANS 7:15

As reviewed earlier, Paul clearly allows for a believer to remain passive when an unbelieving spouse divorces and deserts their marriage according to 1 Corinthians 7:15. From the explanation above, though a spouse may *actively* divorce a spouse who has broken the marriage covenant in some way, the command in 1 Corinthians 7:15 is to be *passive* when being divorced. This contrast implies that the marriage covenant has an *indirect* bearing on the Pauline Privilege in 1 Corinthians 7:15 at best. Nonetheless, it is still helpful to see how the marriage covenant can better inform a believer to carry out the command of 1 Corinthians 7:15 in a number of situations.

#### *The Marriage Covenant in the Context of 1 Corinthians 7:1–16*

As seen above in 1 Corinthians 7:1–16, the Corinthians were deliberately avoiding sexual relations within the context of marriage. From the definition of a marriage covenant given above, this refusal could be regarded as a breach of the covenant (cf. Exod 21:10–11; Ezek 16:8, 16–19, 59). However, Paul does not encourage spouses to end the marriage but instead to fulfill this aspect of their marriage and to not deprive one another (cf. 1 Cor 7:3–5).

Applying Paul's commands in 1 Corinthians 7:3–5 to 1 Corinthians 7:12–16, a believing spouse was not to deprive the unbelieving spouse of sexual relations and certainly not to divorce the unbelieving spouse in order to do so. Were the believer to abstain from sexual relations, it could even be that the unbeliever would be justified in divorcing the believer for breaking the marriage covenant in this way. Were the believer to divorce the unbeliever when the unbeliever desired to maintain the marriage and had not violated the marriage covenant, it would actually be the believer who was sinfully divorcing and deserting the marriage.

#### **Deuteronomy 24:1–4**

In this passage, Moses sought to regulate the informal dismissal of one's wife by requiring the husband to give his wife a certificate of divorce. She was apparently entitled to require official documentation that the marriage had ended and not simply been abandoned. The difference, however, between Deuteronomy 24:1–4 and 1 Corinthians 7:15 is that the abandoned wife in Deuteronomy 24:1–4 was the first to sin and that the abandoned spouse in 1 Corinthians 7:15 is a believer who is innocent.

Realizing the differences between the passages, it would be valid to conclude that an unbeliever who divorces and deserts a marriage with a believer should necessarily provide documentation of divorce to the believer. If the unbeliever does not do so, an abandoned believer has

precedent from Deuteronomy 24:1–4 to formalize what could be described as an abandonment of all of the marriage’s covenant obligations and a functional divorce. If the sinning spouse was entitled to such documentation, an innocent believer should be entitled to this documentation all the more.

### **Exodus 21:10–11 and Ezekiel 16:8**

As seen above, a woman was allowed to end the marriage if the husband failed to provide food, clothing, and sexual relations (Exod 21:10–11). He did not actively pursue a divorce with her and was even physically present in some sense, but his failure to uphold these obligations was tantamount to breaking the marriage covenant, allowing her to actively end the marriage. Just as the wife has precedent to end the marriage in Exodus 21:10–11, so also does the husband have precedent to do so in Ezekiel 16:8, 16–19, 59. As with Deuteronomy 24:1–4, these passages, too, would give precedent for a believing spouse to formally end a marriage in which these provisions were neglected (thus breaking the marriage covenant) even though the unbeliever had not formally terminated the marriage. It should be noted, however, that a believer’s actively ending a marriage in which the covenant has been broken by the unbeliever is not the same as passively allowing an unbeliever to carry out a divorce as in 1 Corinthians 7:15.

### *A Word of Clarification*

The passages above involve a broken marriage covenant that is formally ended by divorce. In Deuteronomy 24:1–4, an indecency that has broken the marriage covenant allows for a divorce. Both Exodus 21:10–11 and Ezekiel 16:8, 16–19, 59 involve innocent parties who could divorce the spouse that had broken the marriage covenant. To be clear, these situations are not completely parallel to 1 Corinthians 7:15. Paul does not command the believer to *actively* divorce the spouse. The situation in 1 Corinthians 7:15 involves a broken marriage covenant, to be sure, but it is the unbeliever who both breaks the covenant and actively ends the marriage at the same time. The believer has done neither.

Stated another way, one must distinguish between the marriage covenant and the marriage itself. A marriage covenant may be broken, but repentance, forgiveness, and restoration can allow for the marriage to continue. However, to break the marriage covenant is to allow for the possibility that the innocent spouse could formally divorce the sinning spouse. This divorce by the innocent spouse is grounded in both a theology of marriage covenant and the precedents given in some of its supporting passages but not Paul’s command in 1 Corinthians 7:15.

Answering the question, then, as to whether or not the marriage covenant allows for further definition of desertion in 1 Corinthians 7:15, even if one assumes that Paul had an understanding of the marriage covenant and its possibility for divorce as explained above, the context and constraints of 1 Corinthians 7:15 exclude the possibility for

the marriage covenant to further define the action of desertion by an unbelieving spouse.<sup>33</sup> In other words, the theology of a marriage covenant as explained above may allow for the believer to actively divorce an unbeliever who has broken the marriage covenant, but this is not the same as a believer fulfilling the command of passively allowing a divorce in 1 Corinthians 7:15.

### *A Word of Caution*

Though the explanation above allows for a believer to formalize a divorce against an unbelieving spouse, a safe application of this belief would be to limit the grounds for divorce to what is explicitly mentioned in Scripture and to expand this application in principle only with great care. At the most, failing to provide “food, clothing, and sexual relations” could perhaps be expanded in principle (i.e., the neglect of a spouse’s basic needs) to include the intentional failure to provide a necessity of life such as shelter. Perhaps it could be expanded as well to include the active endangerment of life by means of physical abuse. Yet still, even when a spouse breaks the marriage covenant in some egregious way, the believer should remember God’s example in showing forgiveness and seeking restoration with Israel. Unfortunately, however, a believing spouse cannot pour out God’s Spirit in the heart of a persistently sinful spouse to guarantee the sinning spouse’s future repentance and faithfulness. In such an instance, a divorce may be a wise though sorrowful last resort.

### CONCLUSION

Marriage is a beautiful relationship created by God that allows for a husband and wife to enjoy all the pleasures intended therein. The majority of evangelical theologians who address the matter would clarify that divorce is never desired but allowed by Scripture in certain instances and may be necessary in desperate circumstances. An understanding of the marriage covenant above allows a believer to carry out a divorce when a spouse’s most basic needs are grossly and intentionally neglected.

As seen above, 1 Corinthians 7:15 contains Paul’s command that a believer must remain passive in the event that an unbeliever divorces and deserts the marriage over the matter of the belief of the believer. In this context, *desertion* was described as the act of divorce by an unbeliever against a believing spouse, resulting in the termination of their marriage. If one allows for divorce in certain circumstances, divorce in situations in which a spouse somehow “deserts” the basic obligations of marriage is better understood as a violation of the marriage covenant and not the type of desertion that Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 7:15.

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<sup>33</sup>Feinberg and Feinberg state, “Paul presents...a circumstance that allows a marriage to be terminated, but it is a very narrow kind of situation” (*Ethics for a Brave New World*, 630).

Though the understanding of the marriage covenant above allows for divorce in certain circumstances, the proof-text for initiating a divorce in the event of a broken marriage covenant is not found in 1 Corinthians 7:15.