

# The Theology of Marriage in Matthew 19:1-12: An Exegetical Response to Marital Instability in Contemporary Christian Communities

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## Description

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## Abstract

*This study investigates how Matthew 19:1–12 addresses marital instability in contemporary Christian communities through a text-critical and exegetical approach. While previous scholarship has examined this passage from historical and theological perspectives, limited attention has been given to the integration of textual variant analysis and the syntax of exclusionary clauses within an operational ethical-pastoral framework. The central research question is: How does the syntax and textual variant of the Matthean divorce clause inform a normative Christian ethic of marriage and divorce? Employing the grammatico-historical method, the study utilizes NA28 and UBS5 to examine the variant  $\mu\eta\ \acute{\epsilon}\pi\iota\ \pi\omicron\rho\nu\epsilon\acute{\iota}\alpha$  (v.9), compares synoptic parallels (Mark 10:2–12; Luke 16:18), and follows a four-stage exegetical process: (1) establishing the critical text, (2) analyzing Greek syntax and semantics, (3) interpreting marital motifs in first-century Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts, and (4) engaging relevant Old Testament intertexts (Genesis 1–2; Deuteronomy 24:1–4). Findings show that Matthew’s exception clause maintains continuity with Jewish legal tradition while reaffirming the covenantal permanence of marriage. Accordingly, the study proposes a pastoral decision matrix that emphasizes covenantal fidelity, ethically conditional divorce, and reconciliation. This exegetically grounded ethic offers practical guidance for church leaders addressing divorce and relational instability amid changing cultural norms.*

**Keywords:** marriage; marital instability; Matthew 19:1-12; theology of marriage; Christian communities

## INTRODUCTION

Marriage has long held a central place in both biblical theology and Christian practice. In Scripture, it is not merely a social institution but a sacred covenant that mirrors God’s relationship with His people (Gen. 2:24; Eph. 5:31–32). Historically, Christian theology has viewed marriage as vital to human flourishing and a reflection of divine love and commitment. Consequently, marriage remains deeply embedded in the cultural, social, and spiritual life of Christian communities. Despite this theological significance, marital in-

stability is a growing concern in many contemporary Christian contexts (Hornby, 2024; Uroko & Enobong, 2022). Approximately 45% of Nigerian marriages end in divorce or separation within the first decade (Statistics, 2025). Shittu argues that rising divorce and singlehood within the Church are not merely social trends but represent a profound theological challenge. Although Christian doctrine condemns divorce, marital dissolution is increasingly common even among Bible-believing families (Shittu, 2025). This gap between belief and practice raises questions about the effectiveness of pastoral care and the resilience of Christian marital ethics. Contributing factors include cultural shifts, economic stress, and the erosion of traditional values (Barna Group, 2024), demanding renewed theological engagement with New Testament teachings (Marks et al., 2024).

Matthew 19:1–12 is a key passage in the New Testament that addresses issues of marriage, divorce, celibacy, and relational commitment. The teachings of Jesus in this passage have profound theological, pastoral, and ethical implications. A wide range of scholars have analysed this text from various perspectives. For example, Wright, Hagner, Gundry, and Craig L. Blomberg have explored its theological dimensions (Craig L. Blomberg, 1992; Hagner, 1993; Johnson & Wright, 1994; Meier & Gundry, 1984). Others, such as David Scott and John Nolland, have examined its cultural and historical context (Lewis, 1961; Nolland, 2005), while Keener highlights how Jesus' teachings challenged both Jewish and Greco-Roman norms surrounding divorce (Keener, 1997).

Further contributions from scholars like Brown, Duling, and Lee M. McDonald explore the theme of celibacy (Duling, 2003; Hays, 1985; Monroy, 2008), while Foh, Tertullian, Stanley, and Oladipo focus on ethical and pastoral applications, particularly regarding counselling, divorce, and remarriage (Foh, 1984; Oladipo, 2006; Stanley, 2005; Tertullian, 2002). Gilmour offers insights into the gender dynamics within marriage (Gilmour, 2014). However, while this body of scholarship is substantial, less attention has been paid to the integration of textual variant analysis and the syntax of exclusionary clauses within an operational ethical-pastoral framework in contemporary communities.

This paper seeks to fill that gap by clarifying the scope of 'μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ' through the NA28 apparatus, compare synoptic parallels, and derive a text-based pastoral decision matrix. The central research question guiding this study is: How does the syntax and textual variant of the Matthean divorce clause inform a normative Christian ethic of marriage and divorce? The passage will be explored in depth to uncover Jesus' vision for marriage, its indissolubility, and its implications for modern relationships. The central thesis of this study is that Matthew 19:1–12 presents a robust theological framework that, when faithfully applied, can serve as a vital response to the current crisis of marital instability. By returning to the biblical principles found in this passage, Christian communities can reaffirm the sacredness and permanence of marriage of marriage, fostering stronger and more resilient relationships.

## **METHOD**

This study adopts an exegetical research methodology to investigate the theology of marriage as presented in Matthew 19:1–12. The exegetical method is grounded in a grammatico-historical approach, which seeks to interpret the biblical text within its original linguistic, cultural, and historical context, while also engaging its theological significance for contemporary Christian thought. The research process comprised several interrelated components. First, critical editions NA28 and UBS5 were used to examine the variant  $\mu\eta\ \epsilon\pi\iota\ \pi\omicron\rho\nu\epsilon\acute{\iota}\alpha$  (v.9), compare synoptic parallels (Mark 10:2–12; Luke 16:18), and implement a four-stage exegetical process: (1) establishing the critical text, (2) analyzing Greek syntax and semantics, (3) interpreting marital motifs in first-century Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts, and (4) engaging Old Testament intertexts (Genesis 1–2; Deuteronomy 24:1–4). A lexical analysis was then undertaken, focusing on key Greek terms relating to marriage, divorce, and fidelity. This was complemented by grammatical and syntactical analysis, aimed at uncovering the structural and functional relationships of terms in the original Greek text to clarify the authorial intent. A qualitative literature review, conducted alongside primary textual analysis, drew on critical commentaries, peer-reviewed articles, monographs, biblical dictionaries and lexicons. It established a theoretical framework, engaged existing scholarship, and identified areas of contention. Thematic findings emerged through context-content analysis, emphasizing semantic and theological nuances of key Greek terms.

This enabled the identification of recurring theological motifs within the text, particularly regarding the ethics and permanence of Christian marriage. The study ultimately affirms Jesus' vision in Matthew 19:1–12 as portraying marriage as sacred and indissoluble. These findings are examined in light of contemporary Christian communities and contribute to theological reflection on marital instability, emphasizing fidelity, commitment, and covenantal purpose in Christian marriage.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Historical and Literary Context of Matthew 19:1-12

#### *Historical Context*

Matthew 19:1-12 takes place within the complex socio-religious environment of 1st-century Judea, which was under Roman rule but still deeply influenced by Jewish traditions. In this passage, Jesus addresses a controversy surrounding divorce that was a key issue among Jewish religious leaders at the time. The Pharisees, who were a dominant sect in Judea, had differing views on divorce based on their interpretation of Mosaic Law, particularly Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which allowed a man to divorce his wife under certain circumstances (Wright, 2006). The Pharisaic controversy was largely shaped by two prominent schools of thought: the more lenient school of Hillel, which permitted divorce for a wide range of reasons, including trivial matters, and the stricter school of Shammai, which limited divorce to cases of sexual immorality (Josephus, 2020). Jesus' response in Matthew 19:1-12 challenges both schools, emphasizing the original divine intention for marriage as a permanent union between a man and a woman, and stating that divorce is permissible only in the case of sexual immorality.

The historical setting also reflects broader Jewish attitudes toward marriage and divorce. In Jewish society at the time, marriage was viewed as a foundational institution, not only for personal companionship but also for fulfilling God's command to "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28). However, divorce was relatively common, especially among those who adhered to the more permissive interpretation of the law (Brooten, 2003). This social backdrop makes Jesus' teachings on the permanence of marriage in Matthew 19 both radical and countercultural.

### *Literary Context*

In terms of literary context, Matthew 19:1-12 is part of a larger narrative in which Jesus' teachings on morality and ethics are prominent. The passage occurs after a series of teachings on the Kingdom of Heaven and discipleship (Matt 18), and its placement signals a transition from discussions of community life to personal ethics and social issues. This is not the first time Matthew records a teaching on marriage; earlier in the Gospel (Matt 5:31-32), Jesus similarly addresses the issue of divorce in the Sermon on the Mount. However, the context in Matthew 19 provides a more in-depth treatment, offering insight into the divine rationale for marriage and the permissibility of divorce, as well as reinforcing the ideals of fidelity and commitment that are central to Jesus' message.

Theologically, Matthew 19:1-12 is crucial because it underscores Jesus' authority to reinterpret the Mosaic Law in light of the Kingdom of God. By appealing to the creation narrative (Gen. 1:27; 2:24), Jesus grounds His teaching on marriage not in the laws of Moses, but in the original design of God for human relationships. This serves to elevate the ethical standards of the Kingdom, emphasizing that discipleship involves a radical commitment to the teachings of Jesus, even when they challenge prevailing societal norms. The passage also highlights the eschatological dimension of Jesus' ministry, where the ideals of the Kingdom of Heaven break into present reality and redefine human relationships (Keener, 2009b). Thus, Matthew 19:1-12 is not just a discussion of divorce; it is a theological statement about the nature of God's intentions for marriage and human flourishing.

## **Exegetical Analysis of Matthew 19:1-12**

### *Textual Analysis*

The grammatico-historical method, which focuses on understanding biblical texts within their original linguistic, cultural, and historical contexts, is essential for interpreting Matthew 19:1-12. This passage, where Jesus addresses questions about the legitimacy of divorce, is rich with significant terms and phrases that warrant careful examination. Key phrases such as "one flesh" (εἰς μίαν σάρκα), "hardness of heart" (σκληροκαρδίαν), and the "exception clause" (μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ) in Matthew 19:9 are pivotal in shaping Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce.

The phrase εἰς μίαν σάρκα ("one flesh") in verse 5 is derived from the Genesis creation narrative (Gen. 2:24), emphasising the union of husband and wife as an intimate, inseparable bond. The Greek word μίαν ("one") is the accusative feminine singular adjective.

It agrees in case, gender and number with the noun *σάρκα* (flesh), which it describes. *σάρκα* (“flesh”) is rendered in this text in its accusative case, feminine gender and singular noun from *σάρξ*, which means “flesh.” In this context, it refers to “one body, of husband and wife” (Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, 1989; Silva, 2018; Thayer, 2008, p. 89). In its Greek context, this phrase conveys the theological significance of the marital relationship, suggesting that marriage is intended as a permanent, exclusive union (Fiedler, 1990).

Textual variants across extant New Testament manuscripts reveal a remarkable consistency in the retention of the phrase *εἰς μίαν σάρκα*, underscoring its lexical stability and theological significance. Major uncial codices, including Vaticanus (B) and Sinaiticus (Ξ), preserve this formulation in Ephesians 5:31 and Genesis 2:24, indicating strong fidelity to the Septuagint (LXX) tradition of the Genesis narrative. The absence of significant variants across diverse manuscript traditions suggests early and widespread acceptance, as well as doctrinal importance within both Jewish and early Christian exegetical frameworks. As Metzger notes, the uniformity of *εἰς μίαν σάρκα* lends substantial exegetical weight to its interpretation in theological discussions on marital union and embodied oneness (Metzger, 1994).

Contemporary scholarly debates highlight contrasting interpretations of “one flesh.” Loader proposes a metaphorical reading focused on emotional unity, yet this tends to overlook the cultural and linguistic significance of *σάρξ* in Hellenistic Greek and Second Temple Judaism contexts (Loader, 2012). The Greek syntax and intertextual links to Genesis point instead to a covenantal and more literal reading (Witherington, 2007). In marital discourse, *σάρξ* commonly denotes bodily union and shared life, indicating a holistic joining of persons. While metaphorical views offer insight, they do not overturn the traditional interpretation of “one flesh” as a durable, corporeal, and spiritual unity (Kostenberger & Jones, 2010).

The Greek term *σκληροκαρδίαν* (“hardness of heart”) in verse 8 is the accusative feminine singular noun from *σκληροκαρδία*, meaning “hardness of heart” (France, 2007, p. 110). It refers to spiritual obstinacy or a failure to align with God’s will. In the Greek text, this phrase signals a moral condition of stubbornness, which necessitates the allowance of divorce under certain circumstances. However, it is important to understand that this phrase does not serve as a justification for divorce but rather reflects humanity’s failure to live according to God’s ideal for marriage (Keener, 1992).

Support by variant analysis is evident in the notable consistency in the use of the term *σκληροκαρδίαν* across manuscript traditions of Matthew 19:8. Early and authoritative manuscripts such as Codex Vaticanus (B) and Codex Sinaiticus (Ξ) preserve this term without deviation, underscoring its textual stability and theological importance. No significant variants alter its form or meaning in this context, indicating a shared understanding among early scribes of its moral weight and interpretive relevance. According to Metzger, the uniformity of *σκληροκαρδίαν* in these key witnesses suggests intentional preservation, likely due to the theological implications surrounding divorce and its relation to human fallenness (Metzger, 1994). This consistency supports the interpretation that Jesus’ reference to Moses’

concession for divorce was not prescriptive but a reluctant accommodation to a deeply rooted human condition—affirming the moral diagnosis embedded in the term.

Argumentative contrast with opposing positions appears in modern interpretations that challenge this traditional reading, suggesting that “hardness of heart” reflects patriarchal legal frameworks more than a theological diagnosis of sin (Instone-Brewer, 2003). This view contends that Mosaic divorce allowances were protective for vulnerable parties, particularly women, within a flawed legal system. However, such sociological readings often overlook the explicit moral framing of *σκληροκαρδίαν* in both biblical and Jewish literature, where it consistently denotes willful disobedience or spiritual rebellion (cf. Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4; Heb. 3:8). As Keener argues, Jesus’ appeal to Genesis and his critique of *σκληροκαρδίαν* call for a return to God’s original design for marriage. Thus, while socio-legal readings contribute valuable historical context, they do not displace the term’s moral and theological weight (Keener, 2009a).

The exception clause (Matt. 19:9), where Jesus mentions *μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ* (“except for sexual immorality”), has been widely debated. The Greek term *πορνεία* (“sexual immorality”) is used in its dative feminine singular noun in this text. It refers to prostitution, impurity, fornication, and is used to describe any form of illicit sexual activity (Danker et al., 2000; Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, 1989; Silva, 2018). It often refers to unlawful sexual acts and is generally understood as “sexual immorality or marital unfaithfulness.” When referring to sexual unfaithfulness by a married woman, it has the same meaning as “adultery” (Fitzler, 1990, p. 110). This clause suggests that divorce might be permitted in cases of sexual immorality, but it does not negate the overarching ideal of marriage as a sacred and permanent union (Brown, 1993).

In Mark 10:1-12 (parallel Matt. 19:1-9; Lk. 16:18), the discussion of divorce is addressed, and Matthew adds an exception, *μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ* (Matt 19:9; cf. 5:32), in response to the strict, absolute prohibition of divorce found in Mark 10:11-12 and Luke 16:18. When Matthew 19:3 records the Pharisees’ question about the lawfulness of divorcing one’s wife and adds *κατὰ πᾶσαν αἰτίαν* (“for any cause”), he is demonstrating his scribal expertise and has, in the words of Erich Fitzler: “again made an excellent formal correction” (Fitzler, 1990). This phrase references the ongoing debate between the schools of Hillel and Shammai regarding permissible grounds for a wife’s dismissal or release. By introducing the exception “except for unchastity” in 19:9, Matthew limits “for any cause,” suggesting that a marriage is only considered broken on the grounds of sexual immorality, particularly adultery (Fitzler, 1990).

Textual variant analysis of Matthew 19:9 confirms the presence of the exception clause *μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ* in nearly all major textual witnesses, including Codex Sinaiticus (Ⲛ), Codex Vaticanus (B), and Codex Bezae (D), reinforcing its textual reliability and theological significance. Despite minor syntactical differences among manuscripts—such as variations in word order or the inclusion of conjunctions—the clause itself is consistently retained in these key sources. Notably, this clause is absent in the parallel accounts of Mark 10:11–12 and Luke 16:18, suggesting Matthew uniquely preserves a Jesus tradition addressing specific pastoral

concerns within a Jewish-Christian context (Metzger, 1994). Its omission in Mark and Luke has led some scholars to suggest redactional intent by Matthew, possibly to clarify Jesus' teaching amid halakhic debates of the era (Davies & Allison, 2004). Yet the textual consistency within Matthew's own tradition (cf. Matt. 5:32) supports the view that the clause is original rather than a later insertion, framing marriage and divorce theologically.

Opposing interpretations often arise from concerns that the clause compromises the indissolubility of marriage, as emphasized in Mark and Luke. Scholars such as Heth and Wenham (2004) advocate harmonizing the Gospels by interpreting the exception as rhetorical rather than literal, arguing that permitting divorce for *πορνεία* introduces moral relativism and conflicts with Jesus' ethic of covenantal fidelity. However, this overlooks the Jewish legal context in which *πορνεία* signified a covenant-breaking act with legal consequences (Instone-Brewer, 2003). To Matthew's audience—shaped by Jewish law and debates between the schools of Hillel and Shammai—the clause would have been understood not as a loophole but as a restriction against the lax “any cause” divorces of the time. Thus, far from undermining marital permanence, the exception clause reinforces the sanctity of marriage by defining the only legitimate ground for its dissolution—covenantal infidelity (Blomberg, 1992). This view upholds both Jesus' moral rigor and pastoral concern for those wronged by marital betrayal.

### *Jesus' Reference to Genesis*

In Matthew 19:4-6, Jesus refers back to Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 to ground His teaching on marriage in the divine creation order. According to Genesis, God created humanity in His image as male and female, with the intent that they would become “one flesh” (Gen 2:24). Jesus' reference to these passages reinforces the idea that marriage is a divinely instituted union, not merely a social or cultural construct (France, 2007). The phrase “one flesh” serves to affirm the monogamous nature of marriage, indicating that the relationship between husband and wife is not just physical, but also emotional and spiritual.

Jesus' use of the creation narrative reinforces the permanence of the marital bond. By appealing to Genesis, Jesus affirms that God's intention for marriage was always to be a lifelong, exclusive, and sacred union. This teaching challenges the cultural norms of His time and underscores that marriage should reflect God's original design, which is grounded in divine purpose rather than human convenience or social norms (Brown, 1993).

### *Divorce and Hardness of Heart*

In Matthew 19:8, Jesus addresses the issue of divorce, stating, “Moses allowed you to divorce your wives because of the hardness of your hearts, but from the beginning it was not so.” Jesus acknowledges that the Mosaic Law permitted divorce due to human “hardness of heart” (*σκληροκαρδία*), but He also underscores that this concession was never part of God's ideal for marriage. The phrase “hardness of heart” highlights humanity's moral and spiritual failure, which led to the legal allowance for divorce. However, Jesus' statement emphasizes

that this allowance was only a temporary measure that reflects human sinfulness, not the original divine design (Keener, 1993).

In contrast to this concession, Jesus points to the creation narrative in Genesis to affirm that marriage was intended by God to be permanent and unbreakable. While the Mosaic concession allowed divorce in certain cases due to human sin, it was not an endorsement of divorce as the ideal. Rather, it highlights the stark contrast between God's original intention for marriage and the fallen state of humanity, which necessitates such concessions (France, 2007).

The grammatico-historical approach to Matthew 19:1-12 reveals the theological depth of Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce. By analysing key terms such as "one flesh," "hardness of heart," and the exception clause, we understand that Jesus is reaffirming the sanctity and permanence of marriage, while acknowledging the reality of human sin and the need for grace. His appeal to Genesis underscores the theological foundation of marriage as a lifelong, monogamous, and sacred union, reflecting God's original design for human relationships

## **Theological And Ethical Implications for Christian Doctrine**

### *Divine Institution of Marriage*

The theological concept of marriage, as presented in Christian doctrine, is far more than a social contract between individuals; it is, in fact, a divine institution. Jesus' teachings in the Gospels emphasize that marriage is a sacred bond, established by God to reflect the relationship between Christ and the Church (Matt 19:4-6; Eph 5:25-32). This comparison serves as a framework for understanding marriage not simply as a cultural or legal arrangement, but as a spiritual union that transcends human conventions (Kostenberger & Jones, 2010; Wright, 2010). Jesus' words in Matthew 19:6, "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate," highlight the divine intent behind marriage, affirming that its purpose is to reflect divine love, unity, and covenant (Garland, 2001). Thus, Christian marriage is not merely an earthly institution but a reflection of heavenly truths, underscoring the theological weight and sanctity of the marital bond.

### *Sanctity and Permanence of Marriage*

Christian doctrine teaches that marriage is sacred, permanent, and indissoluble, as evidenced by both Jesus' teaching and the apostolic letters (Matt 19:4-9; 1 Cor. 7:10-11). The permanence of marriage is underscored in Jesus' response to the Pharisees regarding divorce, where He emphasizes that God's original intention for marriage was one man and one woman united for life. This view of marriage contrasts sharply with contemporary societal trends, particularly in Christian contexts, where divorce and marital instability are increasingly prevalent (Smith, 2019). In many societies in the West and Africa, divorce is viewed as a common recourse when marital issues arise, often undermining the sanctity of the marriage bond (Kostenberger & Jones, 2010; Ojo, 2021). The Christian doctrine, however, advocates for the belief that marriage, as a covenant established by God, should be upheld

with reverence and permanence, providing a counter-narrative to the fluidity of modern relationships (Adeyemo, 2019). Christian teaching affirms that marriage is a sacred and indissoluble covenant to be upheld with lifelong faithfulness, as an act of obedience to God's will and as a counterpoint to modern views that regard divorce as commonplace.

### *The Role of Sexual Immorality*

In Matthew 19:9, Jesus provides an exception to the permanence of marriage, permitting divorce in cases of sexual immorality. This exception clause has sparked significant theological debate, particularly regarding its implications for divorce and remarriage within Christian ethics. Some scholars argue that the term "sexual immorality" refers to a range of sexual sins, including adultery, incest, and other forms of sexual impurity (Keener, 2009a). The inclusion of this exception has profound implications for the Christian understanding of the grounds for divorce, allowing for separation when marital fidelity is broken. However, it is important to note that this exception does not suggest that divorce is the preferred or ideal solution; rather, it acknowledges the brokenness of human relationships and provides a means for restoration and healing in the face of betrayal (O'Donovan, 2014). Thus, while sexual immorality provides a legitimate reason for divorce, Christian communities are still called to strive for reconciliation and forgiveness wherever possible.

### *Celibacy as an Alternative Calling*

Jesus' teaching on celibacy in Matthew 19:12 presents it as a legitimate and meaningful alternative to marriage. He acknowledges that some choose this path "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven," affirming it as a calling rather than a deficiency. This perspective is echoed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:7-8, where he upholds celibacy as a gift and a form of undivided devotion to God. For those unable or unwilling to marry, celibacy offers a spiritually fulfilling path that does not depend on marital status. This teaching challenges cultural norms, particularly in societies where marriage is idealized as the primary or only legitimate relational path (Piper, 2015). In ancient Jewish culture, marriage was essential for social standing and legacy. Jesus' endorsement of celibacy as a valid calling was revolutionary, giving dignity to singleness (Keener, 1993). Similarly, in many African contexts where marriage is culturally expected and equated with social validation, the Christian understanding of celibacy offers a countercultural vision. It affirms that a complete and purposeful life can be lived outside marriage, centered on devotion to Christ rather than fulfilling societal or familial expectations. Celibacy becomes a sacred vocation, grounded in spiritual identity (Doe, 2020).

### **Marital Instability In Christian Communities**

Marital instability in Christian communities is a complex phenomenon influenced by theological doctrines, changing cultural norms, psychological dynamics, and socio-economic factors. Historically, Christian teachings have upheld the sanctity and indissolubility of

marriage, rooted in biblical texts such as Matthew 19:6, which declares, “What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.” Despite these strong doctrinal foundations, marital instability—manifesting as divorce, separation, and relational dissatisfaction—has become increasingly visible in Christian communities, prompting scholarly inquiry and pastoral concern (Grenz, 1997; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2016). Marital instability within Christian communities reflects the tension between enduring theological teachings that uphold the sacred and inseparable nature of marriage and the growing influence of cultural, psychological, and socio-economic factors that challenge its permanence.

### *Theological and Doctrinal Factors*

Christian theology has traditionally emphasized the permanence of marriage as a divine covenant rather than a social contract. However, varying interpretations among denominations influence attitudes toward divorce and marital roles. For instance, the Roman Catholic Church maintains a strict position on the indissolubility of marriage, allowing annulments only under specific conditions (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1997). In contrast, many Protestant denominations adopt a more permissive approach, acknowledging circumstances such as adultery or abandonment (1 Cor 7:15) as legitimate grounds for divorce (Instone-Brewer, 2003).

Theological rigidity can sometimes contribute to marital instability by discouraging open discussion about marital difficulties or delaying necessary interventions (Gillum & Dodd, 2016). Moreover, doctrinal expectations regarding gender roles—such as male leadership and female submission—may exacerbate conflict or suppress the agency of one spouse, particularly in evangelical settings (Goldman, 2004).

### *Cultural Shifts and Secularization*

Christian communities have not been immune to the broader cultural shifts impacting marriage globally. Increased individualism, higher educational attainment, economic independence (especially among women), and the decline of stigma surrounding divorce have all contributed to changing marital expectations (Cherlin, 2004). These changes challenge traditional Christian norms, creating tensions between faith-based values and contemporary social realities.

Secularization also plays a critical role. As religious observance declines in some historically Christian communities, the influence of ecclesiastical authority on personal and family life weakens, often leading to higher divorce rates (Barlow & Johnson, 2019). Yet paradoxically, highly religious Christian couples may experience lower rates of divorce but may still suffer from unreported marital dissatisfaction due to fear of religious or communal judgment (Mahoney et al., 2001).

### *Psychosocial Dynamics and Religious Coping*

Religious beliefs can serve as both a protective and risk factor in marital dynamics. On one hand, shared faith and religious practices such as prayer and church attendance are

positively associated with marital satisfaction and commitment (Fincham et al., 2008). On the other hand, when one partner perceives religion as a source of control or conflict, it can contribute to emotional distancing or resentment (Pargament, 2007).

Furthermore, Christian teachings on forgiveness and sacrificial love can, in some cases, hinder necessary conflict resolution or enable patterns of emotional abuse, especially if interpreted legalistically (Nason-Clark, 2013). Thus, religious coping mechanisms must be examined critically within marital contexts to understand their diverse outcomes. In sum, Marital instability in Christian communities arises from a confluence of theological, cultural, and psychological factors. While Christianity offers frameworks for marital stability through covenantal theology and moral guidance, these can both support and complicate marital relationships. Future research and pastoral care must address the nuances of religious belief and practice in the lived experiences of Christian couples, integrating faith-sensitive approaches with psychological insights.

## **The Counter-Cultural Nature of Jesus' Teaching**

### *Jesus' Radical Approach*

Jesus' teachings on marriage and divorce were considered radical and counter-cultural due to the fact that they fundamentally challenge the prevailing cultural norms and legal practices of His time, and they continue to challenge contemporary views today (Ngubane, 2020). In the first century, divorce was relatively common and permitted for various reasons under Jewish law (Matt. 19:3-9). However, Jesus sharply criticized the prevailing practices, reaffirming God's original design for marriage as a permanent union between one man and one woman (Matt 19:4-6). He emphasized that divorce was only allowed in cases of marital unfaithfulness, thus rejecting the casual divorce that was prevalent (Matt 19:9).

This radical perspective is particularly relevant in certain Christian contexts where specific cultural practices have historically coexisted, sometimes uneasily, with biblical teachings on marriage. In some African Christian communities, practices such as polygamy and arranged marriages continue, shaped by longstanding cultural norms and expectation (Dube, 2008; Omoniyi, 2017). Dube observes that the persistence of polygamy reflects complex negotiations between Christian faith and tradition (Dube, 2008). Likewise, Omoniyi notes that while not all arranged marriages are coercive, some undermine Christian values of mutual love, consent, and respect (Omoniyi, 2017). In these contexts, Jesus' teachings present a countercultural vision that emphasizes equality, commitment, and the sanctity of marriage, challenging social norms that may sustain gender inequality or marginalize women

### *Ethical Application in Modern Contexts*

In the modern world, the ethical implications of Jesus' teachings on marriage extend to contemporary debates about love, gender roles, and marital commitment. Today, marriage is often seen as a flexible institution, with increasing divorce rates and changing cultural expectations around relationships. Many societies, including those in the West and in certain

African contexts, have become more tolerant of divorce, cohabitation, and alternative family structures (Arocho, 2021). This shift can make Jesus' call for marital fidelity and lifelong commitment seem out of step with modern values (Gillespie, 2015). Furthermore, Jesus' insistence on mutual respect and love within marriage (Eph 5:25–33) challenges both historical and contemporary cultural norms that may marginalize women or perpetuate patriarchal structures. As Mbiti observes, while Christianity has influenced marital values in African societies, traditional expectations often coexist with faith-based ideals, sometimes creating tension between cultural customs and biblical principles (Mbiti, 1990).

Pastoral leaders and Christian communities can use passages such as Matthew 19:1–12 to encourage deeper reflection on marriage in light of Jesus' teachings. One practical application is to promote counseling and support for couples, especially in Christian communities where marital stability may be threatened by issues such as infidelity or economic hardship (Banda, 2012). Churches can offer resources to help couples build stronger relationships based on mutual love and respect, rather than solely cultural expectations or legal contracts. Additionally, Christian leaders can emphasize healthy gender roles grounded in mutual submission and sacrificial love (Fayemi, 2018). Jesus' teachings ultimately offer a transformative model for marriage that prioritizes commitment, equality, and unconditional love.

### **Practical Implications And Pastoral Recommendations**

In light of the exegetical and theological findings of this study, it is recommended that church leaders and pastoral practitioners adopt a pastoral decision matrix grounded in the covenantal theology of Matthew 19:1–12. This model emphasizes three core pillars: covenantal fidelity, ethically conditioned allowance for divorce, and the pursuit of reconciliation. Rather than defaulting to rigid legalism or permissive relativism, this framework encourages a discerning, theologically grounded pastoral response to marital conflict.

Churches should integrate this model into premarital counseling, marital restoration ministries, and ecclesial disciplinary structures, especially in contexts where cultural pressures normalize divorce or undermine marital permanence. The matrix should be contextualized through culturally sensitive applications that uphold biblical ethics while addressing local marital challenges, such as patriarchal abuse, economic strain, and extended family interference.

Theological training institutions are encouraged to include this framework in curricula addressing Christian ethics, pastoral care, and biblical hermeneutics. Further interdisciplinary research is recommended to assess the matrix's effectiveness in diverse socio-cultural settings, particularly in the African and Global South regions where Christian communities face the dual tension of traditional expectations and modern marital instability.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has demonstrated that a close text-critical and exegetical examination of Matthew 19:1–12, particularly the syntactical nuance and textual variant of the exception clause (μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ), offers a robust foundation for articulating a normative Christian ethic of marriage and divorce. By employing the grammatico-historical method across four analytical stages, the research has shown that Matthew's treatment of divorce neither contradicts Jewish legal traditions nor undermines the covenantal ideal rooted in Genesis. Rather, the Matthean account reinforces marital fidelity while acknowledging limited, morally serious grounds for divorce.

Moreover, the study's integration of Greek syntax, intertextual links with the Old Testament, and socio-historical context provides critical insight into how early Christian communities may have understood and applied Jesus' teachings. The proposed pastoral decision matrix, which centers on covenantal commitment, ethical discernment, and the pursuit of reconciliation, serves as a practical framework for contemporary Christian leaders navigating complex marital realities.

In light of increasing marital instability within modern Christian communities, this study contributes to the development of an ethically coherent and theologically faithful response. It emphasizes a return to a biblically grounded theology of marriage that is both contextually sensitive and pastorally constructive. Future research may explore how this framework can be contextualized across diverse ecclesial and cultural settings, particularly within African and Global South contexts where traditional kinship structures, patriarchal norms, and evolving socio-economic realities increasingly interact with globalized Christian perspectives on marriage and family life.

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