

# PLAIN SPEECH

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“Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech” (2 Cor. 3:12)

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## WHAT 1 CORINTHIANS 7:39 IS AND IS NOT TEACHING

**1 Cor. 7:39** reads this way: *“The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord.”* From this one verse we learn several things. We learn: (1) lawfully married people are to remain married until one spouse dies, (2) if one’s spouse dies, the spouse still living is free to marry another, and (3) the spouse left behind must remember to marry *“only in the Lord.”*

Most people who claim to follow Christ have very little problem “getting” points one and two above. However, when it comes to the third point, many of those same people have great difficulty reading with understanding (cf. **Eph. 3:4**). As a result, God’s Word is twisted (**2 Pet. 3:16**). The most common wresting of **1 Cor. 7:39** is well summarized by the comments of Gareth L. Reese on the passage. He wrote: *“If the Christian widow chooses to enter into a second marriage, the person she marries must be a Christian. She is not to marry an unbeliever.”*

Is it better for Christian widows to marry only those who are Christians? Absolutely. However, does **1 Cor. 7:39** teach that Christian widows may ONLY marry a Christian? My answer is no. The reasons as to why are noted below:

If **1 Cor. 7:39** teaches that a widow, if she is to marry again, must only marry a Christian, then there is one law on marriage for widows and another totally different law on marriage for non-widows (**1 Cor. 7:12-14**). This makes zero sense!

If **1 Cor. 7:39** teaches that a widow, if she is to marry again, must only marry a Christian, then it sure seems as if Paul had forgotten what he had written earlier in the same chapter. Prior to giving the instructions in **vs. 39**, Paul wrote that God accepts the lawful marriage between a Christian and a non-Christian. Note: *“But to the rest speak I, not the Lord: If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy.”* Clearly, under the terms of the New Testament, God accepts lawful mixed-marriages.

If **1 Cor. 7:39** teaches that a widow, if she is to marry again, must only marry a Christian, then we have a huge problem on our hands. Let’s assume Reese (noted above) and others are right about **vs. 39**. Now let’s say a Christian widow goes ahead and marries a widowed non-Christian because she is “head-over-heels” in love with him. According to Reese and others like him, sin has been committed (**1 Jn. 3:4**). How is such to be remedied? I have asked of some who hold to the view that “only in the Lord” means “marry only a Christian” the following question: *“What would Paul tell a widow and her new unbelieving husband to do?”* The answer invariably given is that they must divorce. Well folks, if that is the remedy then, lo and behold, Paul is contradicting himself. How so? Again, in **1 Cor. 7:12-16** Paul said of those in mixed marriages: DO NOT divorce.

If **1 Cor. 7:39** teaches that a widow, if she is to marry again, must only marry a Christian, then we have Paul teaching different things about this matter to different congregations. For instance, Paul touched upon widows remarrying in his letter to the church in Rome (**Rom. 7:1-3**). Yet, he did not say they had to marry only a Christian. In writing to Timothy Paul told the young preacher to advise younger widows to remarry so as to be taken care of (**1 Tim. 5:14**). He mentioned not a word about them marrying only a Christian. But wait, I thought Paul taught the same thing in every church concerning marriage and divorce? He did (**1 Cor. 7:17**). It’s just that he did not teach the view Reese and others hold to. What did he teach? He taught the same thing the Lord taught while upon the earth concerning MDR (**1 Cor. 7:10-11**), and he taught that God accepts lawful mixed marriages (**1 Cor. 7:12-14**).

If **1 Cor. 7:39** teaches that a widow, if she is to marry again, must only marry a Christian, then absurd conclusions can be drawn from other passages. For instance, let’s look at just two examples (both in the context of the family). **Eph. 6:1** reads: *“Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right.”* **Col. 3:18** reads: *“Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord.”* In both these passages we have “in the Lord” statements. Do these passages teach that children must only obey their parents if they are Christians and that wives must only accept their role if their husbands are Christians, or do they teach that children and wives must conduct themselves in a way that honors God’s will; i.e. accepting the roles of submission and obedience? Duh! Yet, if Reese and the others are right, then children with unbelieving parents and wives with pagan husbands can be just as unruly as can be. Hogwash. Anything that proves too much proves nothing. Granted “in the Lord” does sometimes refer to one being a Christian (cf. **Rev. 14:13**), but what contextual evidence is there to suggest that such is the case here in **1 Cor. 7:39**? None.

Here is the point of **1 Cor. 7:39**: when a Christian’s spouse dies, the person left behind is free to marry whomsoever they choose so long as they marry in harmony with God’s will. Thus the widow/widower may marry someone of the opposite sex who: (1) has never been married, (2) is also a widow/widower, or (3) has put away their spouse for the cause of fornication.