

Christian Care & Concern



For Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

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Acts 17:11 ... 1 Thess. 5:21-22

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"A TFC Booklet"

Dedicatory

Let me first express my continued gratitude for “the great cloud of witness” that has gone on before us. I am indebted to the many saints, all “sons and daughters of oil” who have poured out their lives in active testimonials to Jesus Christ ... in faithful living, writings, works and witness. We are merely “standing on the shoulders” of the many who have already taken their place in church history. I count it a great privilege to draw upon their many contributions to this subject ... in helping many to bring some clarity out of confusion in a day of rampant “covenant-breaking”. It is with this hope that we offer this treatment on one of the most defining issues of our day ... for those who seek objective inquiry based upon the simple reading of God’s Word and the affirming witness of the Holy Spirit. It has been and remains our prayer that there be those of a tender conscience who choose to get free from an awful, besetting sin ... and so run the race to win Christ. (Phil. 3:7-8) R.E.

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Introduction

In our day, the subject of marriage, divorce and remarriage is probably one of the most polemic issues in the whole church. We are all in the process of either forming mere opinions, or coming to conviction before the Lord concerning His Word on this subject. As true saints, it is very important that we study the full counsel of God's Word, that we come to Biblical conclusion and conviction, and then stand firmly in that place. We cannot continually say, "This is what my pastor taught me" or "This is the way my parents taught me to believe," etc. With something of this magnitude, no matter how long it takes, we must give it the proper study, concentration, prayer, and thoughtfulness. Otherwise, we will perhaps bring not only sin and misjudgement into our own lives, but sin and misjudgement into the lives of others. There may be times when we are ministering to others on this subject. Our responsibility at those times is great and we must speak forth the truth, from the conviction of our heart, based upon God's Word alone. So, it behoves us to thoroughly study these things and make a careful search of the Scriptures. In whatever is being said, from pastors or anyone from whom we are receiving teaching—books, tapes, magazines, etc.—we must prove these things. (Acts 17:11, 1 Thess. 5:21-22) We do not have a choice about the context we put on biblical issues. We must put the whole context of the whole Scripture on them. They must be looked at in light of how they are being explained within the context of the passage, the book, or their place in Scripture.

In this booklet, we will look at the framework, the broader strokes of what it means to be divorced and then remarried, how it appears from the Lord's view, what our responsibility is, and what is the responsibility of those who find themselves in that situation. Throughout this writing, we will examine these issues in light of how Jesus dealt with them in His day and how He would want us to deal with them in our day. We will also look at the historical references concerning how the Early Church dealt with this subject.

When we look at the Word of God, let us be careful to walk only in the full counsel of what God has revealed there. Acts 20:27 "For I did not hesitate to declare unto you the full counsel of God."



I Doctrinal Understanding:

1 Defining The Marriage Covenant

“For we are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh.”—Eph. 5:30-31

In the beginning, in the garden of Eden, *marriage was instituted by God*. He created a wife for Adam and brought her to him.

“Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh... Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.”—Genesis 2:23-24

Marriage is two becoming one flesh. But there are still two spirits, two souls, two identities, two individual relationships with the Lord Jesus Christ, and two separate judgments at the bar of Christ.

Marriage, firstly, then, is a *covenant*. It is a covenant between the Lord Jesus Christ, a man, and a woman. No matter how the marriage came to be, if there is a marriage, there is this covenant in place. Developing a biblical view of covenant is very important. It is *not* a partnership. It is *not* a contract. A contract, as we understand it today, holds that if one party breaks the contract, the whole contract is dissolved. But a covenant is viable, alive and still being kept as long as there is at least one party continuing to maintain the original covenant. The Bible teaches this. Our own salvation rests upon this very tenet of “the faith”. There is still accountability to a covenant when any one party is holding the covenant together. Only in the event of death is there an end to a covenant.

“For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband.”—Rom. 7:1-3

Therefore, as marriage is a covenant in the Lord, it is to be a permanent, life-long relationship ... “until death us do part.”

From the beginning, God established who would be included in a covenant of marriage and what the role of each would be in that covenant. Therefore, it is not just our own idea, nor is it a civil issue. Speaking of the time of the creation of marriage, Jesus said:

*“Have you not read that He which made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, for this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more [two], but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.”
—Matt. 19:4-6, Mark 10:2-12*

There are three members to every marriage covenant: a man, a woman, and God, in who's Name they have been joined. If God has joined them together, then He is an intimate part of the covenant relationship, no matter where the man or woman may have been in relationship with God at the time of their marriage. And because it was God who instituted marriage, He will *always* be a party in the marriage covenant.



2 Did Jesus Teach Divorce?

“He (Jesus) saith unto them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so.”—Matt. 19:8

The covenant of marriage is established by making vows to one another before God and in the presence of witnesses. Is it right before God to break our marriage vows, the covenant we have made? The Pharisees came to Jesus ...

“... tempting Him, and saying unto Him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? And He answered and said unto them, Have you not read that He which made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said for this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. They say unto Him, Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away? He saith unto them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so.”—Matt. 19:3-8

Moses allowed it. But Jesus makes it clear that from the beginning divorce was *not God's idea*. If our hearts have been truly transformed by the Spirit of God, then hardness of heart is no longer an issue.

“Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to Himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.”—2 Cor. 5:17-19 (cf: Eph. 4:32, Col. 3:12-13, Matt. 6:14-15, Mark 11:25-26)

There was a time, the Bible tells us, when God “winked” at our ignorance, our sin. (Acts 17:30) At the cross, our Lord Jesus eliminated and thereby discouraged all winks, over-lookings, temporary concessions, etc., of His perfect will. All men everywhere are *now commanded* to repent. That is, to put on the life of Christ, our Perfect and True Saviour, the Lord of Life. We are to repent before God and become new creatures in Christ, *filled with a new spirit*, one of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation. This is a biblical convert—the only kind of Christian. There is no place in Scripture where God gives grace to do that which is *contrary* to His will. In fact, Paul expresses it this way in Rom. 6:1-2, 4:

“What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? ... even so we also should walk in newness of life.”

A pastor recently put out a call for forgiveness to be extended to those who have been married before, to stop looking at them as sinners, and allow them to remarry and “get on with their lives.” Here we must exercise discernment. For if we do not, a double standard may develop. There is no question about the fact that we must forgive each other. But God does not give grace to participate in sin. He gives grace to help us stand faithful in covenantal relationship.

The call is to forgive. There is only one unforgivable sin. (Matt. 12:31) Therefore, it must be true that in the context of marriage one may find the grace to forgive (as our Father in heaven has forgiven) an unfaithful partner. If God has forgiven us, why can't we forgive anyone of anything—the whole realm of sin, unfaithfulness, etc. that Jesus took upon Himself at the cross?

“Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the Kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.” – 1 Cor. 6:9-11

The question of forgiveness is not, “Shall we forgive the divorcee so they can remarry?” but rather, “Have we forgiven the unfaithful one so that the door to reconciliation may remain open? Is there a spirit of forgiveness and faithfulness to carry out that *ministry of reconciliation* to which God has called all of us?”

Consider the whole book of Hosea. Here, God magnifies His grace in the “no remarriage” understanding of this subject. God's grace is abundantly bestowed on disciples who desire to be faithful to His teaching, example, and spirit, no matter how difficult their situation appears to be. In our weakness, our Father infuses us with the strength of His grace. It is always available. “Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.”—Rom. 5:20-21

The second consideration that would commend forgiveness and reconciliation in the event of a marital breakdown is the New Testament teaching of *redemption*. The death of Christ has implications for life-long Christian marriages because Christ took upon Himself the cost of human unfaithfulness. His great sacrifice has broken the power of sin and made forgiveness possible. In Bromiley's words, “Living with divine reconciliation as a constant fact in human life means living with mutual reconciliation as a constant fact. This makes indissoluble union a practical and obtainable goal, even for sinners.”* Is not that what Christian fellowship is? An agreement for *mutual reconciliation* as a constant fact ... not just one time? We are all to forgive one another as we have been forgiven. (Matt. 6:12,14,15)

Our doctrine has to be simplified in order to have the power and humility of Christ behind it. We truly believe that the heart issue of this whole thing—marriage, divorce, remarriage—is repentance. “Unless ye be converted [repent] ... ye shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt. 18:3) “Father forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” (Matt. 6:9-15)

You can see how deep this is. In another example, the unjust steward's mercy was contingent upon how he applied mercy to his fellows. (Matt. 18:23-35)

Christians have been mantled with the "ministry of reconciliation". (2 Cor. 5:18-19) Are we to defect in loving one another, as Christ loved us? He died on the cross and washed away all of our unlovely sins—the gross ones and the least ones, the little white lies, the adulteries, the homosexualities, the murders.

He took care of all those things on the cross. In His marriage to the Church, Jesus purchased our redemption, our forgiveness, through His atoning blood.

He has given us this redemption and made it available by His grace through faith. Do we preach a different message in our churches? God, have mercy on us.

Nowhere is the image of God marred more than in the breaking of the marriage covenant. We can see in our nations today, especially our modern western nations, that divorce is rampant, and that it is a curse. There is so much decadence and freedom that there is no real understanding of covenant any more, that taking responsibility for one's actions has become extinct, that there is little or no trust, and no gratitude—just unbridled selfishness! When it comes to relationships we have a "used car lot" mentality, an Elizabeth Taylor, Hollywood idealism. Have we become the "covenant-breakers" spoken about in Romans 1:31-32? The very end of the Old Testament proclaims this:

"And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to the fathers, lest I [God] come and smite the earth with a curse."—Malachi 4:6

In Matt. 5:32, "the cause of fornication" Jesus mentioned dealt specifically with a violation, sexually, during betrothal. If just after the wedding it was discovered that there were no "tokens of virginity", then, in that case, a young man could legally put away that wife. (Deut. 22:13-22) The parents would willingly write up a divorcement and the young man was free to go and marry again with nothing behind him. He had twenty-four hours to decide. That was the only "escape clause" that Jesus points out. He was not talking about those who had been married for 10-15 years, had children, then one of the spouses had an affair, and it became a loop-hole for the other person to leave. No, this is not referring to that—not in the context of understanding a Jewish view of marriage, the setting in which Jesus was speaking, and that which still prevails in the orthodox Jewish communities of today, along with the Arabian people and other Semitic cultures. (Deut. 22:17-19)

"From the earliest biblical times, the meaning of fornication embraced in the Greek word "pornea" had a very narrow-limited meaning of a betrothed person who engaged in pre-marital infidelity while betrothed, prior to the consumation of the marriage.

There were those who thought they could get away with it, if they would shortly consummate a marriage with another. This is where the tokens of virginity would be very important to someone who paid a hefty bride-price (dowry) for a virgin of Israel! The Hebrew Hope for one who would be the virgin mother of the Messiah was a live desire. Such was the case for Jesus' own mother, whom Joseph wanted to divorce and put away privately. (Matt 1:19)

As Jesus Himself taught ... 'from the beginning it was not so... one man and one woman.' (Matt 19.4-9) For the Christian, there is no place for divorce and remarriage except after one's spouse has deceased.



3 Did Jesus Teach Remarriage? Does The Bible Teach Remarriage?

“But I say unto you, that whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.”—Matt. 5:32

The words “commits adultery” in Matt. 5:32 are, in the original Greek language, written in what is called the present indicative tense. This indicates a situation that started at some point and is continuing. Jesus, in this Greek tense, is teaching that the relationship in the circumstance of a remarriage is “committing adultery”. He did not use the words commits adultery in a tense that meant “one time.” It is a continuing tense. Now, no matter what we think about it, we have to lay aside our emotions on this issue. We have to lay aside who it is we may be talking with or about. We must deal with the soul of the issue. Jesus is very clear—if someone is divorced and remarried, as long as they continue in that relationship then they are in a continuing state of adultery. And they are causing not only the person that they have now married, but possibly their first spouse as well, to be committing adultery. Through divorce the way was opened for four people to be involved in committing adultery if there are two remarriages.

Remarriage violates the marriage covenant. No writ of divorce will equal the covenant of marriage. Yes, divorce is permissible in the Bible, but remarriage while a spouse is still living is not a biblical option.

“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.” (She must marry a Christian.) “But she is happier if she so abide, after my judgment: and I think also that I have the Spirit of God.”—1 Cor. 7:39-40

“And unto the married I command, ‘yet not I, but the Lord,’ let not the wife depart from her husband: but and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife.” —1 Cor. 7:10-11

Very clearly, the position is stated. Paul, in addressing the Corinthian church, is also speaking to people from the slave class, the concubine class, and to those who had had involvement in some form of cultic activity, forced marriages, multiple past (forced) marriages, etc. His advice is: remain as you are. To heed his advice here would be wise so as not to add to confusion by taking on anything else and to decrease confusion to the children. It would solidify the new man in submission to the Lord Jesus Christ as the All-Sufficient One, “El Shaddai”, to further your witness.

“But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (but if she does leave, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not send his wife away.”—1 Cor. 7:10-11

“Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife.”—1 Cor. 7:27 “Let each man remain in that condition in which he was called. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. Brethren, let each man remain with God in that condition in which he was called.”—1 Cor. 7:20, 23-24

So, we can see, from at least three parts of Scripture the balance that is brought to these things. When we say, “‘Til death do us part” it is a life-long commitment. As long as there is life in each person, that covenant is living.

A third, clear, practical understanding of the living covenant of marriage is seen by taking one quick look at the children. Parents may divide through divorce, but they cannot divide the children. They have been made in the likeness and image of both parents and upon divorce; they are not ripped apart in an unnatural way. A child remains one whole being as a testimony against the division of their own, unique parental union!



4 Comments On Deuteronomy 24:1-4

In Matt. 19:7 the Pharisees questioned Jesus by saying, “Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?” They were basically asking, “If all you say is true, then why did Moses command divorce?” That was a loaded question, because Moses did not command divorce. The passage the Pharisees had in mind when they asked their question was Deut. 24:1-4. That is the only passage relative to Moses that gives a definitive statement relating to divorce. The Pharisees picked out one portion of one sentence consisting of 4 verses. There is only one explicit command in these verses and it does not have to do with divorce. It has to do with remarriage. The explicit command against remarriage is discovered by the proper translation. In order to understand this passage we have to depart from the King James version which improperly translates these verses. The verses are quoted here from the NASB translation:

“When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that 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 from his house, and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man's wife ...” (vss. 1-2)

Notice at this point there is no editorializing on this incident. The text does not say who was right or who was wrong. It also does not say that God commanded the man to divorce his wife or that he had to divorce her, or that he did the right thing in divorcing her. There is absolutely no editorial comment at all from God or Moses. The first two verses simply state an illustration of a man who wanted to divorce his wife because he found some indecency in her.

After he wrote a divorce certificate, or a Bill of Divorcement, and sent her out of the house, she remarried.

“... and if the latter husband turns against 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 husband dies who took her to be his wife, then her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled ...” (vss. 3 & 4)

This is the first comment on the entire incident: husband #1 is commanded not to marry his former wife. So, there is a command in Deut. 24, but it is not a command to divorce.

It is a command not to remarry under specific circumstances.

The man in this illustration is not permitted to remarry his former wife. Even if husband #2 dies and makes her a widow, she cannot go back to husband #1. Why? She has been defiled. “... *for that is an abomination before the Lord, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance.*” (vs. 4) To remarry that woman would be a sin, because she is defiled.

Where do we get this? Look at the context in which it is being used. If we go backwards into the context of chapter 23, we will find the same term for indecency used in verse 14. It is, in that verse, referring to physical elimination. Starting with 23:13 we read:

“And you shall have a spade among your tools, and it shall be when you sit down outside, you shall dig with it and shall turn to cover up your excrement. Since the Lord your God walks in the midst of your camp to deliver you and to defeat your enemies before you, therefore your camp must be holy; and He must not see anything ‘indecent’ (defiled) among you lest He turn away from you.”

It is simply saying to bury your excrement because God walks in the camp, along with other folks, too. It was an obvious issue of decency. The term for indecency in 24:1 is the same term as in 23:14. In other words the man found some indecency in his wife, something unclean, dirty, vile, shameful, improper ... unbecoming and embarrassing to him. The word “indecency” or “uncleanness” cannot refer to adultery. Why? Because adultery at this point in Israel's history resulted in death. Not only that, if it had been adultery, Moses would not have used the word “indecency” or “uncleanness”. He would have said adultery had he meant adultery. It is referring, however, to something dirty, embarrassing, or gross, but not adultery because Deut. 22:23-24 clearly says that the penalty for adultery is death. So, whatever the uncleanness or indecency was, it was something short of adultery. Nobody knows the exact identity of this uncleanness mentioned in Deut. 24:1, but here is an idea as to its general character. If a couple knew that adultery ended in death, they might do a lot of things but would generally control themselves just short of adultery. Apparently there were people entering into shameless, indecent, habitual indulgence in sexual sin but coming just short of actually committing adultery. So we see that, if Moses was dealing with an adulterous situation in Deut. 24, very clearly he would have spelled it out.

In no place is there a command to divorce, as the Pharisees misinterpreted, and so did the King James’ translators. It appears that they took the emotional side of this issue without researching the full context of chapters 23 and 24. Again, there is one command here with respect to the bill of divorcement: not to remarry because the wife has been defiled. How was she defiled? She had been joined to another man ... closing the door to any further reconciliation with husband #1.

Secondarily, consider Jesus’ own teaching. The woman at the well was married five times and Jesus recognized all five of her marriages— *“For thou hast well said, I have no husband: for thou hast had five husbands; and he whom thou now hast is not thy husband: in that saidst thou truly.”—John 4:17-18*

We see here that God will keep all oaths that invoke His name. (Reference Jephthah's vow in Judges 11:29-39.)

But the Lord never "approves" of any other consequent vow of marriage. Rather, it becomes a further judgment and abomination on those who invoke "the name of the Lord" in vain! (Deut. 5:11)



5 Do Divorced And Remarried Persons Need To Separate? *Adultery: An Act or a State?*

A basic but often unidentified issue involved in discussions about what a person who has committed adultery should do in order to repent is this: was his sin of adultery only an act, or is it considered to be an ongoing state of sin? If it was an act of sin only, then the person may acknowledge his sin, be forgiven, and be careful not to repeat it. This allows one to continue in the remarriage relationship. If, however, adultery is a continuous state of sin until the present partner is put away, complete repentance and full assurance of God's forgiveness do not exist until the adulterous union is discontinued.

Both positions have very serious implications. If adultery is an act only, then to require separation is to needlessly break up homes and to lay a heavy and unnecessary burden on persons who desire to repent. It could also result in placing a stumbling block in the path of earnest seekers. If adultery is a state, however, then to assure persons of forgiveness while continuing to live with their partner (while the first spouse is still living) is to give them a false hope of salvation and to sanction their going to hell since no adulterer will enter the kingdom of heaven. (1 Cor. 6:9-10) It also undermines the foundations of marriage and weakens the will to work through marriage difficulties.

How does God view adultery ... as an act or a state? We believe the Bible clearly presents adultery as an ongoing state of sin until the adulterous union is discontinued. Read and meditate on the following passages:

Genesis 20: As long as Abimelech had another man's wife under his roof, he was a "dead man" until he released her to go back to her rightful husband, even though he had not yet touched her. This was true for even a pagan king.

Ezra 9 & 10: Though a somewhat different situation, i.e. marrying foreign women, their unions were illicit and their sin was considered to be removed only when they separated themselves from their wives. (10:2-4, 10, 11)

Jer. 7:8-11: (Note preceding context) The Israelites were committing adultery and then going to the Temple and saying, "We are safe"—safe to do all these detestable things ..." God said they were trusting in deceptive, worthless words.

Mal. 2:13-17: God hates divorce, the breaking faith with the wife of one's youth. Can He accept in our time that which He once hated? Is it only the act of breaking faith that He hates, or does He hate both the act and the ongoing state of breaking faith?

Matt. 14:3-4 (NASB): John the Baptist rebuked Herod for taking his brother Philip's wife. He did not say: "It is not lawful for you to have taken her" but rather "It is not lawful for you to have her". Some say the sin was that of incest. Actually, Herod had committed two sins: adultery and incest. The only way to repent of both was to release the woman. John was rebuking a sinner, which shows that immorality is sin, not only for the saint, but also for the sinner. If adultery were merely an act, John died in vain. He should have been more discreet and sensitive, calling only for Herod to say he was sorry and giving permission to continue on with Herodias. Instead, Jesus commended John as being the greatest man born of women. Note also in Mark 6:18 John's warning to Herod was a repeated, continuous action: "For John had been saying..." This is why Herodias nursed a grudge against John.

If he had said, "Just recognize you sinned, but stay with her and don't commit adultery again with another woman", Herodias would not have had reason to be so upset with John.

Luke 16:18 (NKJV): If adultery and divorce effectively terminate the marriage relationship so that the divorcee may then be remarried, how could Jesus' words be true: "*Whoever marries her who is divorced from her husband commits adultery*"? Notice also that he says "whoever", not merely the Christian who does it.

Mark 10:10-12: Jesus clearly states that remarriage after being divorced is adultery.

Rom. 7:2-3: Only death breaks the marriage bond. If the woman marries another man "while her husband is still alive" (not: "before her husband divorces her"), she is an adulteress. It does not say "she commits an act of adultery" but rather "she shall be called an adulteress". Some say that this is only an example used to illustrate our relationship with the Law. Granted, it is an example. However, the teaching about our relationship with the Law can only be true if the example also is true. It is hard to think of how one could improve on this passage in terms of its simplicity, clarity and conciseness.

1 Cor. 7:10-11: The Lord's command through Paul: no divorce, no separation. But if separation does occur, then no remarriage. Either the individuals must remain unmarried or else be reconciled.

1 Cor. 7:39: Marriage is for life, not until divorce separates.



Following are other related passages and perspectives that point to adultery as being an ongoing state of sin until the adulterous union is discontinued:

1. The marriage vow states "till death do us part", not "till divorce do us part". God takes vows very seriously as seen in Ecclesiastes 5:4-6. God honors the first vow, the first union. Sinful vows should be repented of and sinful actions put away, not continued. The second vow is not a legitimate vow.
2. What is the meaning of repentance? With all other kinds of sins, we tell a person that true repentance means putting away sin; only then can he be sure of God's forgiveness. The following passages demonstrate this truth: Prov. 28:13; Mat.3:8 and context; Lk.3:8-14;

Acts 26:20—we prove our repentance by our deeds, not by our words. See also 2 Cor. 7:11.

3. 1 Cor. 5:1 says the man "has his father's wife", not took his father's wife. As long as he was calling himself a brother, they were not to associate with him but rather to expel him from the church. This indicates that his immoral relationship was an ongoing state. Other gross sins are listed as reason for the same action by the church.

4. Consistency calls for discontinuing the adulterous marriage. If two people live in fornication, in order for them to repent we tell them they must stop living together as unmarried people. If a person lives in incest, we tell him to discontinue that relationship.

If two persons of the same sex are married, they must get out of that union, whether or not the State says it is legal. With other sins it is the same: someone who has stolen goods must return them, not merely say he is sorry for having taken them. A person who has kidnapped someone must release the person before we would be sure he had truly repented. Why, then, would this not apply also to divorced and remarried persons living in adultery?

5. The fruit of both approaches. Viewing adultery merely as an act fills churches with adulterous unions, undermines existing marriages, justifies having leaders that are divorced and remarried, and shuts the mouths of Christians and church leaders from speaking out against adultery in a society that is becoming more immoral and perverse. Today, many churches are very little different from the surrounding society in their morals.

Viewing adultery as an ongoing state, however, promotes a life of holiness and purity in churches which take this Scriptural position, and provides solid foundations for marriages, a basis for facing difficulties in marriage, and courage and authority to confront sin both in the church and in the society. This approach best harmonizes Scripture passages on the topic and follows the practice of the Early Church in the first centuries.



Consider the Establishing of a Vow:

A vow is made with a verbal consent by two individuals before God, and at minimum, two witnesses. Let every word be established in the mouth of two or three witnesses. (Deut. 19:15; Matt. 18:16)

So then, a remarried divorcee can verbally (before God) take apart what God hath not approved of, and has not joined together, with a vow of dissolution before her congregation. The civil aspects are a separate matter which also needs to be restructured.

“And He saith unto them, Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her. And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery.”—Mark 10:11-12

“Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain: for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name (His ways, purposes and commandments) in vain.”—Deut. 5:11



II Historical Understanding

1 Biblical Statements On Divorce & Remarriage

Jesus said, “Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so.” (Matt. 19:8) Does God change? No! He still hates divorce! (Malachi 2:14-16)

The Lord never even intended divorce or remarriage to be a factor as long as there was a living spouse.

This is clearly laid out in the Old Testament and New Testament. (Rom. 7:1-4; 1 Cor. 7:10-11, 39-40)

The Lord, as with Adam, instructed the man and provided for him one wife. “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they [two] shall be one flesh.” (Gen. 2:24) That is His perfect will. If the fall had not occurred then it would have remained that way even to this day. Even Romans 7:2 would be eliminated, for without the fall there would be no death! Marriage would be two spouses that became one flesh, walking and living with God eternally. The fall was a concession to the sin that man brought upon all mankind.

In New Testament biblical history, remarriage disqualified a man from becoming an elder or deacon and disqualified a woman from being listed in the local listings of widows over 60. (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6; 1 Tim. 5:9) In Christ, the sin is atoned for, yet there are consequences that “leak” through or that one reaps from past decision making.

In the Old Testament, in Deuteronomy, chapters 4-7, the husband/ father is instructed to teach his family to fear the Lord and to keep His commandments, to wash his bride with the water of the word, and to protect her against all evil, sickness, and harm. (See also Eph. 5:21-32) Men have also been given other responsibilities in the marriage, along with the authority to enforce headship. These include provisions of food, shelter, clothing, etc. That is why the Bible gives no place for a woman to get a divorce. Only the man, the head of household, was allowed to put away his wife with a certificate of divorcement. (And then, only in the Old Testament.) That is why the man is primarily responsible for the divorce, for failing the bride in adequately fulfilling his priesthood. Husbands “foreshadow” the Head, the Lord Jesus Christ. Wives “foreshadow” the Church, the Bride of Christ.

“Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God. Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and He is the Saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for it; that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: for we are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church.”—Ephesians 5:21-32



2 Early Church Fathers On Divorce And Remarriage (2nd-5th Centuries) Introduction

For an historical account, we draw upon the writings of the ante-Nicene Fathers (10 Vol.'s), not because they are “biblical” and not because they are reliable in all areas, but when we survey this subject of remarriage after divorce, we ascertain that they were all in strict agreement, especially prior to 350 AD. On other subjects the “Fathers” sometimes came to divergent views.

But on this single subject, they are unified “in toto” and taught from the same position.

Secondarily, the life setting (Sitz en Leben) is not a factor with these men as it is with us in the 21st century.

They are disciples of the apostles, having sat under their teaching, or have learned from disciples who knew the original twelve.

They normatively dealt with the Greek, Hebrew and Latin language base, and were fluent in the language of transmission and original codex.

They lived in the culture, knew all the cultural idioms of the day, and lived in the original church of the 1st century church and those adjacent to it in the successive second, third, and fourth centuries.

Again, these are selected accounts from the primitive, foundational witness of the early church. They are not a second canon of Scripture, but a fairly reliable historical accounting of the “apostolic Fathers” who lived nearest to Jesus and the original twelve apostles.

In an effort not to re-invent the wheel, we have drawn selected comments from two very thorough treatments on this subject from the ante-Nicene view of divorce and remarriage and from some of the early church Fathers themselves.

FOUNDATIONAL CONCERNS AND COMMENTARY FROM THE ANTE-NICENE FATHERS

From earliest post-New Testament days, Christian writers wrote about divorce and remarriage. Almost always their teaching is about remarriage — rather than merely about divorce — thus reflecting the Gospel material. In almost every case they write against remarriage and mention no exception. (Contrast this with our modern preoccupation with the question of when remarriage might be permissible.) When writing about divorce they do quite frequently mention the permission — which they quite often make into a command — to divorce where there has been adultery. The overwhelming majority of them do not allow remarriage in these circumstances. Some specifically prohibit it; others simply say: there should be no remarriage after divorce. They mention no exceptions.

Some might say that this is an argument from silence. If these early writers were confronted by Matthew 5 or Matthew 19 would they not have made an exception?

Perhaps they were speaking in general terms as Jesus does in Mark and Luke, and they wanted to establish the general principle without dwelling on the single exception? But the significant fact is that they clearly did know Matthew 5 and Matthew 19. They frequently quote them; some of the Fathers make their remarks on divorce and remarriage in their commentaries on Matthew; not infrequently do they mention the exception as it relates to divorce; but only one or two (and those are later writers) mention any exception to Christ's ruling of no remarriage. As we have already said, the vast majority — even in a context of quoting Matthew — either say that all remarriage is wrong (without mentioning any possible exceptions) or raise the issue of remarriage after divorce for adultery and specifically prohibit it.

It would make this chapter overlong to attempt any detailed discussion of all the relevant passages in the writings of the early Fathers. For this, reference must be made to Heth and Wenham: *Jesus and Divorce* (chapter one), Crouzel: *L'Église primitive*, or Collingwood: *'Divorce and Remarriage'*. (See Appendix 2) Clearly, however, it is incumbent on me to produce some evidence to substantiate the last two paragraphs, and I have chosen to limit myself to the second century AD (that is: the first hundred years of post-New Testament writing) and to the eight Christian authors who wrote on the subject during that period.

The Statement of the Early Church View

The author of the most comprehensive study ever written on this subject contends that in the first five centuries all Greek writers and all Latin writers except one agree that remarriage following divorce for any reason is adulterous. The marriage bond was seen to unite both parties until the death of one of them. When a marriage partner was guilty of unchastity, usually understood to mean adultery, the other was expected to separate but did not have the right to remarry. Even in the case of 1 Corinthians 7:15, the so-called Pauline privilege which later Catholics held to permit a believer deserted by an unbeliever to remarry, the early church Fathers said that the deserted Christian had no right to remarry.

Furthermore the Fathers followed the New Testament in insisting that there should be equality of sexual rights in marriage, in contrast to the Old Testament, Jewish and Roman law which gave more freedom to married men than married women. Put simply, a man under Old Testament law could have more than one sexual partner without being guilty of adultery against his first wife, whereas a married woman had to be totally loyal to her husband. Extramarital affairs always counted as adultery where a wife was involved, but a husband was only guilty of fornication if his lover was unmarried. These attitudes were common throughout the ancient world before Christ came. Thus the Pharisees approved of polygamy, and Roman men could have concubines as well as a wife. The early Christian teaching on the "equality of sexual rights" in marriage is evidently based on Mark 10:11 which introduced the notion that a man can be guilty of adultery against his own wife and 1 Corinthians 7:3-4 where Paul insists that husband and wife have exclusive rights to each other's body. The Fathers repeatedly stress this aspect of equality, contrasting Christian attitudes with pagan ones. This demand for total and mutual fidelity between man and wife is of course also expressed in the patristic refusal to countenance remarriage after divorce.

1. Hermas (dates uncertain but writing some time between the end of the first century and AD 150) Hermas asks his heavenly guardian:

(4)... 'If a man is married to a woman faithful in the Lord and he finds her involved in some adultery, does he sin if he continues to live with her?' (5) 'As long as he knows nothing of it,' he said, 'he does not sin. But if the husband knows of her sin and his wife does not repent but persists in her immorality and the husband continues to live with her, then he becomes guilty of her sin and a partner in her adultery.' (6) 'What then,' I said, 'sir, shall the husband do if his wife persists in this passion?' 'Let him send her away [apolyo],' he said, 'and let the husband remain single. But if after sending away his wife, he marries another, he also commits adultery himself.'

(7) 'If then,' I said, 'sir, after the wife is sent away the woman repents, and she wishes to return to her own husband, she will be taken back, won't she?' (8) 'Indeed,' he said, 'if her husband will not take her back he sins and brings upon himself a great sin. Rather one must take back the one who has sinned and the one who repents, but not often, because there is only one repentance for the servants of God. Therefore, for the sake of repentance the husband must not marry. This is the proper course of action for wife and husband. (9) Not only,' said he, 'is it adultery if anyone defiles his flesh, but also whoever acts as the heathen do commits adultery. So if anyone persists in such actions and does not repent, then depart from him and do not live with him, otherwise you also are sharing in his sin. (10) This is the reason why you were commanded to remain single, whether husband or wife, because in such cases repentance is possible.' (Mandate, 4.1.4-10).

Here, Hermas (in common with many of the early Fathers) agrees with the Roman law in mandating divorce in the case of (persistent) adultery and his reason for this command also agrees with the Roman law: he will become 'a partner in her adultery' (5). However, Heth and Wenham point out that he is 'in direct opposition to the civil law of Rome' by forbidding remarriage after divorce for adultery (6, 8-10) and by making it a Christian duty to receive back a repentant wife (7f). Another difference from contemporary society is that he applies all this not only to a husband with an adulterous wife but also to a wife with an adulterous husband (10). In all these matters where he differs from Roman law and practice, he shows how profoundly he has been influenced by New Testament teaching on divorce and remarriage (Heth and Wenham p. 24).

Hermas is one of the early writers who specifically addresses the question of whether it is permissible to remarry after divorce for adultery. His answer is a clear: no. (6, 8-10) It is true that his main reason for this is to allow the adulterous partner to repent (8, 10) and the question inevitably presents itself: what if the opportunity for repentance is past, i.e. if the adulterous partner has remarried?

The significant fact, often overlooked, is that repentance is not the only reason Hermas puts forward for remaining single. He also says that for the partner who has not been unfaithful to marry again would be adultery (6, 9). He thus clearly shows that, in his understanding, neither a partner's unfaithfulness nor divorce-for-unfaithfulness breaks the marriage bond. This remains, and it is still adultery to remarry even when your partner has been unfaithful.

2. Justin Martyr (converted c. 130; died c. 165)

In his First Apology (c. 150), Justin quotes — one after the other — Matthew 5:28f, Matthew 5:32b (or Luke 16:18b) and Matthew 19:11f and then immediately adds: 'And so those who make second marriages according to human law are sinners in the sight of our Teacher' (1 Apol. 15).

There is an outside possibility that this could refer to remarriage of any kind, even after the death of a partner, but most scholars agree with E. R. Hardy that ‘the reference is . . .

to remarriage after divorce’ since the context of the Matthean quotations demands this (Hardy in Richardson: *Early Christian Fathers* - p. 76)

Two points are worthy of note here. One is that Justin makes a distinction between what is possible ‘according to human law’ and (by implication) what is possible according to ‘our Teacher’s’ law.

Human law recognizes a valid second marriage; ‘our Teacher’ calls this ‘sin’. Secondly, Justin quotes from Matthew 5 (certainly verses 28f and probably verse 32) and Matthew 19 (verses 11f) and yet makes no exception to his statement that ‘our Teacher’ regards remarriage as sin.

In his *Second Apology* (2.1-7) Justin says that Christians must separate from adulterous partners. He describes a case where both partners were sexually unfaithful. The wife became a Christian and gave up her infidelity; the husband persisted in his adultery. She wanted to divorce him but was persuaded by friends to wait in the hope that he might change. When he went from bad to worse, she divorced him. Justin clearly approves of what she did. There is, however, no mention of remarriage. In the light of the material in the *First Apology*, the assumption must be that she would not be free to remarry.

3. Athenagoras (writing c. 177)

Athenagoras the Apologist addressed his *Legatio Pro Christianis* to the Emperors Marcus Aurelius Antoninus and Lucius Aurelius Commodus. He says that a Christian man must either remain as he was brought into the world, or else . . . abide in one marriage and no more, for a second marriage is a fair-seeming adultery. ‘Whoever shall put away his wife,’ Scripture says, ‘and shall marry another, commits adultery.’ It does not allow him to divorce the one whose maidenhood he had [ended], nor to bring in another wife beside her. One that robs himself of his first wife, even if she be dead, is a covert adulterer, thwarting the hand of God – for in the beginning God made one man and one woman – and destroying the unity of flesh that was meant for the propagation of the race (*Leg. pro Chr.* 33).

The New Testament clearly teaches that it is preferable to remain single after the death of one’s partner (1 Cor. 7:8f, 39f; 1 Tim. 5:9-15) but nevertheless clearly allows remarriage in this situation (Rom. 7:1-3). Athenagoras goes beyond the New Testament in saying that someone remarrying after the death of his wife is ‘a covert adulterer’. Nevertheless, he is deeply influenced by the New Testament teaching. He quotes directly one of Christ’s sayings on divorce and remarriage (either Mark 10:11 without the final words ‘against her’ or Matthew 19:9 without the exception clause) and he backs up his argument against remarriage by saying what God did ‘in the beginning’ and by indirectly quoting Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 (cf Mark 10:6-8; Matthew 19:4-6).

He clearly says that remarriage is wrong and allows no exceptions. If his direct quotation is from Matthew 19:9 he may well have left out the exception clause because he was convinced that the exception applied only to the question of divorce and not to the question of remarriage (which is the subject Athenagoras is discussing).

To him remarriage is ‘fair-seeming adultery’ — ‘fairseeming’ because it was allowed by Roman law, but adultery because the marriage bond still exists, unobliterated by divorce.

4. Theophilus of Antioch (writing c. 180)

Theophilus wrote:

The gospel voice provides a stricter teaching about purity when it says, ‘Everyone who looks upon another person’s wife to desire her has already committed adultery with her in his heart’ [Matt. 5:28]. ‘And he who marries,’ it says, ‘a woman divorced by her husband commits adultery, and whoever divorces his wife except for fornication makes her a partner in adultery’ [Matt. 5:32] (Ad Autolycurm, 3.13).

The interesting point here is that Theophilus quotes Matthew 5:32b (in a form closer to Luke 16:18b) and then quotes 5:32a after that. Some scholars have suggested that this inversion is deliberate to make the point that while remarriage to a divorcee is adulterous in all circumstances, divorce is permissible where there has been *porneia*; we cannot be sure whether this deduction is correct.

5. Irenaeus (writing c. 185)

In *Adversus Haereses* 4.15.2, Irenaeus briefly alludes to Christ’s remarks that the Mosaic permission was given because of men’s hardness of heart and that it cannot be made compatible with God’s original law. He also refers to Genesis 1:27. He does not, however, mention remarriage.

6. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150 - 215)

In *Stromata* 2.23.145, Clement deals with divorce and remarriage at some length. The key passage is: ‘[The fact] that Scripture counsels marriage, and allows no release from the union, is expressly contained in the law: “You shall not put away your wife, except for the cause of fornication”; and it regards as fornication, the marriage of those separated while the other is alive.’

Clement is clearly forbidding remarriage. He says so at the beginning of this passage (‘Scripture . . . allows no release from the union.’) and he says so at the end (‘[Scripture] regards as fornication the marriage of those separated while the other is alive’). Since he is keen to show that ‘Scripture’ says this, he sandwiches a quotation from the Gospels between the two prohibitions of remarriage. It might be thought, since he wants to say that all remarriage is prohibited, that he would quote Mark or Luke. Instead he quotes Matthew, with the exception clause (‘except for the cause of fornication’ is *plen ei me epi logo porneias* and looks like a conflation, from memory, of Matthew 5:32 and 19:9). It is clear then that he regards Jesus’ words as allowing divorce in the case of adultery but not allowing remarriage under any circumstances.

We have already quoted a second passage in Clement where he relates Matthew 19:11f to its context and specifically to 19:9. He says that the Gnostics, who were calling marriage a sin, misinterpret Matthew 19:11f because they ‘do not realize the context ...

What the questioners [in 19:10] wanted to know was whether, when a man’s wife has been condemned for fornication [porneia], it is allowable for him to marry another’ (Stromata 3.6.50). Clement is insistent that Matthew 19:11f must be understood in close connection with 19:9 but leaves a little vague what that connection is. The most natural explanation, as we have seen, is that the people who ‘have renounced remarriage [literally: made themselves eunuchs] for the sake of the kingdom of heaven’ (19:12) are divorcees who, in obedience to Christ, have refrained from remarriage.

If this is, as seems likely, Clement’s understanding, then he is teaching that Jesus specifically prohibits remarriage — even for the non-adulterer — after divorce for adultery, since Clement states that Jesus is answering the question: ‘Whether, when a man’s wife has been condemned for fornication, it is allowable for him to marry another?’

7. Origen (c. 185 - 254)

Origen was not only one of the most influential theologians in the early church but also was one of the most prolific commentators on Scripture. In many passages he expounds the Christian doctrine of marriage, like Clement before him defending marriage against ascetic denigrators. Over and over in his Commentary on Matthew Origen states that to act contrary to the teaching of the Saviour, to act contrary to what is written, is acknowledged by everyone as impiety. He quotes Romans 7:3 as proof that it is adultery to remarry as long as one’s former spouse is alive. Like Hermas, he insists that separation is obligatory where the wife is guilty of fornication (porneia; Matt. 19:9). The reason he says this is perhaps found in his commentary on the words of the Pharisees in Matthew 19:3, where they ask if it is lawful for a man to put away his wife for any cause at all:

And I think that the Pharisees put forward this word for this reason, that they might attack Him whatever He might say; as, for example, if He had said, ‘It is lawful,’ they would have accused Him of dissolving marriages for trifles; but, if He had said, ‘It is not lawful,’ they would have accused Him of permitting a man to dwell with a woman, even with sins.

Origen also argues that 1 Corinthians 7:3-4 means that husband and wife are equal when it comes to conjugal rights. He boldly states that the husband who withholds himself from his wife and does not satisfy her desires is perhaps more culpable for making his wife an adulteress than is the man who puts away his wife for a reason other than fornication: poisoning, murder or the like. And it is always adulterous for a divorced woman to remarry (Matt. 5:32). But nowhere in all his long discussion of Matthew 19 does he discuss the case of the innocent husband separated from an adulterous wife. Arguments from silence are of course doubtful. However, in view of his repeated clear-cut remarks that remarriage of divorcees is adulterous, his use of Romans 7:3, and his reliance on earlier writers such as Hermas and Clement, it seems likely that Origen thought as they did, namely, that innocent divorced spouses could not remarry.

8. Tertullian (c. 145 - 220)

In one of his early writings Tertullian envisages Christian partners separating and living in a state akin to widowhood if one of them is adulterous. His hope is that the guilty party will repent. He writes:

But, however, since Patience takes the lead in every species of salutary discipline, what wonder that she likewise ministers to Repentance, (accustomed as Repentance is to come to the rescue of such as have fallen,) when, on a disjunction of wedlock — for that cause, I mean, which makes it lawful, whether for husband or wife, to persist in the perpetual observance of widowhood — she [i.e., Patience] waits for, she yearns for, she persuades by her entreaties, repentance in all who are one day to enter salvation? How great a blessing she confers on each! The one she prevents from becoming an adulterer; the other she amends. In other words, the innocent party is prevented from committing adultery by abstaining from remarriage, and the guilty party is brought to repentance.

When Tertullian speaks of ‘a disjunction of wedlock’ he does not mean the dissolution of the marriage bond that unites husband and wife. He holds that this is indissoluble in common with nearly all the early Christian writers. Even after a separation for immorality the couple remain husband and wife. He does not mention the possibility of remarriage for the innocent party because whatever happens the individuals remain husband and wife. Summary of the Fathers’ Testimony (2nd - 5th c.)

Later Christian writers up to the end of the fifth century continue the same tradition of interpretation of the Gospel divorce texts found in the earlier authors we have looked at. All the relevant texts have been exhaustively and carefully studied in H. Crouzel’s monumental work *L’eglise primitive face au divorce* (1971). To list those who hold that remarriage after divorce is contrary to the gospel teaching is to call a roll of the best-known early Christian theologians. Besides those already examined in some detail, they include Basil of Ancyra, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory Nazianzus, Apollinaris of Laodicea, Theodore of Mopsuestia, John Chrysostom, Theodoret, Epiphanius, Ambrose, Innocent I, Pelagius, Jerome, Leo the Great, and Augustine. In all, twenty-five individual writers and two early councils forbid remarriage after divorce.

Crouzel, however, has identified one exception to this general picture. Ambrosiaster, so-called because in the Middle Ages he was wrongly identified with Bishop Ambrose of Milan, did allow remarriage after some divorces. We know nothing about the identity of Ambrosiaster save that he wrote commentaries on the Pauline epistles sometime between 366 and 383. In his commentary on 1 Corinthians 7 he argued that divorce was legitimate in cases of fornication and that an innocent husband could remarry in such circumstances but not an innocent wife. The reason: for ‘the man is not bound by the law in the same way as the woman; for the man is head of the woman’. He also allowed a Christian husband or wife deserted by a pagan spouse to remarry (the so-called Pauline privilege).

In three aspects Ambrosiaster stands alone among the early Christian writers. First, in permitting remarriage to deserted Christians. Second, in permitting remarriage to innocent husbands in adultery cases. And third, in discriminating against women in such situations: the doctrine of male headship was of course accepted by other early church Fathers, but they did not appeal to it to justify giving men more license than women.

Here Ambrosiaster is apparently rejecting the normative Christian position that husbands and wives enjoy equal and exclusive rights in regard to each other's sexuality (cf. 1 Cor. 7:3-4).

In this regard he may have been influenced by Roman law, but at any rate he is here in complete contradiction with the spirit of Christianity. It would seem too that in allowing divorcees to remarry he was also a stranger to the dominant Christian attitudes of the early church.

Summary Thoughts

It is true that the early Fathers are not part of the canon of Scripture and do not have the authority of the biblical writings. What they say is not binding on the Christian and we have discussed them here not so much because of the value of their own teaching (real though this is), but because they are the earliest interpreters of the words of Jesus.

It is also true that the Fathers were more ascetic than the New Testament. We have seen that Athenagoras goes further than the New Testament in condemning remarriage even after the death of a partner and that Hermas, while saying – contrary to the culture of his day – that a husband should take back an adulterous wife who has repented, adds 'but not often,

because there is only one repentance for the servants of God' (Mandate, 4.1.8).

This only underlines that they are not authoritative for us and that we must treat some of their conclusions with caution. It certainly does not mean that we can sweep aside wholesale their understanding of the New Testament texts, the earliest interpretation in Christian history.

The fact is that they both knew and frequently quoted Matthew 5 and 19. They clearly see these exception clauses as permitting (several see them as mandating) divorce in the case of adultery but none of them (except the lone Ambrosiaster) make even the slightest mention, when discussing Matthew 5 or 19, of an exception to the prohibition of remarriage. 'Not even the text which offers most grounds for this suggestion (Matt. 19:9) is quoted by any writer prior to the sixth century — even among those commentators who explicitly discuss it — as vindicating the practice [of remarriage after divorce for adultery]' (Kirk *p. 78).

Their normal practice, when speaking of remarriage (which is normally their focus, rather than divorce by itself), is to prohibit it entirely. No exception is mentioned. This is so despite the fact that the exception of divorce for adultery is mentioned quite frequently. As we have seen (e.g. Clement), it is not uncommon to mention the absolute prohibition of remarriage in the same context as the exception that allows divorce for adultery is mentioned or quoted.

There are of course several Fathers who specifically raise the question of remarriage after divorce for adultery, and all (the only clear exception again being Ambrosiaster) prohibit it. In our period we have seen this in Hermas (Mandate, 4.1.6, 8-10) and Clement (Stromata, 3.6.50). Chrysostom, Augustine and other later writers are absolutely clear on the matter. Plummer in his commentary on Matthew quotes Augustine's succinct comment: 'Only for fornication may a man divorce an adulterous wife, but while she is alive he may not marry another' (*p. 81).

This, then, is how the Fathers interpreted the words of Jesus.

They are not infallible, yet, as Heth and Wenham point out, they ‘had a built-in cultural, social and linguistic grid in their thinking which the twentieth-century reader must labour to reconstruct if he wants to interpret the Greek New Testament accurately. Being closest in time to the composition of the Gospels, the Fathers are most likely to have understood the original intentions of the writers in matters of Greek grammar and syntax’ especially if Greek was their mother tongue (*p. 77). And their virtually unanimous testimony, stated or implied, is that Christ in the Gospels—and specifically in Matthew—forbade remarriage after divorce in all circumstances, including when divorce was for adultery.

Conclusions

1. Christ’s teaching is binding on His followers

Jesus introduces His teaching on the subject with the solemn: ‘But I tell you’ (Matt. 5:32; 19:9), a mark of His conscious authority (cf 7:29). He even has the boldness to abrogate the permission to divorce and remarry — indeed a piece of legislation (Mark 10:5) — which Moses wrote in the Old Testament (Mark 10:3-9; Matt. 19:4-8). Even the phrase ‘The one who can accept this should accept it’ (Matt. 19:12, cf 11) is by no means, as we have seen, a statement that ‘you can take this or leave it’ but rather a phrase parallel to: ‘He who has ears, let him hear’ (e.g. Matt. 11:15). It is a challenge to be taught by Jesus and to accept His (admittedly tough) teaching.

This point — that Christ’s teaching is binding on us His followers — should not even have to be made. But it is remarkable how many people try to evade Christ’s teaching on this very issue of divorce and remarriage. The most common argument is that Christ abolished the old law (Mark 10:3-9; Matt. 19:4-8) and was not intending to bring in a new law. There are senses in which this is true: it is arguable as to whether Christ would want the civil law in a secular state to prohibit all remarriage after divorce; it is also certainly true that Christ’s new life is not a crushing burden of do’s and don’ts that are even more overwhelming than those of the Pharisees. But it is a totally false deduction to go on and say that Jesus’ teaching was merely advice, the explanation of an ideal which we need not live up to if our circumstances or our temperament do not permit. Atkinson quotes Helen Oppenheimer: ‘It has frequently been insisted that “Christ did not legislate” but to put the matter so it can be misleading, if it is assumed that Christ’s commands need not be obeyed’ (Atkinson, *p. 71). Rather, Christ spoke with authority and expected His followers to obey His words (Matt. 7:24-27).

As to the ‘crushing burden’ of these commands of Christ’s, there is not the slightest hint in the Gospels that He allows His followers to be obedient only up to a point. Bromiley again and again stresses that the difference between Christ and the Pharisees (or life without Christ) is that Christ not only makes demands but enables His followers to keep His commands. Jesus ‘does not . . . lay on [His disciples] a burden that they cannot carry. Instead He opens up for them the possibility of doing willingly and effectively that which previously, even out of the strictest sense of duty, they could not do’ (pp.45f).

We must therefore adapt our pastoral practice to the teaching of Jesus, and not let very real pastoral concerns warp our reading of the Gospels or even allow us to dismiss Christ’s words altogether.

Too often a Christian group will struggle with Christ's teaching on remarriage and conclude: 'But it doesn't work like that.' Helen Oppenheimer, in a more sophisticated way, says the same thing: 'Indissolubility of some sort is the most obvious interpretation of Christ's teaching on marriage . . . Dissolubility of some sort is the most obvious interpretation of some of the facts of human life' (*p. 81). She states specifically that she is trying to base her answers to the questions about divorce and remarriage on both Scripture and experience. Yet, as she sees it, these two are in opposition to one another. By contrast, Christ certainly wants us to work out His teaching in our experience, but He does not expect His followers to modify His teaching in the light of what they believe contradictory experience is saying.

2. Christ's teaching is stricter than that of His contemporaries

This is true not only in Mark and Luke, but also — and specifically — in Matthew (even with the exception clause). It is in Matthew that Jesus directly speaks of the contemporary teaching about divorce (5:31) and pits His own, much stricter, teaching against it (5:32). It is in Matthew that the Pharisees put their question in such a way as to engage Jesus in the contemporary rabbinical debate (19:3). We have seen that the rabbinical schools contained not only the laxer ideas of Hillel but the stricter view of Shammai who allowed divorce only for sexual infidelity. Yet it is in Matthew that Jesus' words — again with the exception clause — are so strong and demanding that they shock not only the crowds but His own disciples (19:9f). And it is once more in Matthew that Jesus says, in the most solemn terms, that His disciples' righteousness [must] surpass that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law (5:20).

It should not surprise us, then, that His teaching is so shocking to our contemporaries. Admittedly few of us would want to go as far as Hillel and allow divorce even for a trifle: we have been too much influenced by Christ and His apostles for that. But most people in the West today would feel that even Shammai's teaching was too extreme because they would want to broaden the grounds for legitimate divorce to include e.g. 'marital breakdown'. Yet on this issue — as on many others — Christ is much more demanding, and has much higher standards, not only than those of contemporary society but also than those of the popular professing religious society.

3. Divorce is never God's will

It is necessary to insist on this. So much debate today focuses on the exception that Jesus made. Yet that was most definitely not where His emphasis lay. He was asked whether it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife (Mark 10:2; Matt. 19:3) and the whole emphasis of His answer — just as much in Matthew as in Mark — is that divorce is not lawful.

God originally made humans male and female with a view to marriage; at the beginning of creation He instituted marriage: an event (it is also a process but Christ is speaking here about what happens at the moment a man marries a woman) when each partner leaves his/ her original family, forms a new family with the partner to whom he/she cleaves, and — most importantly — is made 'one' with his/her partner. It is God who joins the couple together as one.

The implication is obvious: no one is to sunder this God-given oneness (Mark 10:6-9; Matt. 19:4-6).

It is true that if one partner commits adultery, the other may separate himself/herself in legal divorce (Matt. 19:9; 5:32), but even this is only permitted; it need not happen if the offended partner decides to maintain the marriage.

It is, then, never God's will that there should be a divorce, because it is God's will that the oneness should not only exist (it will do, despite legal divorce) but be lived out (in marital fidelity). Jesus does, however, sanction — not command — divorce in the case of adultery and in that case only.

4. Legal divorce does not destroy the oneness of marriage

Couples can — though they should not, except in the case of adultery — live apart. They can — though again they should not, except where there has been adultery — become legally divorced: separating out their finances and making custody arrangements for the children. But what they cannot do is destroy the oneness God gave them when they married. They can undo their own work (of getting legally married); they cannot undo the work of God.

It is the issue of remarriage which shows this most clearly and it is for this reason that, in the context of discussing divorce, Jesus talks about remarriage (Mark 10:11f; Matt. 5:31f; 19:10-12). Remarriage, Jesus teaches, is adultery. This can only be because the original marriage — the oneness, the joining together — still exists.

This is why a divorced Christian, even when reconciliation is no longer possible, must continue to think: 'I am married and therefore not free to contemplate marriage to anyone else.'

While married, he could never think of marrying a second partner.

His legal divorce changes nothing in God's eyes and therefore should change nothing in his: he is still married; he is not free to contract a second marriage.

Exactly the same principle applies to a single person who is attracted to a divorcee (Luke 16:18; Matt. 5:32). If he met a woman who was legally married, he could never think of marrying her; he would need to ask God's help to overcome his attraction or, if this proved impossible, he would need to break off the friendship. Exactly the same applies when he meets a divorcee. She is still married in God's eyes; she should consider herself so, and he should consider her so. Any steps leading to marriage are therefore not to be contemplated. This of course seems extraordinarily hard to many today, but it is the indisputable teaching of our Lord.

5. Does divorce for adultery destroy the oneness of marriage?

One question is, however, in dispute: did Christ teach that divorce for adultery (not adultery itself) destroys the oneness of marriage, and that the offended partner (not the adulterous partner whose duty is to seek reconciliation) may therefore remarry? Mark and Luke of course give no hint that there are any exceptions to Christ's teaching about no remarriage.

Matthew, however, gives an exception to Christ's teaching about no divorce (which Mark and Luke do not mention); could it be that in Matthew Christ also allows for remarriage after divorce for adultery; and therefore teaches that divorce for adultery irrevocably breaks the marriage bond?

We have seen that Matthew 5:32 does not allow us to answer that question, the exception clause there is so completely an aside. Matthew 19:9 is, by almost unanimous consent, the only saying on which such an idea could be built. So far we have looked at the sentence itself and concluded that while it may teach that the man who divorces his wife for marital unfaithfulness and marries another does not commit adultery, the exception clause is an aside (not where Christ's main emphasis lies) and is in the natural (and only possible) place to teach: a man may divorce his wife for marital unfaithfulness, but anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman — for whatever reason — commits adultery.

We have looked at the preceding context and seen that the whole emphasis is on the fact that it is not lawful to divorce. Christ speaks of the oneness that God gives in marriage and wants to make the point that a mere legal divorce cannot destroy this oneness. He therefore adds that remarriage is adultery (19:9). The exception about the right to divorce is very much an aside, added so as to give the full picture. It is, in itself, possible that Christ believed this also conferred the right to remarry in these circumstances, but it would be dangerous to draw that conclusion from an exception which is very much not the main thrust of His argument.

The succeeding context in any case makes such an interpretation very unlikely. The disciples are thunderstruck by what they have heard (19:10). This is incomprehensible if Jesus had merely reiterated the well-known position of Shammai which was part of the contemporary debate (cf 19:3). Moreover, far from roundly correcting them, Jesus goes on to speak of the value of a singleness which God has 'given' and in context this must mean a singleness after divorce, even the kind of divorce that Jesus (and Shammai) allowed. Christ's uniqueness as compared with Shammai was not in a stricter ruling over divorce, but in prohibiting remarriage — and saying that the God-given oneness remains — even where legal divorce is justified.



Historical Reference

The context (cultural understanding from Moses to Jesus) of the Bill of Divorcement was viewed as a legal instrument which made provision for the woman and her children, that the man would be legally liable for their welfare and financial needs, and not to be a burden on society. (Deut. 24:1, 3)

“And they said, Moses suffered to write a bill of divorcement, and to put her away. And Jesus answered and said unto them, For the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept. But from the beginning of the creation God made them male and female. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and CLEAVE to his wife; and they twain shall be ONE FLESH: so then they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.”—Mark 10:4-9

The Bill of Divorcement then was a form of protection for the one that was “put away”, and an on-going responsibility for him that put away ... to provide for those he had put out of his house.

“Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain: for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name (His ways, purposes and commandments) in vain.”—Deut. 5:11



III EXPOSITIONAL AND APPLICATIONAL UNDERSTANDING

1 Marriage: The Image Of Our Salvation

“... This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church.”—Eph. 5:28-32

Within His creation, God has made the things which are seen to teach us concerning the things which are not seen. (Rom. 1:19-20) Creation is an instruction book we will always have. It points to the spiritual application framed in the physical universe.

The marriage covenant, as created by God Himself, pictures the relationship of God in His covenant with man. A full and comprehensive study of marriage as it images the Divine/human covenant cannot be stressed enough. To understand this ‘type’ will equip us with a very clear means of presenting the truth of God’s heart of love and forgiveness toward His Bride.

We see this when we study and consider the Book of Hosea. We find that the entire book is dedicated to one thing: covenant between God and man illustrated through the picture of marriage. It is not just about a man being married to a woman. It is a *type*, imaging the relationship of God and His people joined in covenant. It images love, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Now, by grace, through faith in His death, burial, and resurrection, we enter into covenant with Jesus Christ. This New Covenant is our salvation. We become one with Him and share the great privileges of God. *“He that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit ... your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own. For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s.”—1 Cor. 6:17, 19, 20*

Again, Paul makes it clear, through his writings to the churches, that the picture of marriage is a shadow of the substance of Christ and the Church:

“So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: for we are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church.”—Eph. 5:28-32

“They two shall be one flesh”—they are joined together; they are one. Nothing can take that apart; no one can take it apart. Christ and His Church/Bride will not come apart in His marriage, in His salvation, in His restoration, in His covenant, in His reconciling His flesh unto Himself. As Christians, would we want it any other way? Would we want salvation to come apart? Marriage is indeed a true picture of covenantal love as it pertains to our own salvation—an eternal relationship with the Lord our God. What can separate us from the love of God? (Rom. 8:38-39) “If God be for us, who can be against us?”—Rom. 8:31

Therefore, in this earth, especially in the church, should not our marriages be accurate in the picture, in the natural, because they represent the spiritual? If we mar this image in the natural, then we are misrepresenting the truth of the spiritual—our relationship in covenant with the Lord. We would be marring the very image of our Lord Jesus Christ and His Bride! Let us be careful then to keep our Lord’s 3rd Commandment ... “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain: for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain.”—Deut. 5:11

Oh, may we see the riches of this picture from the instruction book of Creation! When we understand the covenant of marriage, we will understand that the only reason we have anything from Christ Jesus is because of the motions and the operations of His covenantal love. We have been given much through this institution. That is why we cannot treat it lightly. It is holy ground.

There can be no marring of this issue of salvation, of justification, and a right relationship with the Lord as we relate to it in the marriage picture. We must view our marriages through our relationship to God. This will certainly give us a “raised” view of what marriage truly is. We will bless, extol, and exalt the Lord our God in His covenant of marriage to His Bride.



2 Marriage: Our Consecration

“Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge.”—Heb. 13:4

The act and issue of marriage is consecration. To be consecrated means to be holy, undefiled, set apart. The marriage is truly an issue of the rendering of a consecrated life. When we marry someone, we are consecrating our whole life to that one relationship. We are setting ourselves apart from all other relationships of marriage for that one. Marriage is our commitment to be consecrated unto that one relationship for a whole lifetime.

Emphasizing this word “consecration” puts more clearly into our view that *we have responsibility* in our natural marriages and as the Bride of Christ. It is a picture of the Church in relationship with Christ Jesus. We are to be holy as He is holy. (1 Pet. 1:15) Having God’s precious promises, we are to remove all filthiness of flesh and spirit, that we might *perfect holiness* in the fear of God. (2 Cor. 7:1) We are to be perfect, even as our Father in heaven is perfect. (Matt. 5:48) This is our responsibility. And holiness is a corporate responsibility for the Body of Christ. Are not we, as a corporate Bride, supposed to be working together to remove all the spots, wrinkles, and blemishes so that we will be a consecrated, holy Bride unto Him? Rev. 19:7 states, “Let us be glad and rejoice and give honor to Him; for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and His wife hath made *herself* ready.” Not God ... we have to make ourselves ready before God. *We* have to dress ourselves in white robes, fine and pure. Rev. 19:8, “And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white; for the fine linen is the righteousness (justification) of saints.”

And that is what goes on in a natural marriage. We are, as husbands and wives, working together as helpmeets unto holiness, one to one, every day, as we live with each other.

Marriage is a pilgrimage together to get *to life's end maintaining holy covenant* with Yahweh Elohim, Almighty God. Our marriages must not be defiled, but consecrated, set apart, for the purpose of bearing fruit unto holiness in imaging and glorifying our Lord Jesus.

Let the marriage bed be undefiled. It is consecrated. It images God. He is consecrating Himself to those who will consecrate themselves to Him through the work of Christ Jesus. *The issue and fact of consecration is to ONE being.* It is to be “one being” with the Lord. The two are become one—one in spirit (a Holy Spirit), one in His Body, and one with all that He has. Oh, what a blessing!—what we have, hidden in Christ, yet undiscovered, unwrapped, unused ... *graces, ideas, meditations, understandings ... knowing the Lord, intimately.* As Paul has written, “That I may know Him ...” (Phil. 3:10-15)

When we become one in Christ, we share one Holy Spirit, one Kingdom, one Body, and have everything that God ordains because of this covenant of marriage with Him. It is not something we earned nor merited, but it is a *legal and binding, everlasting covenant* purchased by the blood of our Lord Jesus, granting us *all* of what God has given.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with ALL spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.”—Eph. 1:3

“According as His divine power hath given unto us ALL things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him that hath called us to glory and virtue: whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature ...”—2 Peter 1:3-4

“Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are.” ... “Therefore let no man glory in men. For ALL things are yours ... whether the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; ALL are yours; and ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's.”—1 Cor. 3:16-17, 21-23



3 Heavenly Marriage: His Full Condescension, Our Full Ascension

“But made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.”—Phil. 2:7-8

“And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might shew the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us through Christ Jesus.”—Eph. 2:6-7

For God to marry man is a complete condescension. But for us, it is total ascension! The only way He could accomplish it was by the blood of the Lamb. Only because He sees the impress of the Lord Jesus Christ upon us can God marry man.

Only death shall separate a man and wife in the natural. Only death shall unite us to the Lord, eternally. Our death to self—our identification with our Lord’s condescension, His death—must precede eternal marriage with the Lamb. When we are born again, we come into the Kingdom of God. We ascend into that order of heaven that will be a lasting relationship with God. Even if we do not see Him face to face now, our relationship with the Lord is as real today as it will be then. It does not matter where we are, we can give glory to God—even while we dwell on earth! Our heavenly marriage with the Lord can be realized even now as we prepare in holy consecration for the Day of The Lord. We cannot prove that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead or that He even walked upon this earth, yet we can, by faith, live in His Kingdom. We can live this ascended life, now!

We must let the visible reality of our union/communion marriage with God be so visible that others will be convinced that we are one with the Lord. Since we have ascended into the Kingdom of God, we must now act like it, living out true, reconciled, ascended, marriage consecration unto the Lord. If we do not exhibit “married” behavior, if we are living somewhere else, spending time with someone other than our heavenly spouse, we will not convince anyone that we are really married. Why are we still bumbling along in this life, looking like we are still all alone instead of being victoriously released creatures that possess all things unto life and godliness, with joy and peace ruling our hearts, fully satisfied through all dimensions of time, physics, and reality?! This is our relationship with God! And if we cannot see that He has fully condescended to us, and that in this relationship we are fully ascended unto Him, then we just do not have this reality! But if it is a visible reality in our lives, then we will have the ability to speak into the issues of divorce and remarriage with authority.

The Bible tells us that the Kingdom of God comes not with observation but in our midst. The phrase “in the midst” often signifies “involved in,” “surrounded” or “overwhelmed by.” The Kingdom of God is “in our midst”! We are overwhelmed by this; we are involved in it; we are in the thickest part of it; we are in the depths of it; we are in the midst of the afflictions or troubles and cares of it; we are in the midst of the contemplations of it; in the midst of the battle; in the midst of pagan darkness of error, and we are in the midst of Gospel light. It envelops us! Milton says it this way, “On earth, join ye all creatures to extol Him ... Him first, Him last, Him midst, and without end.”

The Kingdom of God is at hand! It is not meat nor drink. It is not our physical being, what we see or what we feel. It is righteous-ness—the fact that we are justified—resulting in peace, having dealt with all of our sin. It is done! Justified! Free! And that results in joy! And oh, if it does not result in joy, we have to question everything else. Joy only comes with a first-love relationship with the Lord in His Kingdom. Our marriage to the Lamb should be sweet, soft whisperings, holy moments together, secret touches, contacts. We do not have to wait to die to have that. Should we squander this season of grace? Our joy in Him is the result of continuing in that primary or first-love position with our Lord Jesus Christ. That love will be ruling and reigning in our hearts. This is living in His Kingdom and His righteousness, through His salvation. And it must be our continual position before the Lord. If we are already married, we will act like it.

It is an abomination to leave the Kingdom of God to go whoring after the world. We cannot go back! (Ezek. 6:9-10; Heb. 6:4-6, 10:26-31) When we had it all, ascended to heavenly places in Christ, then leave for a distortion or perversion, we cannot come back to the place where we have it all! This takes spiritual minds and hearts to understand and apprehend.

We have to know a little bit about heaven, about relationship with our heavenly Bridegroom, to hunger and thirst for these things. The Holy Spirit of God comes upon us and indwells us with a deposit.

We can know a little bit about everything of Jesus Christ in our betrothal, in a portion of all His facets. The greater part still lies ahead.

May these thoughts give us some glimpses of the shadow and the framework of what we are dealing with, from the larger view. As much as we can, let us strengthen what remains. We cannot go beyond our limits. We are in no condition to speak about Christ in anything unless we own Him, unless we are living in this married-to-Christ relationship. Otherwise, we must sit alone and get right. If we are just skipping in and out of the Kingdom and are still having problems going up and down, we must stop blaspheming the Lord! We cannot be His helpmeet. We cannot fulfil His Great Commission. We must be giving to others. We must be giving them a fully condescended Christ, that they, too, might be fully ascended into His Kingdom in a full, free, and final justification! We must be living a continuously raised, ascended, transformed relationship with our King of kings, our Lord of lords ...

“For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure ... that ye may be blameless and harmless, ... without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world.”—Phil. 2:13, 15



4 To Divorce Or To Be Reconciled

“... God, who hath reconciled us to Himself by Jesus Christ ... hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation ... and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God.”—2 Cor. 5:18-20

As Christians, if we are not the first ones, like Hosea, to be agents/ ambassadors of reconciliation because of the “word of reconciliation,” because of the “ministry of reconciliation” that we have been given, then we must ask ourselves: are we true Christians? (Matt. 6:14-15; 18:33-35) We should be the first ones to forgive anything. Forgive them! Forgive them all!

Forgive them as Jesus Christ forgave us! Everything!

And if we do not forgive from the heart, neither will our Heavenly Father forgive us our sin. A true Christian has no excuse.

“Unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, let not the wife depart from her husband. But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife.”—1 Cor. 7:10-11

If you do have to leave because it is impossible to bring peace into your house, then set up two different households.

But do not get remarried. Stay unmarried. Leave the door to reconciliation open.

In the situation of a mixed marriage, i.e. a believer with an unbeliever, then 1 Cor. 7:12-15 is our mandate and injunction. The Bible here teaches that they stay together unless the unbelieving one leaves. Yet, even if an unbelieving one does leave, the believing one can remain in covenant, in forgiveness, working and praying toward reconciliation. *“If any brother hath a wife that believes not and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away.”* This is an injunction to allow a person to stay in the marriage, even though she is an unbeliever. The believing husband is not to put her away. In the word of God, whether one is a believer or unbeliever is not the issue in this constitutional understanding of marriage. The injunction is to stay married.

“And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him.” Here, a believing wife is instructed not to leave her unbelieving husband. She, too, can keep the covenant of marriage alive.

“For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband.” They are one flesh. The unbelieving one will be getting a picture of what a true Christian is as the believing spouse demonstrates true covenant-keeping. That does not mean that the unbelieving spouse is saved. It means there is a visible consecration in his or her life that they can observe. Everyday, they have an illustration of covenant-keeping ... in the prayers, the courage, the joy, the submission, the yielding, and the waiting upon the Lord by the believing spouse.

“But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases; but God hath called us to peace.” If there is an unbelieving spouse who insists on leaving, let them leave. One is not in bondage to follow them around town, to wash their clothes, to take care of all their financial needs, to talk to their parents for them, or to make excuses for them. The one who was left may set up their own household and go on with life.

Now, is there anything in these verses (1 Cor. 7:10-16) about getting a divorce? Is there anything about getting remarried? No. Nowhere is it suggested or implied that a spouse who has been left may then pursue a divorce or seek to be remarried to another. A mandate has already been given to stay single or be reconciled if the other leaves. Even when they cannot convince their spouse to stay with them, a true disciple of Jesus will not remarry but will be waiting and praying for the reconciliation of their marriage. That is one evidence that they are covenant-keepers, true disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And indeed, within reconciliation mercy must be applied. The biblical perspective on mercy is that it is conditional. As we learn from the beatitudes in Matthew 5:7 mercy is shown to those who give mercy. This is the ministry of reconciliation; this is the word of reconciliation.

We see this in regard to our Lord's teaching on the law of forgiveness in Matthew 18:21-35. *“Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you? And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.”* (NASB)

God expects us to extend the same mercy that He has given us through salvation, not only to our brothers and sisters, but certainly to someone of much greater importance, of much more affection and intimacy, of much more covenant-making—our marriage spouse, made in the image of one flesh, as Christ and the church. That as we have been saved through the reconciliation and the suffering of Christ Jesus to a resurrected life, new and clean, forgiven, having been shown mercy and grace, in like manner, we too are to demonstrate the same thing to those who offend us. Injustice is not a factor if we remember the cross.

The Lord also teaches this in His great prayer in Matt. 6:12-15:

“And forgive us our debts (conditionally) as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen. For if ye (conditional) forgive men for their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

Notice that He continues to use the personal pronoun, your Father. As intimate as our relationship is with God, the Father, as a loving Father, He remains impartial. He is no respecter of persons. He treats us all the same. The law standard upon which He built relationship does not affect His Father-son, Father-daughter relationships. The law is held above relationship. Before He is a God of mercy and grace, He is a God of covenant-keeping, of holiness, of justice, and of righteousness. Otherwise we would clearly have no need for mercy or grace at all. This is why covenant-keeping, and understanding its meaning, is so important. It is why understanding the law of covenant-keeping is so important. We must understand that the heart of the law, the heart of covenant-keeping is mercy and grace. Yet, there are ramifications for breaking covenant.

Again, mercy is conditional, as we see it in the words of our Lord Jesus ...

“Give and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again.”—Luke 6:38

It is the law of sowing and reaping. How we deal with others is how it will be measured back to us. Oh Lord, may we be merciful!

Life can go on apart from marriage. That is the way one who has been separated from a spouse must think.

If someone has come into situations where their life is changed and they cannot change it back, they just do not have the power because the circumstances are so overpowering, they can still go forward. They can still have a great relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ! That is, if they have remained innocent in those circumstances. If one has marred their relationship with the Lord in any way, of course it will have a great impact upon them — whether it is due to their marital circumstances or anything else. One must understand that part, too. There is fault that follows being divorced and then remarried. The Bible makes it very clear that we are to live without blame, above reproach. Repentance is available.

Let us weigh the authority of Scripture against the shifting sands of society's standard.

The slide rule of morality in the world has no relationship to the fixed moral standard of God's commandments, God's law, and Jesus Christ's own words. (Jn. 14:21-23, 15:7-8)

God's holiness is at stake when we start manipulating the affections and the thoughts of men. God has made us in His image, never to be taken apart from Him ... redemption, now completed. Isn't that the covenant standard that we as Christians embrace? Let us be about "the ministry" of reconciliation with "the word" of reconciliation. Amen.

And let us remember: God gives grace to the humble. (1 Peter 5:5-11) We will want to be in that place of grace ... grace to overcome, to respond in forgiveness, grace to be merciful, to remain single, to continue to be well-pleasing unto the Lord ...

"... And bringeth forth fruit ... since the day ye heard of it, and knew the grace of God in truth ... that ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness ..."—Col. 1:6, 10-11

"But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you. To Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen."—1 Peter 5:10-11



In Conclusion

In a concluding look, we understand that marriage is to be a permanent, life-long relationship. When problems arise that lead to separation or divorce, every attempt possible ought to be made by the spouses to forgive one another and restore the relationship. This may take weeks, months, even years of prayer, patience, and perseverance. Two aspects of the New Testament teaching on marriage and divorce commend this general approach to the marital breakdown. First, based on the teaching of the Lord on the subject of divorce, Paul knows of only two alternatives that can authoritatively be set before the divorced and divorcing Corinthian Christians: remain unmarried or else be reconciled. (1 Cor. 7:11) If one must get divorced, they must stop there. A separated or divorced Christian should avoid any thought that would hinder the possibility of restoration. In particular, this means not dating or forming intimate relationships with members of the opposite sex. The type here is based on Yahweh divorcing Israel. Did He look for a new culture to represent Himself? No! He brought Israel to understand her sin, to confess it and repent of it. But she would not! Yet, God is holding to His covenant promises He made with Israel, even to this day! (Ezek. 20:9-44, 36:22-38; Jer. 3:1-4:2; Is. 48:9-11)

"Yet you say, 'For what reason?' Because the Lord has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. But not one has done so who has a remnant of the Spirit. And what did that one do while he was seeking a godly offspring? Take heed then, to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth."

'For I hate separation/divorcement', says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'and him who covers his garment with wrong,' says the Lord of hosts.

'So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously.

' You have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet you say, 'How have we wearied Him?' In that you say, 'Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and He delights in them,' or, 'Where is the God of justice?' 'Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He shall come,' saith the Lord of hosts.'—Malachi 2:14-3:1

"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse."— Malachi 4:5-6

It is interesting to note that the very last command in the Old Testament has to do with restoring families. (Also in the beginning of the New Testament - Luke 1:17.)

America as a nation is obviously in a mess and under the curse. Many families are cursed and separated. Could it be that we have missed the mark when it comes to tearing apart our families? When we look at the Word of God, let us be careful to walk only in the full counsel of what God has revealed there. Acts 20:27: "For I did not hesitate to declare unto you the full counsel of God." ... Both actions and reaction; choices and consequences.



Final Consideration

To those who profess to be saints:

Do fellow Christians take each other to law ... to sue for divorcement? Brethren, in the name of Christ Jesus, that is as un-natural as "abortion!"

"What God hath joined together ... let no man take apart." "The two are become one flesh." (Mark 10:5-9)

"Behold, this is a great mystery ... the mystery of Christ Jesus and His church." (Eph. 5:32)

"Husbands—love your wives, EVEN AS CHRIST ALSO LOVED THE CHURCH, AND GAVE HIMSELF FOR IT." (Eph. 5:25)



IV Testimonials

1 A Husband's Testimony

Like many people today, I have travelled extensively within the world of professing Christianity. My mother was Catholic and my father simply had no interest in religion of any kind. I was raised Catholic and attended a Catholic school through the fourth grade. After my parents' divorce, when I was about 12 years old, my mother switched to the Episcopal Church for a few years and eventually stopped going altogether. In high school I lived with my father and stepmother who became increasingly involved in various fundamentalist movements, which revolved around several TV evangelists. For several years we lived next door to the prosperity gospel guru Kenneth Copeland. When I went off to college I attended the Episcopal Church but after getting married switched to the Southern Baptist church. Since that time I have been in and out of various other churches and even studied for one year at a Lutheran seminary.

God, or the concept of the Christian God, has always been hanging on the walls of my life. In Catholic school we were always being given little statues of God or Jesus or Mary. The nuns in their long black habits and veils always seemed like holy angels as they seemingly floated down the long, dark school halls. Later in childhood, after my parents were divorced, my mother, sisters and I were living in Austin, Texas. It was a very unhappy time. The divorce had been bitter. My father moved away to another state, and I had lost all touch with him. My mother was sinking into alcoholism. One night, feeling lost and abandoned, I got down on my knees and cried out to God. I had read in the Bible that God promised to be a father to the fatherless. So, I asked God if he would be my father--watching over me to guide, teach, correct and sometimes just to hold me. When I finished praying, I felt comforted and at peace. Looking back over the years I can now see that God heard my cry and has indeed been a father to me. Often I have ignored His advice, neglected His words and rejected His correction. Despite this, He has ever been faithful, rising early to continue calling me out of the darkness into His marvellous light.

As a general rule, it is wise to listen to your parents' advice. Ignoring their warnings and concerns, I married in college, and five years later, near the end of medical school, I was divorced. I met my second wife several years later in Detroit where I had moved to begin my residency training in pediatrics. My second wife, Ellen, had been raised in Pakistan where her parents were medical missionaries. Ellen was a quiet, humble woman with a true servant's heart. She was attending a local inner city church in Detroit, which was nominally Lutheran.

When I asked Ellen to be my wife she agreed, but over the ensuing weeks she became less sure of her decision. Ellen had been taught to read her Bible regularly as a child and that habit continued into her adult years. She was concerned because of Jesus' straightforward statements on divorce in the gospels. When the news of our engagement reached her family members her brother-in-law told her plainly that to marry me would be to commit adultery. I read and reread the verses in the gospels, but somehow I couldn't believe that there wasn't a way around them. After all, I loved Ellen and she loved me. Isn't that what a marriage is all about? We both wanted this marriage. We sought counsel with the pastor of Ellen's church who admitted it was a difficult issue but in the end God had called us to peace. If I was truly sorry for the divorce and repented of it in my heart, then God could and would forgive me for divorcing my first wife. There was no discussion at that time of reconciliation with my first wife.

In all our counsel there was no mention of the vows I had made and any duty I might still have because of those vows made in the sight of God.

Ellen was still a bit uneasy. The night before the wedding she went to her mother still unsure if it was right to marry me--a man who had divorced his wife. Her mother answered that if Ellen loved me and I loved her then it would be all right. So we were married the next day. All the concerns over divorce and remarriage were pushed into the back of a deep closet and forgotten. They did not, however, disappear.

After finishing my training, Ellen and I moved to Cedar Rapids, Iowa where I began private practice in pediatrics. We were attending the Catholic Church at that time. I performed as a cantor at mass (a cantor is someone who sings parts of the worship service and also leads the congregation in singing hymns) and officiated at several special functions held by the church. My medical practice was very lucrative. We lived in a nice house and had many nice things most of which were the result of my own acquisitiveness. I eventually joined a country club and became addicted to golf.

Now if you had asked me at this point if I was a Christian I would have said "yes" without hesitation. I would have acknowledged that there were some things in my life that needed some improvement, but without a doubt I was a Christian. I believed that Jesus died for my sins on the cross and that I would be saved because I believed in Him. But despite such a confession, I would know in my heart that something was very wrong. I was living in such a state of constant guilt. My pleasures were becoming more and more tainted with the taste of guilt and shame. At one point I was so tired of feeling guilty about leaving Ellen and the children to play golf that I made a deliberate decision not to care. Ellen and the girls would just have to accept that this was the way things were going to be. Everyone was responsible for his own happiness. If Ellen was unhappy with my playing golf, the problem was hers and not mine. She was making a deliberate decision to be unhappy, and if she wanted to, she could just as easily decide to be happy.

God forgive me. I am so filled with shame to remember those days. And in the midst of all this I would go off to mass on Sunday to lead the congregation in singing praises to Jesus and share in His body and blood. Oh my God, what an abomination and a stench I was in Your face.

The turning point came when Ellen became pregnant with our fourth child. She decided she wanted to have this baby at home rather than in the hospital. She had been introduced to a Christian midwife and had been given some reading material on home birth. This midwife and her husband had a ministry not just to pregnant women but also to the entire family. Through their publications, I was introduced to biblical teaching on the family. This teaching convicted my heart of all the sin in my life and the awesome responsibility I had towards my wife and children. The burden of my hypocrisy was like a huge weight crushing me to the ground. No longer could I pretend it was not there.

So in a matter of months, we divested ourselves of many unnecessary things that I had acquired for no other purpose than to satisfy my own desire for pleasure. My family became a priority. I began learning what my responsibilities were to the Lord Jesus. Ellen and I were both hungry for true Christian fellowship but everywhere we went we found different brands of hypocrisy and dead religious formalism.

After about a year of wandering we settled in Ellensburg, Washington, still searching for fellowship. Twelve months passed and we remained alone.

We continued with our family devotions but did not meet with any particular church. One day, we were at the local grocery store when a bearded man in plain navy blue clothes approached us. Having noticed Ellen's head covering he invited us to his church. We accepted the invitation and began attending regularly.

They were a very gracious and warm people despite their plain dress. Almost every weekend we were invited to someone's home for lunch after service. It was refreshing to attend a church where the women wore modest clothing and the children were in good order and well behaved. I began to make preliminary inquiries into membership and was told, graciously, that we were welcome to worship with them as often as we desired, but because we were divorced and remarried membership was not possible, since those living in such a situation were considered to be adulterers. Our children could become members upon their baptism but we could not. The issue was left there and everyone at the church continued to smile and greet us. Perhaps it was our own imagination, but increasingly we felt like outsiders with no way in. So after a while, we stopped attending and retreated back to our home and our children.

Ellen and I talked about the divorce and remarriage issue more often now but with no specific purpose. Since becoming convicted over the previous few years, I had begun reading the Bible more regularly. Whenever I came across the words of Jesus on divorce I felt uncomfortable. I would avoid those sections of God's word that said anything about marriage or divorce—but the uneasiness never completely left me. Whenever I picked up a Bible, I could feel those passages through the cover, and I began to pick up the Bible less and less.

About this time a friend of ours, who had been trying to start a home fellowship, finally convinced us to come and visit their worship meeting. We were a bit leery about the impact of our marriage situation on their group. I expressed my concerns to my friend, who was one of the leaders of the group, and was assured that although it was a difficult issue it did not prevent us from being a part of their fellowship. They called me "brother" and Ellen "sister." We prayed together, ate meals together, worshiped together and in all ways were part of the fellowship. But unfortunately this was a young fellowship with no mature leadership and without any unified doctrine on the matter of divorce and remarriage.

During our time with this group, a brother from another part of the state had agreed to disciple my friend and another man and to function as an elder for the fellowship until local elders could be developed or found. This brother, Brother E., offered to counsel me on the divorce and remarriage issue if I so desired. As I remember, the offer was made in a straightforward manner and with the admonition that it was a serious issue that needed to be dealt with. The decision, however, was mine. Brother E. presented the issue in such a matter of fact way that I didn't feel threatened or manipulated. At this point I was willing to investigate the divorce and remarriage issue even though my heart sensed where it might lead. My feeling at the time was, that no matter what Brother E. might say and no matter what Ellen and I might do, there would always be love between us. Our relationship with Brother E. and the saints in that fellowship began with love. They met us where we were at the time and loved us there. But most importantly, they were not willing to leave us there.

So with some trepidation on my part, Brother E. and I agreed to meet and discuss the issue.

For me it was a very difficult discussion. Brother E. began the discussion with the most important issue of all which was whether or not I was truly a disciple of Jesus Christ. When questioned, I had to admit that I did not understand even the most basic elements of true, biblical salvation. I had never truly repented biblically. I didn't even understand the meaning of repentance. My faith was just a sincere profession and was not a saving faith. Brother E. understood my spiritual condition and dealt with the issue of repentance and salvation first. Until that was taken care of, the issue of divorce and remarriage could not be effectively approached.

There was no grace, no power to overcome sin and to make the hard decisions that we are all called upon to make as followers of Jesus. Brother E. explained to me the way of God more accurately.

By the grace of God, I was born again, this time to a "Living Hope" and a truly transformed life. Oh that there was more discipleship in the Church, more precision and more correct understanding of "The Way, The Truth, and The Life." How many troubles and trials, how many losses could I have avoided if only somewhere among all those churches I attended as a young man there had been true biblical discipleship.

As a newborn Christian, I greatly desired to be pleasing to my Lord in all things. For the first time in my life I began to understand what sin is and how serious it is. My senses were awakened to the utter horror of sin's presence. It is here that I gained an apprehension of "the fear of God" and a righted view of His glory in righteousness. As scripture says, I hated even the garment stained by sin. I wanted to be clean and clear before my Lord, and I rejoiced that He had made a way for me and all mankind to be washed clean and set free. And as I thanked God for His forgiveness, I also understood that I could no longer continue in sin. Any and all areas in my life that were not in accordance with God's will must be plucked out, cut off and cast away.

The area of greatest concern was, of course, the issue of my divorce and remarriage. Now I could face Jesus' words in Matthew 5:31-32, 19:8-9, and Mark 10:10-12 without flinching, because for the first time in my life the grace of God was present. And what is the enabling grace of God but His power given to us to stand in the light and finally, effectively deal with sin—what He calls sin! Without God's enabling power we are helpless and unable to overcome sin in our lives.

Malachi 2:16 is absolutely clear: God "hates" divorce! He couldn't say it any plainer. What He likes and dislikes does not change because He does not change. God is not a man that He should change. In divorcing my first wife, I had done something that God hates. I would also point out that God provides no qualifier! God hates ALL divorce regardless of the precipitating circumstances. And not only does God hate divorce, but He continues to stand as a witness between me and the wife of my youth with whom I had dealt treacherously. (Malachi 2:14)

Jesus' words about divorce are also very plain. You must resist the desire to run from them. Divorce, except (as in Jesus' day) for sexual immorality while under covenant of betrothal (i.e. - Joseph and Mary), is not allowable. Remarriage after divorce is the sin and state of adultery. Now, if Jesus were just a man and not God incarnate, I might be able to limit His statement to a particular time or culture that is several thousand years distance from my own. But Jesus was not just a man and was in fact God incarnate. The 21st century is no surprise to Him. He was and is very aware of concepts such as cultural relativity, theological idealism and higher biblical criticism. But despite being very well informed in these "advanced" modes of thinking...

Jesus nowhere makes allowance for them.

Nowhere in scripture does God say that a particular truth is limited to a certain time or cultural context. Murder is wrong in all times; a lie is still a lie; biblical repentance is still a requirement of faith in Christ: “But unless you repent you shall likewise perish! (Luke 13:3,5) This remains true in all places and in all cultures. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.” (Hebrews 13:8) It is men that must change, not God. (Jn. 3:3)

At this point, I was now willing to accept that my divorce was wrong. And even if we take into consideration Jesus apparent allowance for divorce on the grounds of infidelity, there were absolutely no grounds for the divorce in my case. As far as I knew at the time there had been no sexual immorality. I divorced my wife because I was unhappy with our relationship and wanted out. The fact that at the time I was not born again provided no excuse! I was well aware of Jesus’ words about divorce. And even if I weren’t a Christian in any sense of the word, God’s law remains just as applicable. God’s law of gravity applies to everyone regardless of whether they know of it or accept it. Drop an atheist and a Christian off the tower of Pisa simultaneously and they will both hit the ground at the same time.

When I repented and believed, I repented of all my sins, and God was faithful to forgive me all my sins. The question at this point is: what does biblical repentance mean? (Especially in my particular situation as a divorced and remarried man?) The fact that God had forgiven me for the divorce was undeniable. There is no sin beyond God’s ability to forgive through the precious blood of His son. And it is equally true that there is absolutely nothing I could do to atone for any of my sin including the sin of divorce and adultery. But our relationship with God does not begin and end with repentance. Repentance and regeneration are the start of a new life. This new life that we live by faith in the Son of God has certain expectations. It makes certain demands upon us, not the least of which is that we will not continue to willfully live in sin. “And Jesus said to [the adulteress], neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more!” (John 8:11)

When I commit a crime against a friend and then go to that friend and ask his forgiveness I am doing two things. First, I am admitting that what I did was wrong and should not have been done. Secondly, I am asking that friend to forgive me and thereby restore our relationship as friends. If for example, I stole his shiny new sports car and later felt guilty about it, I would go to him and admit my wrong and beg his forgiveness. Because he is a generous man, he forgives me the wrong, for which I thank him profusely. We then shake hands, he invites me over for dinner next week, and I jump back in “his” shiny sports car and head home with a profound sense of relief. There is of course something very wrong with this story. This is not the picture of true biblical repentance. I did in fact feel guilty over my theft and was truly sorry that it had happened, but what I did with those feelings cannot be called repentance. There was no restoration of the stolen goods and without restoration there can be no true repentance. Therefore, the state of being a thief remained in effect.

I would like to emphasize here that if I return the stolen car to my friend I am not earning or meriting his forgiveness. He can choose to forgive me whether I return the car or not. Returning the car also does not free me from the penalty of auto theft. I am a thief whether I return the car willingly or whether I am arrested and the authorities return the car. My friend, of course, could choose not to press charges. The point here is that my restoration of the stolen car is the “visible demonstration” and logical outflow of my repentance. Whether my friend forgives me or not is a separate matter. Restitution, or reconciliation is the necessary fruit of true biblical repentance.

In Luke 3, John the Baptist warned the people to bring forth fruit worthy of repentance and not to trust in their position as Abraham's descendants or in some ritual baptism. He said, "And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." The people responded with the question "What shall we do then?" In other words, they were saying that if being Abraham's children and undergoing John's baptism didn't provide proof of their acceptance with God then how were they to know. John then goes on to recommend specific deeds that the people should perform.

The tax gatherers should gather no more than what they are directed and the soldiers should be content with their wages. Now some today would accuse John the Baptist of preaching a righteousness based on works (merit) and would quote Paul's well-known statement that we are saved by faith and not by works. But John is not saying here that these individuals would earn their forgiveness by their works. He was saying that if their repentance were real then there would be a visible, verifiable change in the conduct of their lives. And if those changes were not present then there was no true repentance. (i. e. - the obedience of righteous faith.)

Jesus echoes this point in Luke 13:6-9 where He admonishes the people to repent, then follows with this parable: "A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, 'Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?' But he answered and said to him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down.'"

Repentance is a tree that produces "Certain Fruit." And if there is no fruit then there is no repentance! If we want to know if we have truly repented of our sins we cannot point back to some words uttered one evening, or some feeling of sorrow we once experienced or some ritual bathing we participated in once upon a time. The obvious and undeniable evidence of true repentance is seen when we can point to a transformed life. We no longer say the things we used to say. We no longer do many of the things we used to do. The things that used to be most important and desirable in our lives are now so much dung. Our pagan acquaintances that knew us before, now no longer recognize us, and in fact suspect we have gone off the deep end.

Ellen and I now evaluated the problem of our marriage in the light of God's truth. We simply wanted to do what was right in God's eyes. It was clear to both of us that we were wrong to have married. But we had married, and now thirteen years had passed and six beautiful children had arrived. How were we to fulfill our responsibilities to Christ and His Body, to our children and to each other? Like the people whom John the Baptist had just baptized we cried out to the Lord, "Oh Lord, what must we do?" There was no question that God had forgiven us the sin of adultery—He had. But now that we were forgiven, we knew there were some other steps that needed to be taken.

We had several options before us. We could simply continue on with our lives, living as husband and wife, rearing our children as best we could and attending but not able to participate fully as members in the body of Christ. But to make this choice was to continue to live in a state of adultery. We would continue to be "in sin." Sin is not just an event; it is a condition of being. Obviously, to remain in a state of sin would be incompatible with true repentance. Our repentance would be nothing more than a feeling of sorrow we had at some point for what we had done. The other option was to restore what could be restored. We could not unmake thirteen years of married life, but we could return the marriage bed.

To continue in physical intimacy would be to continue consummating what God considers an adulterous relationship.

For thirteen years, Ellen and I had enjoyed the physical privileges that never should have been ours to use. For thirteen years we had been driving a stolen vehicle! It was time to return it.

But perhaps the most difficult aspect of our relationship that had to be let go involved how we felt towards each other in the secret place of our hearts. I could not continue to look upon Ellen with the fond eyes of a husband. She was no longer under my authority as her husband.

There was an emotional bond that had to be broken; otherwise, whatever changes we made outwardly would simply be hypocrisy.

God sees the heart, but the heart is deceitful above all else and it is the favorite hiding place for men's sins. Ellen and I had to let go of each other, both physically and emotionally.

We now live celibately in separate households. Our relationship now is that of a brother and sister in the Lord. Ellen now lives with a Christian family, which provides accountability for the Body of Christ and us, and spends days mothering and home schooling the children. We continue to fulfill our responsibilities to our children—in fathering, mothering, encouraging, and nurturing, in extra-curricular activities and in separate groups, etc. We have been greatly encouraged and comforted to see the grace of God moving in their lives as they witness the seriousness of sin and its consequences along with the faithfulness and mercy of God. They understand the sanctity and holiness of marriage. They know that it is possible to live a holy life and to live it with joy and hope in believing.

Many people look upon our relationship as broken and joyless. They express a sentimental view of human love and lift it up and make an idol of it. They cannot conceive how anyone could be truly happy giving up such a relationship. When they say such things they only reveal that they do not know Christ. True joy, true fulfillment, true happiness is found in one place and only one place—in Christ. For He is our Salvation.

The truth is that our relationship was broken the day we married. A twisted and warped thing came into being which God never intended. He could not love it or have fellowship with it. Only now, after thirteen years of living in sin, by the grace of God we are whole ... no longer “in” the state of adultery. Now we can have that fellowship with God that we could not before. Now God's grace in Jesus Christ can flow into our lives and our children's lives like it never could before and that is The Good News.

We do not look behind us and pine away for the past. Old “things” are passed away. Behold! All things are made new! (2 Cor. 5:17) “And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return.” (Hebrews 11:15) But our focus is forward and upward to that city whose builder and maker is The Lord. Instead of relationship with each other as the focus, we now concentrate on our relationship with Christ. As Paul said in Philippians, “... but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind ...”

“For I hate divorce,” says the LORD, the God of Israel.”



2 A Wife's Testimony

Dean and I were married in 1987. It was his second marriage (after a divorce) and my first.

I was raised in a God-fearing home. I was exposed to the Scriptures from an early age. Dean, too, had read the Scriptures. We were aware of Christ's words about divorce. We knew the prophet Mala-chi's declaration that God hates divorce. But we did not listen with our hearts. We did not heed the counsels of the Holy Spirit.

We sought the counsels of men--the pastor of the local church, our families, friends. Their words were comfortable. "God forgives." "God has forgiven Dean, Ellen, can you not do the same and go on with life?" "Make a new start, forget what is behind." One lone voice spoke a different word. My sister and her husband wrote to us recalling the words of Jesus, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery" against her. They advised us not to marry. We spurned their counsel. We got married.

Through the years we wandered from church to church. We were looking for the Truth. Blinded by our own sin of adultery, we could not see. The churches that accepted us, we rejected. We knew they taught less than a full gospel. The churches which spoke to us of our marriage as sin, we rejected. We heard the law without love and took offense at the presentation of it.

My heart longed for communion and fellowship. Alienation from God and my fellow man was all I found. I felt that my very soul was branded with the scarlet letter "A"--adulteress/unclean. I was without hope, though I claimed that I was a Christian. Only God could wash me clean. But I would not heed His call to "repent and follow Me."

Years passed. Children multiplied. We had five children. How could we train them in the fear and admonition of the Lord when we did not fear God and obey His commands? "Hypocrite! Hypocrite!" echoed in my heart and mind as I tried to teach them. The best that I had to offer was a form of godliness without power. That was inadequate both for myself and for the little ones.

Then we met a group of believers who spoke the truth in love. From the Scriptures they showed us that we were living a lie. We called ourselves Christians. But we did not follow Christ's call to repent from our sin of adultery and follow Him, with ALL of our heart, ALL of our soul, ALL of our strength.

I saw that we had come to a decision point. We could choose to repent from adultery and be reconciled with the Lord and His Body or we could choose to remain married, enjoying all the privileges of our marriage and be for ever responsible before God for that choice.

It was a choice between life and death. In order to live, I had to die. Our marriage, as we knew it, had to die.

It seemed overwhelming—until I lifted the eyes of my heart to Jesus. He died, the perfect Lamb of God, to take away the sins of the world. He provided the atonement required to reconcile this sinner to the Father. Is anything too much to ask of me in light of that?! I had made idols of our marriage, our children, my reputation, for they were more important to me than a whole, sold out obedience to the Lord of the Universe. They had to be cast down. Jesus Christ had to be LORD of my life. It was not enough that He be part of my life. I had to become a Christian—all of Christ, none of me.

I had to be born again. All these years I had thought I was a Christian. There was no power, no peace, no fruit of the Holy Spirit in my life. I had known about Jesus Christ but had not surrendered my will. Ellen Smith had never died. Sin still reigned. I had to die in order that Christ could live and be formed in me as I walk in obedience to His commands.

Oh, the joy we have found in obedience! Truly His yoke is easy and His burden is light. On this side of the cross I cannot imagine living other-where. Here I see, know, and daily experience the sufficiency of Christ. Indeed, the Lord is my strength and my song and He has become my Salvation.

When Dean and I realized our need for true, Biblical salvation—our need to be saved from a sinful past, to live by God's grace in obedience to Christ who is our hope of glory—we also realized that we needed to be vitally connected to a local fellowship. It is only within the context of the Body of Christ that we can continue to walk in the obedience of faith—encouraged and encouraging one another in our Lord, held accountable to one another, giving and receiving from one another as from our Lord. Here there is grace—the power to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age while we wait for the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ who gave Himself to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for Himself a people that are His very own, eager to do what is good.

The practical working out of the decision to repent of our adulterous marriage began with confession. We asked forgiveness of those whose counsel we spurned, starting with God, our parents, one another . . . but we had to go beyond that. We had to turn away from the sin. We had to cease to enjoy the pleasures and privileges of our marriage. We have covenanted to remain celibate, no longer living as man and wife. We have established two separate households.

Child number six was conceived in the interval between hearing the truth and acting upon it. We now have six children. Our children are our heritage from the Lord. They are our joint responsibility. They need both a father and a mother. Dean and I will need to work together to train them in the fear and admonition of the Lord.

The children can see in the life of our family that God is to be feared. His commands must be obeyed. Disobedience has consequences. At the same time obedience brings peace and joy.





... And who gets hurt the most?

Appendix 1

Other APM positional papers on the same subject are available upon request

Rom. 7:2-3 - Bound, 'til death do us part

1 Cor. 7:27, 39 - Bound as long as she lives

Rom. 1:31 - Covenant Breakers

2 Tim. 3:3 - Oath-breakers

Matt. 19:6 - They are no longer two but one flesh! What God has joined together, let no man take apart.

Prov. 5:18 - Rejoice with the wife of your youth.

Matt. 5:31-32, Matt. 19:9

- Fornication / before marriage

- Adultery / after marriage

Mark 10:2-12

"And the Pharisees came to Him, and asked Him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife? tempting Him. And He answered and said unto them, What did Moses command you? And they said, Moses suffered to write a bill of divorcement, and to put her away. And Jesus answered and said unto them, *For the hardness of your heart* he wrote you this precept. But from the beginning of the creation God made them male and female. For *this* cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife; and they two shall be *one flesh*: .so then they are no more two, but *one flesh*. What therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder. And in the house His disciples asked Him again of the same matter. And He saith unto them, *Whosoever* shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her. And if a woman shall put away her husband, and *be married to another*, she committeth adultery."

Luke 16:18

The whole book of Hosea ... 3:1-3; 4:6-12

- Hosea never divorced his estranged wife...

- He bought her back in old age

Ezekiel 16:32-38; 16:45-50; 16:59

- Breaking the Covenant

Malachi 2:10

- 2:13-16 - Wife of your youth

- 3:6 - I, the Lord ... I do not change.

- 2:16 - I, the Lord ... I hate divorce!

Appendix 2

For those who require in depth investigation:

We stand on the premise that the Bible is the first and last word on all subjects, including marriage, divorce and remarriage.

We maintain that for followers of Christ the Word of God is our only authority ... in Jesus name ... for *“In Christ Jesus are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”* Col. 2:3-4

As the Bible is our only authoritative reference work and commentary, we also offer other resources, merely as helps to better understand biblical concepts, words, cultural settings, customs and manner.

Still other works listed here may come at the ‘biblical position’ much differently than the positional treatment we have offered here.

Therefore, we present this list to you with the understanding that we are all under the apostolic mandate that requires our “Berean discernment” to be functional, faithful, and firm ... to the end. (Acts 17:11; 1 Thess. 5:20-22; Rom. 12:9-10)

“... Let every man be fully persuaded in His own mind ...” for only you shall give an account one day for every word that comes out of your mouth and life. (Eccl. 11:9-10, 12:12)



Appendix 3

Bible Passages Related To Marriage, Adultery, Divorce, & Remarriage

Old Testament Passages:

Genesis 1: 27, 28
Genesis 2: 24
Genesis 20
Exodus 20: 14-17
Leviticus 20: 10
Deuteronomy 5: 18-21
Deuteronomy 24: 1-4
II Samuel 11 and 12
Ezra 9 and 10
Job 31: 1, 9-12
Proverbs 5, 6 and 7
Proverbs 22: 14
Proverbs 28: 13
Jeremiah 7:9, 10
Hosea 4: 1, 2
Malachi 2: 10-17
Malachi 3: 5

New Testament Passages:

Matthew 1: 18-20
Matthew 5:27-32
Matthew 14:1-12
Matthew 19: 1-12
Mark 6:14-29
Mark 10: 1-12
Luke 16:18
John 4: 16-18
John 8: 1-11
Romans 7:2, 3
I Corinthians 5: 9-13
I Corinthians 6:9-11
I Corinthians 7
Galatians 5: 19-21
Ephesians 4: 17-19
Ephesians 5:5-13
I Thessalonians 4:3-8
Hebrews 13:4
Jude 4
Revelation 2:20-23
Revelation 21: 8
Revelation 22: 15

Appendix 4

Responses to questions:

1. *What about the "exception clause" (Mt. 5:32).* Jesus here clarifies in which situation a man is causing his wife to become an adulteress. He does not give permission for remarriage; in fact, he forbids remarriage even to the adulterous woman. In Mt. 19:9, a very good case can be made for the position that divorce in certain limited cases is permitted but not remarriage; ie. that the exception clause modifies only the first part of the verse, not the last part. This position allows for separation in certain limited cases, such as homosexuality and prostitution without giving permission for remarriage. This position best harmonizes with other Bible passages on the topic and is the position of the Early Church for the first five centuries (See: Jesus and Divorce by Heth and Wenham, p. 22). This position also makes the best sense of the disciples' expression of surprise (Mat. 19:10) about the strictness of Jesus' teaching against divorce and remarriage in contrast to the liberal position of the Jewish Rabbi Hillel for "any and every cause" and the conservative position of Rabbi Shammai permitting remarriage in the case of infidelity.

2. *What about 1 Cor. 7:15.* A believing man or woman is not bound..." Bound to what? In observing the context, it seems the best understanding is to say: "He/she is not bound to fulfill his/her marital rights if the unbelieving spouse voluntarily leaves. He/she is not bound to force the unbeliever to stay." To say that this "not bound" passage means that one may divorce and remarry causes Paul to contradict himself in what he says in vs. 10, 11 (by God's direct command) and v. 39.

3. *Doesn't Paul say that "each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to when God called him" and "to remain in the situation which he was in when God called him"?* (1 Cor. 7:17,20,24) Yes, but God does not call people into a state of adultery. They should remain only in situations that are not sinful, as per the examples given: circumcision, being a slave. To apply this to a remarriage situation requires one to also say that a person who is single or a widow(er) when he accepts Christ must always remain that way.

4. *Didn't Paul say that if you are loosed from a wife you may marry without sinning?* Actually, what he said is "Are you loosed from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned: and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned..." (1 Cor. 7:27,28 NKJV). He did not say "if you remarry, you have not sinned." To marry if one's spouse has died is not sin, but to use this passage to justify remarriage while the first partner is living causes Paul to contradict himself in this same chapter (vs. 10,11,39) and in his teaching in Romans 7:2,3, to contradict the teaching of Jesus (Mk. 10:11,12; Lk. 16:18) and also the understanding and practice of the Early Church. One must ask the question: how may a person properly be "loosed from a wife" in order to marry again? The Scriptural answer is: the death of the partner (1 Cor. 7:39; Rom. 7:2,3). Furthermore, in the context of "loosing", Paul is not speaking about divorcees, but about virgins and widows (7:25-40).

5. *Doesn't God forgive? Doesn't his mercy cover our sins?* God's mercy becomes ours when we confess and abandon our sins (Prov.28:13). Otherwise we are sinning deliberately, and as long as one remains in that state there is no forgiveness (Heb.10:26-31). Note also Titus 2:11-14: The grace of God teaches us to say "no" to ungodliness and worldly passions-not continue on in them. See also 1 Jn. 3:7-10. If adultery was sin in the beginning when first committed, common sense indicates it continues to be sin when it continues to be committed. That is the way we view all other sins. Why would it be different with adultery?

6. *What if I divorced my spouse before I was a (committed) believer in Christ? Doesn't that allow me to remarry (or to stay with my present spouse)?* We need to remember that marriage was not first of all a Christian institution and is valid whether one marries as a Christian or not. Adultery is not a sin that only Christians can commit. If marriages were valid only for Christians, then we would have to tell all unbelievers that their marriages are worthless and that in God's sight they are not married. this approach would also conflict with the passages in Genesis 20 and Matthew 14 where Abimelech and Herod, as unbelievers, were clearly condemned by God in what they had done.

Appendix 5

A Pastoral Response To Divorced And Remarried Persons

How shall we respond when divorced and remarried persons come to us and our churches? What advice do we have for them? This is certainly one of the most difficult issues we face in pastoral work, made all the more so by the fact that Christian leaders and churches differ so deeply on this matter. Here are some suggestions to consider:

1. First of all, make sure you know what you believe and why. Read and meditate on relevant Scripture passages. Think carefully through the implications of adultery as an act or an ongoing state of sin. To counsel divorced and remarried persons when you yourself are uncertain of Scriptural teaching will neither be helpful for you nor for the persons involved.
2. Prayerfully go as soon as possible to the person(s) after you discover there may be a divorce and remarriage involved, but do not prejudge the situation until you hear from the person himself. There are many possible variations and we should not quickly pass judgment until we have all the facts. Don't postpone your inquiry too long. The longer you wait, the more you weaken your case and concern. If you wait too long, the person can say, "If you really believed that I am living in a state of adultery, why didn't you come sooner?" By waiting so long, your friendship overtures can be viewed as being manipulative, hypocritical, and self-serving. When you go, ask for the fullness of the Holy Spirit, pray for His direction and courage. Then expect Him to work through you and for you.
3. Before you go, prepare yourself spiritually and emotionally to meet with the person/couple. The session could be a very emotional one. The person/couple may respond with anger, with grief, with denial of guilt, with countercharges, or with a desire to study God's Word on the topic, with an acceptance of wrong-doing, and a desire to get out of the adulterous situation. We are not responsible for their reaction. We are responsible to lovingly speak the truth, to respond in a Christ-like manner and to walk alongside those person(s) who desire help in doing the will of God. We are also responsible to appropriately maintain confidentiality in the matter and to avoid sharing shameful details of immoral behavior (Eph.4:12; 5:3). We should try to treat the person(s) as we would like to be treated if we were the person being confronted.
4. Do not begin your visit with lecturing or condemning. Rather, begin by asking like this: "I have heard that you are divorced and remarried. Is this true?" Then listen to their explanation respectfully. While listening carefully to them, listen also to the Holy Spirit within you for His indication about how you will continue.
5. You may then ask something like this: "Have you thought about how this fits with what the Bible says, for example, in Luke 16:18?" Ask them to read it from the Bible and to explain their point of view.
6. You may ask if they would be open to reading what the Bible has to say on the subject and give them a list of relevant Scripture references. (See Appendix 3.)

7. They may have questions and want to discuss various Bible verses.

This is a great opportunity. They may also be interested in articles, booklets and books on the subjects. Choose carefully those you will recommend you should have read them first yourself. I prefer having them read the Bible passages first before they get into other resources. You may want to recommend a resource for them. Ask if you may discuss it with them when they finish.

8. While they are reading the Bible/other resources, pray for them regularly. Pray for God to open their eyes, to sensitize their consciences, to protect them from deception and from persons who would confuse them or justify them in their sin. It is helpful to find one or two other persons with whom you can agree in united prayer for this couple. However, choose carefully prayer partners who will guard confidentiality and who are persons of prayer. You may even want to consider periods of fasting along with your prayer. Remarriage tangles are not easily resolved.

9. If you are asked by the person(s) involved what you think they should do, be wise as a serpent, harmless as a dove and courageous as John the Baptist. This is a very sensitive moment indeed, particularly in view of our society with its love of lawsuits, including suits against clergy for malpractice in counseling. You may want to answer something like the following: "You ask God what He wants you to do. According to what I have read in the Bible, if I were in that situation. I feel I would need to..."

10. When the person asks you, "What do you think about...?", it is wise as much as possible to reply with "The Bible says..."

11. As we relate with the person(s), we need to remember to be kind and firm. We reflect both the holiness and the love of God. "Dealing redemptively" with the person includes "speaking the truth in love". It is not redemptive to withhold or soft-pedal the truth. We must be sympathetic as the person wrestles with the implications of his sin and its consequences. We must also be firm and not dilute the truth of God's Word. This is not an easy balance to achieve. Some of us are more inclined to be merciful and will struggle to stand firm. Others of us are more prophetic and will need to ask God to make us care deeply for the person.

12. We will also need to be very patient with the person/couple. It will doubtless be a process, longer than we would wish, and will be a struggle for them as they work through the issue. Some will angrily walk away from us, leaving us to deal with our pain as well. This is the way of the cross. Others will struggle, question, doubt, question again. In it all, we need to be loving and firm. God will save and deliver some as we walk faithfully with Him proclaiming the truth in love.

13. A most difficult aspect of this issue is how to relate with born-again people who come to us in a divorced and remarried state. Perhaps we will relate differently with those who divorced and remarried before becoming believers and with those who did so, as born-again believers, against better knowledge. In the case of the latter, surely 1 Cor. 5:11 would apply: "...you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral... With such a man do not even eat."

" It seems rather clear that this "eating" is not restricted to the Lord's Supper.

With those persons who have come to Christ for salvation and then discover the sinfulness of their remarriage relationship, it seems Christ-like to exercise patience with them as they wrestle with and decide what their response will be to this aspect of genuine repentance. We will need to depend much upon the Holy Spirit to guide us about when and how to broach the subject, and how long we can relate with them as new brothers and sisters in Christ while they struggle with the claims of Christ in this area of their lives.



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