

DIVORCE & REMARRIAGE

a biblical view

INTRODUCTION

In our day of incredible social change and moral confusion, clear biblical thinking is needed on this subject of divorce and remarriage. Marriage relationships are breaking down at an alarming rate and those affected, after the sadness of divorce, are seeking 'a fresh start' in another union. It is not only outside of the church that this is happening. Tragically, divorce and remarriage is becoming almost common place within 'the household of God', which the apostle Paul declared to be:

"The church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth."

1 Timothy 3:15

The church is that community which is called to uphold the truth in the world, a calling that, no doubt, includes an upholding of the true nature of marriage. Such a responsibility, of course, can only be fulfilled where there is a clear understanding of the mind of the Scriptures.

The purpose of this brief study then, is to gain a biblical perspective of at least some of the issues relating to the question of divorce and remarriage. Hopefully, in the end, the reader will be left with a simple and integrated understanding of the relevant scriptural passages, and so be able to respond truly to the call of God in this area.

Although the approach here is mostly of a 'nuts'n'bolts', exegetical nature, the paper is offered as an expression of conviction born of warm, pastoral concern.

Section One

THE STARTING POINT

Because of the pain and heartache involved in any marital collapse, the attitude with which we approach this subject should certainly be one of compassion and sensitivity. We would not just want to be *right*, but seek to know the way of true hope and healing for those in such situations. Of course, any valid expression of compassion must go hand in hand with a desire to know the mind and will of God. Only upon this basis can authentic ministry be offered in the Lord's name.

We must come to this question then, with *a full-hearted desire for the truth*. Any sincere believer, we assume, would have such a desire. However, unfortunately—and perhaps understandably—when it comes to this particular subject it is often not the case. All kinds of personal agendas can affect the way this matter is approached. It is very true that our thinking is shaped by what our passions demand.

Maybe the following statements from Psalm 119 best express this starting point of *full-hearted desire for the truth*:

"Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in Your law."

"Your statutes are my delight; they are my counsellors."

"I run in the path of Your commands, for You have set my heart free."

"Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path. I have taken an oath and confirmed it, that I will follow Your righteous laws."

"Your statutes are my joy forever; they are the joy of my heart."

"Your statutes are wonderful; therefore I obey them. The unfolding of Your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple."

"Streams of tears flow from my eyes, for Your law is not obeyed."

"Trouble and distress have come upon me, but Your commands are my delight."

verses 18, 24, 32, 105, 106, 129, 130, 136, 143

Section Two

THE NATURE OF MARRIAGE

In looking at the nature of marriage there is probably no better place to start than with Paul's grand pastoral and theological statement in Ephesians chapter 5. Quoting from Genesis 2:24, he says:

"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."

He then continues in the next verse:

"This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church."

Paul speaks here of a *profound mystery*. Biblically, a mystery is something that has long been hidden but is now openly revealed to the people of God. In this passage, the apostle is declaring that the mystery of the true nature of marriage is now opened up for us in the revelation of the relationship between Christ and the church. The Marriage of Christ and His bride is not a reflection of human or 'creational' marriage. It is, in fact, the other way round. God had planned the union of His Son and His elect long before the first union of a man and a woman.

From the beginning, marriage was intended to be a prophetic sign pointing forward to the *true Marriage* of Christ and the church. The Scriptures portray the great Wedding Feast to come as the goal of all history!

According to Ephesians 5, then, marriage is:

a one-flesh union between a man and a woman, designed to reflect the union of Christ and His church.

In the light of this we need to ask one of the most pertinent questions in relation to the issue before us: "Would Christ ever divorce His bride and be joined to another?" The answer is, of course, that such a thing would be unthinkable!

We must view our Lord's teaching in this area in the light of His desire for union with His precious spouse. He had longed to receive her as His own from before the creation of the world. It was to be His Father's ultimate gift to Him! When He spoke, it was as the True Bridegroom—with holy passion.

A heartfelt understanding of the 'profound mystery' would, I believe, actually make the rest of this study quite irrelevant. The exercise of working through textual details would be superseded by a joyous preoccupation with the nature of marriage itself. The emphasis would shift from what *can* or *cannot* be to what *is so* in terms of the 'true Marriage'. Human-centred agendas would give way to a holy dread of any action that might minimize the progress of God's truth in His world.

a distinction between marriage and fornication

Before moving on to the next section there is one thing which needs to be established, especially in our day of casual and, increasingly, long-term sexual relationships outside of marriage. We must make a distinction between marriage and *fornication*—that is, sexual impurity. What has to be understood is that although marriage is, indeed, consummated by sexual union, sexual union, itself, does not amount to marriage.

Sexual intimacy within marriage is a wonderful sign of the 'one-flesh union' God has created between a husband and his wife. Such intimacy outside of marriage, however, is an illicit use of the sign—a union devoid of the reality it points to. It is merely fornication.

In 1 Corinthians 6:16 Paul says,

“Do you not know that he who is joined to a harlot is one body with her? For ‘the two’, He says, ‘shall become one flesh’.”

The apostle here is making a very powerful statement. There were obviously some in Corinth who felt that to have sexual union with a prostitute was not a very serious matter. Paul, however, declares that such action, in fact, makes the fornicator to be *one body* with the woman. He illustrates the reality of this 'one body' union by comparing it to the 'one-flesh' union of marriage, which it is pathetically imitating. To be made one body with a prostitute is by no means equivalent to marriage; but it is, nevertheless, a *union*, with disastrous spiritual consequences. Believers who become one with another in this way actually 'sin against their own body'—which is a temple of the Holy Spirit (6:18–19). Imitation of marriage through fornication is, indeed, a serious matter. It, in fact, brings deep personal defilement. Fornication and marriage are as different as night and day.

Every culture has a lawfully recognized expression of entrance into marriage, whereby a man and a woman come into a binding covenant relationship with one another. Whenever this occurs God, Himself, joins that couple in marriage, making them to be 'one flesh'—now, uniquely united in His sight. Anything less than this will leave two such people outside the pale of the sacred institution the Creator has ordained. Something is established in the act of marriage that does not occur apart from it.

It is extremely important to maintain this distinction between marriage and fornication. Failure to do so will certainly not help our thinking in regard to the matter before us.

Section Three

THE CLEAR STATEMENT OF SCRIPTURE

In this section, we are going to look at those passages that are completely unambiguous and can be taken entirely at face value. These will combine to make a unanimous biblical affirmation in regard to our subject. What they declare may be called 'the clear statement of Scripture'. The affirmation is this:

Marriage is a one-flesh union between a man and a woman that can be dissolved only by death; and therefore, divorce followed by remarriage (while one's partner is still alive) is an act of adultery.

As we begin, the quoting of Malachi 2:13–16 would be most appropriate. Although there *is* some debate about the precise meaning of this particular passage, it, nevertheless, has obvious relevance to our subject:

"You flood the Lord's altar with tears. You weep and wail because He no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, 'Why?' It is because the Lord is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit they are His. And why one? Because He was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. ... 'I hate divorce,' says the Lord God."

Now to the other passages.

In Luke 16:18, in the context of accusing the religious Pharisees of doing what is detestable in God's sight, Jesus said:

"Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery."

Again, this time answering a question put by His disciples after a confrontation with the Pharisees, Jesus said in Mark 10:11–12:

"Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery."

Next we turn to the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 7:2–3, as he illustrates the relationship of the law to the gospel. Here he is plainly drawing from the Lord's own teaching above:

"By law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man."

It is instructive to note that the word translated 'bound' in verse 2 of Romans 7 is, in the original Greek of the New Testament, written in the perfect tense and the passive mood—the perfect tense indicating that it is something which has been accomplished in the past and continues to be effective in the present; the passive mood meaning that someone apart from the woman herself has effected the bonding. This *someone* is, of course, the Creator. *He* has bound her to her husband with a bond that may be dissolved only by death.

Now we come to 1 Corinthians 7:10–11. Again the words of the Apostle Paul:

"To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife."

Notice that here Paul is once more simply referring to the teaching of Jesus. From this he determines that a wife must not even *separate* from her husband. For those who do separate he adds the strict proviso of remaining unmarried if reconciliation does not take place. Here, we have a direct apostolic, pastoral application of what Jesus taught in the Gospels.

Finally, in verse 39 of the same chapter, he says:

"A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord."

I think we would have to agree, from these passages, that the general statement of Scripture is very clear indeed.

"But", it may be said, "What about the 'exception' in Matthew chapters 5 & 19?" We will come to this matter shortly. Before we do, however, there is an important passage to look at in the Old Testament.

Section Four

MOSES' LAW ON DIVORCE

At this point it is appropriate to examine Deuteronomy 24:1–4. Here we have a statement that provides indispensable background for a right understanding of Matthew 19. Moses says:

"If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be

detestable in the eyes of the Lord. Do not bring sin upon the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance."

Notice that here Moses was not *commanding* God's people to write certificates of divorce and give them to their partners if they did not measure up! He says:

"If a man marries a woman ... and he writes her a certificate of divorce."

The fact is that the people of the world in that day were divorcing and remarrying as a matter of course. If a wife 'burned the toast' one morning, her husband would be likely to put her away on the spot! That's how things were—and unfortunately, the men of Israel were reflecting this same kind of behaviour.

It was not the Lord's purpose at this stage to legislate against divorce and remarriage, as such. But it *was* His purpose to reveal something of the nature of such action and, at least, to restrict its abuses.

This passage is, actually, making a very significant statement about the nature of divorce and remarriage. The instruction in verse 4 clearly says that because the woman has been married to another while her husband is still alive, she is unable to return to that original husband because she has, in fact, '*been defiled*'. The absolute sanctity of the marriage union, expressed in Genesis 2:24, is upheld.

Section Five

THE 'EXCEPTION' IN MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

Now to those two controversial verses: Matthew 5:32 and 19:9. In these statements many have found what they believe to be an exception to the rule of there being no remarriage after divorce while one's partner is still alive.

It must be said that this emphasis has only been in vogue since the 1500s. It was made popular by Erasmus who began a tradition of approaching these two verses in this way. Because of his influence we have today what is known as the 'evangelical consensus'. That is, a view held in common by many who believe the Bible to be God's word, who see that Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 provide an exception to the otherwise straight-forward teaching of the New Testament on divorce and remarriage. Those who hold this view affirm the clear statements that prohibit remarriage while one's partner is still alive, but hasten to say that such a prohibition does not apply where adultery has occurred. Adultery, they believe—according to Matthew 5 and 19—dissolves the marriage bond and frees the 'innocent party' to remarry. The obvious question to be asked is whether an examination of the two scriptures before us upholds such a view. I do not believe it does.

Here, then, are the two statements:

"Anyone who divorces his wife, except for [literally, 'apart from a matter of'] fornication, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."

Matthew 5:32

"Anyone who divorces his wife, except for [literally, 'not for'] fornication, and marries another woman commits adultery."

Matthew 19:9

What needs to be clarified in this section, are the reasons why Matthew twice provides 'an exception' in his account, whereas Mark and Luke don't in theirs.

In the two verses under consideration, it is significant to note from the outset that the exceptions are, in fact, worded quite differently: 5:32 is, 'apart from a matter of', and 19:9, 'not for'. This indicates that they are not merely a repetition of the same thought.

Matthew 5:32

In Matthew 5:27–32 Jesus is speaking of ways that the seventh commandment is violated. That is, the command to not commit adultery. In verses 27–30 He shows that the commandment is violated when a man looks upon a woman with lustful desire; and in verses 31 & 32, that it is also violated when a man divorces his wife, *causing* her to commit adultery by remarrying while her partner is still alive.

In Matthew 5:32, our Lord is simply saying: "If you divorce your wife you cause her to commit adultery when she marries another; that is, unless you divorced her because of fornication. In that case, you do not *cause* her to become an adulteress because she already *is* one." He is not speaking at all about permission to remarry.

The teaching here is that, in this instance, three parties are guilty of violating the seventh commandment. The man himself is guilty because he has caused a non-adulterous wife to be open to an adulterous remarriage by divorcing her. The woman is guilty because she has entered into a union with another while her husband is still alive. And the one who marries the divorced woman is guilty also, because he too commits adultery. All of this affirms the indissoluble nature of marriage.

It is significant to note here that Jesus' words, 'causes her to become an adulteress', were more than likely suggested to Him by the words, 'after she has been defiled', describing the remarried woman in Deuteronomy 24:4. Everything Jesus said about divorce and remarriage related back to both Genesis 2:24 and Deuteronomy 24. His statements were, in reality, expositions of these passages.

Matthew 19:9

The context of Matthew 19 is one in which Jesus is answering a loaded question in relation to a current, and highly controversial, debate on the meaning of Deuteronomy 24:1.

We will take this passage section by section starting from verse 3:

"Some Pharisees came to Him to test Him. They asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?' "

We will remember that in Deuteronomy 24:1 Moses spoke of the man who writes his wife a certificate of divorce because he finds '*something indecent*' or '*displeasing*' about her. It was these words that were at the centre of the debate among different groups within the party of the Pharisees.

Rabbi Shammai took a conservative view and taught that *something indecent* referred to adultery. For him this was the only grounds for divorce and, in line with our present Erasmian view, he saw that if this occurred the man would be free to remarry. Rabbi Hillel however, had a more liberal view of the matter, teaching that *something indecent* could be spoiling the evening meal, or even talking too loud! But to top it all, Rabbi Akiba thought it could even apply to the situation where a man found a woman who was prettier than his wife, at which point she would become 'indecent'!!

And so the Pharisees here, in asking about divorce for 'any and every reason', were trying to get Him to side with one position or another. But, as we will see, Jesus did not give legitimacy to any of these views.

Verse 4:

"Haven't you read," He replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female', and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

The Pharisees were asking, "On what basis is divorce justified?" Jesus, of course, immediately referred back to Genesis 2:24. In His answer, the Great Bridegroom Himself was, in effect, saying, "How can you even ask the question!"

We can imagine the passion with which He spoke as He said:

"What God has joined together, let man not separate."

Astonished by His reply, they began to press their case.

Verses 7 & 8:

"'Why then,' they asked, 'did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?' Jesus replied, 'Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because of your hardness of heart. But it was not this way from the beginning.'"

Notice what the Pharisees had done to the sense of Deuteronomy 24:1. They had changed Moses' tolerance of a particular situation into a statement of command. But Jesus quickly corrected their wrong emphasis by replying that Moses in no way *commanded* divorce, he merely *permitted* it at that time because of the hardness of their hearts.

At this point, in verse 9, Jesus makes the declaration already referred to:

"I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for fornication, and marries another woman commits adultery."

What, then, is the meaning of the 'exception' in this verse? Is it providing permission to remarry on the basis of a partner's unfaithfulness? The answer must be, 'No'—at least, because of the context in which the statement is made. If Jesus were saying that a marriage partner's unfaithfulness provided permission to remarry, He would merely be agreeing with the 'conservative' view of Rabbi Shammai. This would make nonsense of the whole encounter.

Furthermore, we must understand why it was that Matthew inserted the exception in this passage, rather than just give the plain teaching on divorce and remarriage recorded by Mark and Luke. The reason appears to be that he did so in the light of his inclusion of Joseph's intention to divorce Mary in chapter one:

"Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly."

Matthew 1:18–19

The background to this intended divorce was the uniquely Jewish situation, in which divorce was the only way that a betrothal could be dissolved. This, of course, is a different matter entirely to divorce after a marriage union has been established.

And so, in 19:9, it would appear that Matthew inserted the 'not for fornication' exception in order to avoid confusion among his readers—by distinguishing between Joseph's legitimately intended pre-marital divorce already recorded, and the illegitimate post-marital situation presently being discussed.

The following paraphrase then, communicates the meaning of the statement:

"I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, [except for sexual immorality during a Jewish betrothal], and marries another woman commits adultery."

The parallel account to Matthew 19 recorded in Mark 10:2–9, doesn't address the distinctively Jewish issue in relation to Deuteronomy 24—that is, the question of the basis upon which divorce may be justified. All references to that Jewish debate are ignored and the instance is recorded as a simple discussion on the legitimacy of divorce itself. The Lord's response to the Pharisees in Matthew 19:9 isn't in Mark 10 at all. Mark, rather, chooses to record Jesus' answer to the disciples' question asked later 'in the house' (v.10), where the statement is simply:

"Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery."

Mark 10:11,12

Both Mark's and Luke's Gospels are directed towards Gentile readers, and so, many Jewish emphases are either, explained, minimized or omitted.

It is significant to mention at this point that in all of these references cited in Matthew, Mark and Luke, the words 'commits adultery' are in the *present continuous* tense. That is, they tell us that to marry another while one's partner is still living is to be in a situation of ongoing adultery!

In the Matthew 19 passage, Jesus certainly exposed the error of the Pharisees' ideas in relation to both divorce and remarriage. He declared that what they had been tolerating, in their own and others lives, was nothing less than adulterous. What a shocking statement this must have been to these religious zealots who saw themselves as 'the pure of the land'!

Reading on in Matthew 19, it becomes apparent that it was not only the Pharisees who felt the impact of this teaching. So radical did our Lord's words appear—and so totally opposed were they to the opinions of even the most conservative of the day—that we have the aghast reply of the disciples in verse 10:

"If this is the situation between a husband and a wife, it is better not to marry."

They certainly realized the implications of what was being said! For them—at their present level of understanding, and from their social perspective—Jesus' teaching was extremely difficult to accept. As far as they could see, it would be better to just forget about marriage in the first place. The prospect of having to continue in relationship with a difficult woman, or suffer an imposed singleness after her unfaithfulness, would be too much to bear!

Jesus then took the opportunity to comment on the matter of celibacy—one that relates very much to the issue of remaining unmarried after divorce.

In verses 11 & 12 He went on to say:

"Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others have been made eunuchs; and others have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it."

In Matthew 13:11 He had already said:

"The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, not to them."

The disciples had been *given* revelation of the secrets, or 'mysteries', of the kingdom. This set them apart from others who had not. (We have already seen from Ephesians 5 that the relationship between Christ and His bride is a 'profound mystery'—one of the kingdom's great mysteries, in fact!)

Those to whom it has been *given* are the only ones who are able to receive the word regarding celibacy. They do so 'for the sake of the kingdom of heaven'.

We may appreciate an unbeliever's struggle to accept the situation of celibacy after divorce. But those who have received the great things of revelation are able to accept or 'grasp' this word, and—in fact—should do so (19:12). Those whose only frame of reference is the kingdom of humankind and of this world, will, naturally, be pressed to decide in favour of their own 'felt needs' and 'personal rights'. But the children of God have a much wider and more wonderful perspective—the kingdom of God and of heaven!

In the light of all that has been shown above, the statement of Matthew 19:9 cannot be seen to contain a provision for remarriage while one's partner is still alive. It is, rather, yet another prohibition against this very thing.

unfaithfulness within marriage

As this section draws to a close, a comment needs to be made on the matter of unfaithfulness within marriage. It is obvious that adultery is, indeed, a serious violation of the sacred marriage union. However, it is also true that the Scriptures in no way teach that it either dissolves the marriage bond, or obligates a person to divorce the offending partner.

God Himself, as the Husband of His people Israel, demonstrated this by instructing Hosea to be restored to his adulterous wife Gomer:

"The Lord said to me, 'Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods.' "

Hosea 3:1

In Jeremiah 3:8 it is, in fact, rhetorically stated that God gave Israel a certificate of divorce as an expression of His intense grief and displeasure over her harlotry. The verses following, however, portray Him as one who is calling His wife, Israel, again to Himself!

The 'certificate' given to Israel could never nullify the covenant God had made with His bride—He never intended that it would. His giving of it was merely a statement of His grief and displeasure in terms that the people understood. As we have seen from our Lord's own teaching, a certificate of divorce never has nor ever will dissolve a marriage covenant.¹

From what we have seen in this section then, it is surely apparent that in spite of the confusion which has often surrounded the statements of Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, they both actually do uphold 'the clear statement of Scripture':

Marriage is a one-flesh union between a man and a woman, dissolved only by death; and therefore divorce followed by remarriage (while one's partner is still alive) is an act of adultery.²

Section Six

THE SITUATION OF DESERTION BY AN UNBELIEVER

When examining 'the clear statement of Scripture' in Section Three, we looked at 1 Corinthians 7:10–11 in which Paul recounted the teaching of Jesus in the context of a believing husband and wife. Now we must turn our attention to verses 12–16, in which he speaks of how a believing partner is to respond to a non-believing partner.

The passage, of course, has its own context, in which Paul is answering specific questions posed by the Lord's people at Corinth. Verse 1 of chapter 7 begins:

"Now for the matters you wrote about."

Apparently, there was some confusion among them as to whether or not keen Christians should marry or remain single. It seems there was also the question as to whether one who has

¹ [DIVORCE ON ACCOUNT OF ADULTERY]

In Jesus' day, divorce of an unfaithful wife had become a legal obligation for a Jew. This had arisen from the wrong interpretation of Deuteronomy 24, which has Moses commanding divorce rather than merely permitting it because of hardness of heart. This is what is behind Joseph's dilemma in 1:19. Although in the context of a Jewish betrothal situation, his action does illustrate the current legal and social obligation of a 'wronged husband'.

Jesus' teaching sharply contradicts this prevailing situation. The radical nature of discipleship not only means that the Lord's people may often have to ignore social expectations, but that they may also, unfortunately, from time to time, need to disobey the laws of the land in order to obey God.

² [SEPARATION FOR SPECIAL CAUSES]

There may very well be a time when marital separation is appropriate—especially where there is the presence of danger for a wife or children. This is an area for which the pastor/elders of a congregation should take careful responsibility.

Although I, personally, have been open to facilitating the separation of a wife from her husband under such circumstances, it has not yet, in my ministry, needed to occur. In fact, I must say that I have seen women grow enormously in grace during extended times of difficulty and personal trauma—even ultimately seeing their situation completely resolved by the power of the gospel. Such resolution is, of course, unfortunately, not always the outcome.

become a believer should remain married to an unbeliever. Would the Lord want such a relationship to continue? These appear to be the matters to which Paul is responding.

Again, we will move through the passage section by section, starting with verses 12 and 13:

"To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him."

Because this is a specific area not covered in the general statements of the Gospels, Paul here gives his own apostolic instruction. He clearly states that it would not be the Lord's will for a believer to leave an unbelieving partner, and continues in verse 14 to explain why:

"For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy."

Whatever Paul is actually saying here, it is certain that an unbelieving partner at least has some spiritual benefit in being married to one who enjoys a covenant relationship to the Lord. This being so, there is an obligation to continue to live as husband and wife.

In verses 15 and 16, however, he states that there is one exception to this rule:

"But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?"

The one exception is if the unbelieving partner refuses to stay. In that case the believer is under no obligation to go on trying to hold the marriage together. Furthermore, because God's people know that He remains sovereign in all these things, they may be at peace. The fact is that there is no assurance that an unbelieving partner would come to know the Lord, even if he or she could be persuaded to return.

Some though, find in this passage not only permission to live separately, but also to *remarry*. They come to such a conclusion because of the words in verse 15:

"is *not bound* in such circumstances."

It is understandable how a reader might arrive at this view by comparing the word 'bound' here at face value with the word 'bound' in verse 39:

"A woman is *bound* to her husband as long as he lives."

However, in the Greek text, the word in verse 15 is not the same as the one in verse 39 and Romans 7:2, referring to the 'marriage bond'. It is a completely different one, which means 'to be enslaved'. To say here, then, that the believing person is 'not bound' means that he or she is 'not enslaved,' or 'free from slavery'. Paul is simply providing apostolic permission for a deserted believer to not feel obligated to continue to press for reconciliation. Such a one is free to live separately—a liberty he does not openly provide for a believing couple, as we saw in verse 10.

There is no mention anywhere in this passage of permission to remarry. In fact, as we have seen twice in the chapter (vv. 11 and 39) the prohibition of remarriage while one's partner is alive is upheld. The issue is, as always, the clear teaching of Scripture that:

Marriage is a one-flesh union between a man and a woman, which is dissolved only by death; and therefore, divorce followed by remarriage (while one's partner is still alive) is an act of adultery.

Where there is a situation of *desertion* by either a believing or unbelieving partner, the indissoluble nature of the marriage bond prevails. One's deserting partner may enter into an adulterous union, but this by no means gives a godly man or woman freedom to also make such a God-grieving choice. As always, Paul's apostolic command must be upheld: "Let them remain unmarried". And this, sustained by the reason Jesus Himself gave for continuing in such a state: "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven."

Section Seven

THE MATTER OF LAW & GRACE

Having moved through these six brief sections, there may be those who find themselves in mental agreement with what we have termed 'the clear statement of Scripture', but who are, nevertheless, left with feelings of uneasiness. The approach taken may seem to betray an attitude which refuses to take into account the deep needs of those who find themselves in the pain of failed relationships. To say that this teaching is to be applied absolutely, in all situations, may seem to be callous and graceless—an expression of cold, steely legalism.

Some clear thinking on the subject of this section—'The Matter of Law & Grace'—should be helpful in responding to these natural feelings and impressions.

Firstly, a definition of legalism:

Legalism is the taking of a clear statement of Scripture, extending it by inference, and then giving to that extension an absolute status that is binding in all situations.

When it came to legalism, the Scribes of Jesus' day were masters of the art. They produced endless volumes of extra-biblical instruction derived by inference, and consistently came under the Lord's censure because of it. He clearly affirmed that all legalism is intolerable.

If we too were to take the teaching of the Scriptures in any area, and extending it by inference make absolute demands upon others on that basis, we also would incur the Lord's disapproval.

However, according to our definition, to apply the clear teaching of Scripture on divorce and remarriage to all situations of marital breakdown cannot be said to be legalism—it is simply obedience to the plainly stated mind and will of God. We must never call obedience to a clear command of Scripture legalism!

Legalism and true obedience to God's law are two entirely different things. One is to be avoided at all costs, the other, pursued wholeheartedly. One binds and oppresses, the other is a manifestation of human liberty in Christ.

The problem in this area comes when we see a conflict between the twin dynamics of law and grace—a problem that is resolved only when we understand the true nature of both.

the law of God

God's law is the very outshining and outworking of His own nature. As those made in His likeness, it is the one basis upon which we—through grace—may come to human fullness and maturity.

That's why Paul said in Romans 7:12 in relation to the commandment not to covet:

"The law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good."

He continued in verse 22:

"In my inner being I delight in God's law."

As we saw at the end of Section One, the Psalms beautifully express the delight that God's true people have always had in His law—that gracious revelation of His good intention for them. This is not, though, the spirit that naturally prevails in the fallen human heart. It is, in fact, just the opposite.

In our sinfulness, God's wonderful law tends to become our greatest aversion. It is perceived as an enemy that, all too persistently, confronts us with the condemnation and shame of our moral failure. This being so, our natural tendency is to feel that its requirements are somehow

unreasonable—needing to be tempered with a kind of grace that minimizes the obligation. But is this the grace of which the Scriptures speak? Not at all.

the grace of God

Biblically, grace is the unconditional action of God in freely restoring us to Himself, and setting us on the path to true human maturity. It is expressed most fully in the giving up of His dearly loved Son to the judgment of our sins—dealing with their offense entirely and forever. It is that which frees us from the condemnation of the law, and brings to us a full and glad assurance of forgiveness—casting out fear.

Grace enables us to face the fact of our sins, and then, standing in the liberty of a cleansed conscience, to joyously worship the Father 'in spirit and truth'—wholeheartedly desiring conformity to His good law. It, indeed, opens our hearts to 'seek first His kingdom and His righteousness', in the light of the coming Day!

The grace of God is no divine sedative prescribed to lull the conscience into a diminished sensitivity to His law's demands. Rather, it is His action towards His children that enables us to face the law in all of its dimensions, and say with David in Psalm 40:8:

"I delight to do your will my God; Your law is within my heart."

It is not a matter of grace winning out over law, but rather, grace freeing us to happily and wholeheartedly seek its fulfillment. It is not law *or* grace, but law *and* grace—the fullness of both, leading us to the goal of human maturity.³

Being liberated by grace to obey the will and way of our Maker is, actually, the way of life!

This is a most needful perspective for all who have suffered the pain of a marriage breakdown. Such understanding brings the assurance that there can be *life* after the tragedy of divorce. The knowledge of grace and free-spirited obedience to God's revealed will guarantees this.

There is even life after divorce and an adulterous remarriage, if that has, unfortunately, already occurred. The only prerequisite being that the couple confess such a remarriage as wickedness and repent of it—ceasing to defend it as a legitimate action. On this basis they are free to go on within that marriage without any sense of condemnation. There is always life after repentance!⁴

Sadly, however, many who have wrongly remarried do not respond in this way. Refusing to move on in the full light of both holy law and abundant grace, so often consigns a person to ongoing personal struggle. The Scriptures plainly teach that the conscience of one created in

³ Paul relentlessly insisted that we could never be saved by law keeping—only by grace through faith. Here, though, we are speaking not of *receiving* salvation, but of *living in* the salvation we have freely received—through ongoing obedience to the functional 'moral' and 'creational' law of God revealed in the Scriptures.

⁴ Some feel that such repentance should necessarily involve the 'putting away' of those with whom they have been adulterously united. This is what Israel did when, after returning from exile, 112 of the men took wives from among the idolatrous nations around them (Ezra 9 & 10). The people had been commanded by the LORD not to enter into such unions, and so, in order to turn away His fierce anger—which would have resulted in a loss once again of His blessing upon them—they separated themselves from their rebelliously chosen marriage partners (even though children had been born into some of these unions).

I, personally, don't feel that repentance in relation divorce and wrongful remarriage needs to involve such action. Firstly, because the situation with Israel had to do with separation from idolatry, rather than the issues we are dealing with in this paper. But, most importantly, because there is no command given either by Jesus or the apostles in this regard. To make such a radical requirement would seem to put us in the place of legalism: extending a clear command of Scripture by inference and making it binding upon all. What we *may* say is that an adulterous remarriage is certainly 'an irregular marriage'—one that is not honouring to God. Repentance then, would require an open acknowledgment of this by the offending couple, as indicated above.

I do believe that we may also say that our 'human-centred' and 'need-obsessed' unfaithfulness in this critical area, may well, be impeding the blessing of God upon His people! Those with pastoral responsibilities should consider this carefully, as we earnestly seek His mercy in these days.

God's image, will not allow the 'springs of life' to flow freely in the face of willful violation of His law—no matter how much it is rationalized.

David's testimony in Psalm 32 is most enlightening in this regard:

"Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.
Blessed are those whose sin the Lord does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit.
When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.
For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.
Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord'—and You forgave the guilt of my sin."

verses 1–5

These words graphically show the blessedness of forgiveness on the one hand, and the anguish of suppressed guilt on the other. It is never an act of kindness to encourage people to rationalize their disobedience to the revealed will of God!

What a tragedy it is, then, when those who counsel others fall into the error of the prophets and priests of Jeremiah's day, of whom the Lord said:

"They dress the wound of My people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace."

Jeremiah 6:14

There is only one context for authentic ministry: the fullness of both grace and truth.

Section Eight

SOME OTHER RELATED ISSUES

the indispensable nature of 'given-wisdom'

From what has already been said, it is clear that the only appropriate way to approach the kind of pastoral situations we are thinking of in this study, is upon the basis of the given-wisdom of the Scriptures alone. We must not begin with men and women and their felt-needs, with our own impressions of what should or should not be, or with 'the mind of the people'. We must begin with that which comes from 'above', the given word of God.

In the Scriptures, God has wonderfully made known to us the true nature of all things. That is, how it is with Himself as Father, Creator and King; how it is with us as children, creatures and servants in His likeness (created, fallen, redeemed, and ultimately glorified); and how it is with the creation (its origin, nature and goal). All of this we could never know apart from 'revelation', and all of it provides an indispensable framework for true discernment. Our problem is that we tend, so easily, to fall prey to the evil one's ploy recorded in Genesis 3:1:

"Did God really say ... ?"

The temptation to listen to a word other than the Creator's is always to be resisted. Any drift from the given-wisdom of the Scriptures, will inevitably undermine our ability to both live truly and have true ministry to others.

The various perspectives in our next section are given with a genuine desire to discern what is faithful to the word of God, and most honouring to His name. It is, however, granted that to follow them would, clearly, require a definite experience of new birth in Christ, and joyous, hope-filled devotion to His call to discipleship. The reader will have to decide whether or not these urgings move beyond the bounds of what is directly revealed in the Scriptures.

the appointment of leadership within the household of God

In regard to this question, I believe that the apostle Paul's instruction in 1 Timothy 3:2 is most relevant:

"The overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife."

In 1 Timothy 5:9, the exact statement in the original Greek is made in the reverse. Those who are to qualify for a place on the list of 'serving-widows' were to have been '*the wife of one husband*'. Because of the identical nature of these statements, we can assume that both must be speaking of the same thing.⁵

This injunction would, of course, have application to a polygamous or polyandrous⁶ situation. Polygamy, however—which was frowned upon in the Roman Empire—doesn't appear to have been a problem in the early church. On the other hand, the situation of one who had been divorced and remarried while his partner was still living *would* have been an ever-present issue.

As we've seen, according to the teaching of both Jesus and Paul, subsequent marriages while one's partner is still alive amount to *additional* marriages—making a remarried man to be the husband of more than one wife. Such a person could not be said to be 'above reproach', and must therefore be disqualified from the function of elder/pastor/teacher (or deacon, 1 Tim. 3:12).

Those engaged in formal pastoral function must be *above reproach* simply because they are, in a particular way, the Lord's representatives in a given local fellowship of believers. It is His *name* that is paramount in the consideration of any such appointment.

To say that divorce and remarriage disqualifies a person from formal pastoral ministry may be a difficult thing for some to accept. We can understand the personal grief of one who feels called to such a function, yet is not able to openly and publicly embrace it.

The reality is though that tragic circumstances do occur in life, which cause people to be unable to fulfill all manner of longings. For instance, a fine athlete suffers paralysis after a road accident, or a young woman discovers she is infertile. These are, indeed, tragic experiences. However, it must be said that those in such distressing situations always have a clear choice before them. They will either sullenly fall prey a sense of personal victim-hood and futility, or, will joyously and obediently move on into the future their Maker has for them—in that strong trilogy of 'faith, hope and love'.

It is important to affirm here that—apart from the functions of elder/pastor/teacher or deacon—there is, virtually, unlimited scope for the exercise of one's gifts on behalf of others. Our dear Lord will always make provision for His clear-spirited servants, to joyously bear eternal fruit within His great kingdom of love!

Have wrongly remarried people appointed to pastoral functions been effective within them? I do not doubt that they have. The Lord continues to bless us all with our various deficiencies. Surely though, we ought to build our patterns of practice *not* upon what the Lord has mercifully borne with among us, but upon what He has commanded, and promised to most abundantly bless.

And above all, should we not seek what will best 'make known His manifold wisdom to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms' (Ephesians 3:10)? This wisdom, we have seen, is rooted in His purpose to ultimately reveal the glory of His Son and His bride in the eternal kingdom. May our approach to marriage—as a prophetic foreshadowing of this coming Marriage—truly be a witness to the indissoluble union of Christ and His church!

How tragic it would be, if 'the household of God', 'the pillar and foundation of the truth', were to be so focused upon human *need*, that the *name* of the Lord was, largely, disregarded in this matter.

⁵ Some loosely translate these verses as "faithful to his wife" and "has been faithful to her husband". It would seem best, however, to retain the more literal sense. Either way, in the situation in Ephesus a potential elder that had been divorced and remarried while his wife was still alive, would, in fact, not have been faithful to her. The same would be true in the case of a potential 'serving widow', and her example to younger women would be severely impaired.

⁶ Polyandry being the female equivalent of polygamy.

the situation of divorce prior to conversion

Some, while in agreement with the substance of all we have been saying, nevertheless, feel that when it comes to the situation of divorce prior to conversion things must be different. "Surely", it is said, "when we receive Christ and are 'born again', the old is gone, there is a *new life*—and so the possibility of remarriage."

It is wonderfully true, of course, that to be in Christ is to be a *new creation*. However, to imply that this new life should become a pretext for violating God's holy law, would, indicate a misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of conversion.

To be *justified* is to be, as we say, 'just-if-I'd never sinned'. Wonderful! But to affirm this is not to deny that certain things have occurred—they have, and there are often physical and social consequences. What it means is that we are no longer under condemnation because of them.

Through justification and forgiveness, we are marvelously liberated from the condemnation of the law—not that we may disregard it, but rather, as was stated in the previous section, that we might keep it. The renewing work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration is with a view to bringing us into relationship with the Father and the Son, and into the freedom of wholehearted obedience. This is the essence of the new life into which we have been born.

A new life? Yes, certainly, but not *another* life. It is the *same* life, cleansed and made dynamic in Christ!

So then, again, although we deeply appreciate the plight of those in tragic situations, the wisdom we receive from 'the clear statement of Scripture', and a biblical understanding of grace, should be the basis upon which we both live and seek to have ministry.

the problem of 'scrambled eggs'

'Scrambled eggs' is a term that is sometimes used to describe the complex relational situations in which many find themselves when they come to Christ. A classic example would be that of a couple who have both been divorced, have been living together outside of marriage for several years and have children from that relationship. As a repentant couple, what should they do? A common pastoral response to this question would be: "You can't separate scrambled eggs. They just have to marry and 'put it right'—after all, children are involved".

However, what we have here is not necessarily scrambled eggs at all. It is, indeed, an awful predicament. But the reality is that a man and a woman have simply had children out of wedlock.

As was affirmed in Section Seven, having come to know the grace of God, such a couple will now want to live according to His way. In the light of His revealed will, they would, naturally, not want to remain in fornication; nor would they insist on entering into an adulterous remarriage. 'The clear statement of Scripture' would require that they remain unmarried if their first partners are still living.

It would seem that their only option would be to live separately—as close as possible, of course. This would, clearly, be an irregular family situation, but at least the children would know that their parents don't live apart because of anger or bitterness—as is so often the case—but because they both want to do what is pleasing to their Heavenly Father. An extremely unfortunate and difficult situation brought about by sin? Yes, but one in which the grace of God abounds for all concerned—including the children—as His word is honoured and His will obeyed.

If this appears to demand too much in terms of personal cost, it must be remembered that believers all over the world face enormous difficulties as a consequence of coming to Christ. For example, tens of thousands each year know that baptism will mean total family collapse—and, very often, their own imminent death. This is not meant to dismiss the situation before us as insignificant by comparison, but it does put it in some perspective. Jesus spoke much of the radical implications of seeking first 'His kingdom and His righteousness'. It will always be the case that 'we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God' (Acts 14:22)—and that His grace will be entirely sufficient to sustain us in it all!

the question of pastoral care

It is not my purpose to develop the matter of pastoral care in any detail here. It is important, however, at least, to state that adherence to the biblical injunctions before us, *must* be worked out within the context of a responsible expression of community in Christ. To fail in this would be reprehensible. We must function truly as the family of God. And those who are separated or divorced should be encouraged to see this believing community as part of the Father's good provision for them. The declaration of James 1:27, although not specifically mentioning those of whom we are speaking, is, even so, a relevant word:

"Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress."

In my own pastoral experience, I have seen single parents and their children wonderfully cared for within a local Christian community.

CONCLUSION

There is much more to be said in regard to this whole subject. The immense theological significance of marriage could well be looked at in greater detail. More could also be said in the practical, pastoral area—especially in relation to the gospel's power to resolve personal issues such as grief and anger, and liberate a person into rich, free-spirited vocational living.

However, given the limitations of the mostly exegetical and corrective type of approach taken, I would hope that at least something has come through of the grand nature of marriage itself, the heart of the Great Bridegroom for His people, and the fullness of His enabling and sustaining grace towards them.

Having applied our minds to the Scriptures in the way we have, I am sure it is evident that the response of many at this time to the matter of divorce and remarriage leaves much to be desired. As the people of God we have a great deal to consider, both in terms of our faithfulness to the clear statement of Scripture on the one hand, and the ministering of true hope and healing on the other.

And of course, there is also our need to consider what may be necessary for a mighty action of divine mercy among us in these days, bringing us, together, as His chosen people, into the glorious blessedness that we long for—and so into the righteousness that will cause Him to be magnified among the nations, rather than dishonoured. Oh that we would earnestly seek such an outpouring of the Spirit upon us. "Lord, ... in wrath remember mercy"!! (Habakkuk 3:2).

I really do trust that what has been expressed in this paper has lessened the confusion in relation to such a critical issue, and given some direction towards a response that is, indeed, more faithful, life-giving and God-honouring.

So many have suffered, and are suffering, the trauma of marriage breakdown. Surely, the most gracious and compassionate thing we can do, is to lovingly and persistently encourage one another to be strong in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep His word, and seek the honour of His *name* above our own immediate sense of personal *need*—knowing that if we do this, we will live!

Moses, in his time, by God's will, made a concession regarding this matter, because of the hardness of the people's hearts. But now in Christ, the mind and will of God for our day has been made clear. In the light of His good word to us, the exhortation in Hebrews 4:7 is most appropriate:

"Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts."

