

The background of the cover is a close-up photograph of a wooden gavel resting on a wooden surface. In the foreground, two gold wedding rings are placed on the same surface, one slightly overlapping the other. The lighting is warm, highlighting the textures of the wood and the metallic sheen of the rings.

Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage

Dean Taylor

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1. One Flesh, One Covenant

“...*Yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant. And did not he make one?*” (Malachi 2:14-15)

Divorce...the very word brings such pain, such heartache, such contention. It not only divides families, it splits churches, separates friends, polarizes denominations; it isolates victims, champions assailants, destroys faith, and disparages numberless children caught in the middle, asking, “*Why? Where is God?*”

The truth is—God is there, and He cares about these little ones; He cares about the families, He hears the prayers of the bereaved, He hears the cry of the widow and the fatherless—*He cares*.

He even sees the mistakes, the wrong choices, the disastrous scenarios, and He stands listening, ready to help. He watched the sins done in ignorance, the sins done in hard times, and the sins done blatantly to His face, and to all these He offers *blood*—the sacrificial blood of His Son, Jesus Christ, to atone, redeem, forgive, reconcile and empower these destroyed lives, so that they can become beautiful, fruitful children of God once again.

He sees the “impossible situations,” and just like He does with so many other “impossible” things in our lives, He promises to bring beauty from ashes, streams in the desert, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness. God is glorified when He takes the impossible and says, “DONE.” As it says in Romans 4:17, “...*even God, who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were.*”

The lives affected by divorce are real people with real pains. Many have suffered betrayed trusts and bear deep scars. They are not an “argument” or a “doctrine,” they are souls—souls that Jesus died for. Because of this, they cannot be dismissed, ignored, maligned, or marginalized. As a people of God, we are called to minister to them. Moreover, as a church in America, we must recognize that this “people group” is not merely a passing fad, but an ever increasing element of our morally declining society.

With these hard situations, like all hard situations, the temptation is to ignore it and hope it will just go away. This seems to be the prevailing tendency among the churches which maintain a conservative, biblical attitude toward divorce and remarriage. Defeating words such as

“Let someone else minister to them,” “They will never fit in here,” or “They’ll never stay,” are not words of faith. The purpose of the church is not to exist as some sterilized, fictitious Precious-Moments-like figurine displayed on a shelf. We are to face the hurts, the pains, the ugly, the despised, the dark, the diseased, the impossible, and then administer Christ to them. The subway station graffiti often reads “Jesus saves,” and if this isn’t true, we’re wasting our time.

In the next few issues we will be examining the biblical guidelines for marriage, divorce, and remarriage. It is my prayer that, by the grace and anointing of God, the truth of Jesus will be uplifted, and not my opinion or the opinion of an agenda or a denomination. “*Yea, let God be true, but every man a liar*” (Romans 3:4). I’m certainly not the final word on divorce and remarriage. I am a pastor, not a theologian, and I have no desire for a religious debate for the sake of academic exercise. It is my hope that these articles might encourage all of us to reach out and minister to those who are victims of divorce, and mostly, that the scores of souls which feel caught in “impossible situations” would discover the light of the gospel, and find Jesus there waiting with the key of faith that opens any door! Overall, it is my prayer that God would strengthen that which remains, as we seek to hold up what the Word of God has to say on these issues.

Another World

Daily in the midst of the market place, the water well, and the synagogue, laughing at weddings and crying at funerals, observing the wink of the money changer’s eye and the tremble of the widow’s hand, Jesus walked for 30 years—watching, pondering, and comparing. He compared all that was “man” with all that was “divine,” and taught that by grace men could become partakers of the boundless storehouse of the kingdom of God. Although He had voluntarily laid down His divinity, He knew, even as a child, who His true father was. Even though His celestial throne was awaiting His return, Jesus knew heaven. No idealistic thoughts were needed to remind Him to “*seek those things which are above.*” All the holiness, purity, order, majesty and worship of that place were created by Him, and it was in that place that Jesus taught us to pray: “*Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven*” (Matthew 6:10).

What must it have been like to be *Him*—in the everyday hustle and bustle of shopping, working, synagogue-ing, etc.? When Jesus’ time had come and he began to teach the people, His words cut through

to the very heart and motive of everything we do. Even our everyday necessities were challenged by Him. He did not shrink away from bringing attention to our propensity toward living careless and godless lives. Jesus warned, *“For as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark”* (Matthew 24:38).

He challenged earthly securities, self-defense, judicial vindication, and all other efforts of human strength and set them at naught. He took purity and sin beyond the outward and proceeded to challenge even the inward motives of our hearts. Revenge, anger, covetousness and lust had never been taken this far before. He split the society, changed the world, and brought us a flawless image of our God.

When discussing divorce and remarriage, as well as many other of Jesus’ teachings, the clearer the kingdom of heaven is in view, the more sense the teaching will make. Also, the more the church represents a faith-filled expression of the entirety of the Sermon on the Mount, the more clearly a message of repentance like this will be demonstrated, *“not just in word but in power.”*

Marriage

Married life was, in the time of Jesus—perhaps even more than it is today—the very center of Jewish life. Indeed, it would appear that it would have been quite a strain for them to have considered the unmarried man complete. As it was recorded in the Jewish Talmud, *“The man who is not married at 20 is living in sin.”* And also, *“Any man who has no wife is no proper man for it is said ‘male and female created He them and called their name Adam.’”* However, while the married state was certainly prominent in Jewish society, divorce had also become an unfortunate experience of their time. Additionally, while the marriage bond was highly revered, the bond for the man differed somewhat from that of the woman. Polygamy, which by Jesus’ time was becoming very out of fashion, was inevitably still a part of their heritage and domestic identity. What effect this mindset had on the sense of responsibility from the men is unknown, but judging from Jesus’ teaching, it seems that their view was off balance, at least in part, because of their misunderstanding of what marriage really was.

Jesus raised the duty and majesty of marriage higher than it had been for a long time—*“since the beginning.”* His illustrations to it and parables about it demonstrated that Jesus saw in the marriage relation-

ship a type or likeness that was so close to His heart that it typified salvation, redemption and eternal fellowship in heaven (Matthew 25; Ephesians 5; Revelation 20).

That said, as honorable as Jesus makes marriage out to be, He also showed us that marriage itself was not to be the very center of our identity and focus. He taught that this sacred place in our hearts was to be reserved only for Him. *“And there went great multitudes with him: and he turned, and said unto them, If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple”* (Luke 14:25-26).

Radically challenging the entire vision and understanding of our life in heaven, He even disclosed that in that place, many parts of the normal married life as we know it will not even exist. *“For when they shall rise from the dead, they neither marry, nor are given in marriage; but are as the angels which are in heaven”* (Mark 12:25).

The Beginning

As Jesus was traveling into the coast of Judea, he was met by a group of Pharisees who wanted to “tempt” him by asking what his position was on divorce. However, before Jesus would enter into this discussion about divorce, he apparently felt it necessary to correct their view of marriage. As Andrew Cornes suggests in the book *Divorce & Remarriage, Biblical Principles & Pastoral Practice*, the reason the Jews were off on their doctrine of divorce and remarriage was because, like the modern church, the Jews came about it from the wrong perspective: “They began with the biblical passage about divorce... He began with the key passage about marriage. And one of the points He was certainly making was that their mistake stemmed from starting in the wrong place.”

“The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?” (Matthew 19:3) The passage of scripture that Jesus took the Pharisees to was back to the very first marriage between Adam and Eve, found in Genesis 2:18-25. Jesus answered the Pharisees saying, *“Have ye 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?”* (Matthew 19:4-5)

Here, taking the Pharisees back to the original marriage in the Garden of Eden, Jesus stated to them what the fundamentals of marriage actually are. He taught that since the dawning of creation, marriage essentially requires:

1. One man and one woman
2. A man must leave his father and mother
3. A cleaving together
4. Becoming one flesh

1. One man and one woman: Modern attempts to disparage the sanctity of marriage by suggesting the union of same sex partners defies nature, historical precedent, and common morality. However, most importantly, it defies the Law of God at the very core. History itself has borne out that even when secular nations have ignored this ordained creation principle, total moral breakdown inevitably follows. So, the primary element necessary for a lawful marriage is to have one man and one woman.

2. The man must leave his father and mother: Interestingly, the focus here is on the man. The changing of their place of residence naturally comes to mind. However, since in the Jewish culture moving was not always the norm, its connotation suggests even more than this. It suggests a moving of the place of loyalty, identity and emotion. Before the marriage, the man was completely a part of his parents' household. All of his identity came from there. Now, in this new household, this chief place of identity, benevolence and loyalty was to be rendered unto his wife. Cornes suggests that in our modern culture, which puts little emphasis on the honor and loyalty given to our parents, this seems but a minor and insignificant point. However, to the Israelite, this change of household identity, authority, and loyalty had a profound effect on all relationships (ibid. 57).

3. A cleaving together: “...*For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh*” The Hebrew word for “cleave” in this passage suggests the idea of being glued together. This word is used in Job 38:38, speaking of dirt clods which stick together after the rain. In another place, it is used by Joshua, referring to a military alliance (Joshua 23:12). The word is also used referring to the leprosy that would cling forever to the dishonest and greedy Gehazi (2 Kings 5:27). In marriage, the husband and wife are “glued” together—bound inseparably into one solitary unit (Carl Laney, *The Divorce Myth*).

In the Greek, the word “*cleave*” (pros-kol-lah’-o) means: *to glue upon, glue to, or to join one’s self to closely*. I’ll never forget a brilliant real-life object lesson of this passage I once saw in a children’s lesson. A few years ago, in order to graphically demonstrate the meaning of this word, Bro. Paul Lloyd from Charity Christian Fellowship took a piece of wood that had been glued together the night before and attempted to separate it with great force as the children looked on expectantly. I’ll never forget the result: as we all looked on in astonishment, the board indeed splintered into pieces, but the union was still intact! The message was clear.

4. Becoming one flesh: The most obvious use of this phrase is realized in the marital affection between man and wife. This is certainly in view in Paul’s rebuke to the men at Corinth in their sin with prostitutes, “*Know ye not that your bodies are the members of Christ? shall I then take the members of Christ, and make them the members of an harlot? God forbid. What? know ye not that he which is joined to an harlot is one body? for two, saith he, shall be one flesh*” (1 Corinthians 6:15-16).

Although God ordained that there be strong emotional and spiritual ties created through marital affection, the Bible clearly shows that in marriage, this “one flesh” identity goes beyond mere physical affection. Taken in isolation, the “one flesh” attachment of fornication is certainly sharing in a privilege granted only to the married, and is a serious offence to God. However, the conjugal act, in and of itself, does not “make” the marriage. If this were the case, there would have been no reason to differentiate between Solomon’s wives and Solomon’s concubines.

Taken in the creation context of Genesis quoted by Jesus, this miraculous union of the “two becoming one” is something that is accomplished supernaturally, by God. God is present at the marriage, and it is God who makes this union. The first two parts of marriage quoted by Jesus indicate an active process: “leave and cleave.” This last part, and the one that Jesus seems to bring the most attention to, is spoken of as an accomplished fact, “*and they twain shall be one flesh.*”

Commentator Andrew Cornes, discussing the phrase “become one flesh” from the Hebrew, states: “The Hebrew phrase does not describe the process, but the accomplished fact, the changed situation.” In other words, the reality of becoming “one flesh” is not just an *idea* for the married couple; it is something spiritual and supernatural that God accomplishes at marriage. This is something that goes beyond basic

human comprehension. In this light, it is indeed a “mystery,” as Paul wrote to the Ephesians: *“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 5:28-31).

Becoming Blood Relatives

When God made Eve out of Adam’s rib, He was very graphically demonstrating the authenticity of this “one flesh” relationship. When Adam saw her for the first time he cried out with joy. A literal translation of what he said is, “This one at last. Bone—my bones! Flesh—my flesh! This one shall be called woman because from man this one was taken!” (Carl Laney, *The Divorce Myth*)

It is a very interesting fact that this concept of becoming “one flesh” was taken so far by Mosaic law that once a person was married, their spouse’s family then became related to them, just as if they were their own flesh and blood.

The various prohibitions of incestuous marriage found in Leviticus 18 are based not only on literal blood lines, but also on these “blood” relationships created through marriage. Marriage thus created both vertical blood relationships in the form of children, and horizontal “blood” relationships between spouses. In Leviticus 18:18 and 20:14, it is written that a man was not allowed to marry his wife’s mother or sister. Incest laws were common among ancient civilizations. What made the Hebrew culture different was that the prohibitions against marrying one’s own family included not just your own blood relatives, but also those who *married* your blood relatives (Leviticus 18:8, 14-16). (Wenham & Heth, *Jesus and Divorce*)

No Longer Twain

To these basics of marriage, Jesus added his profound, dominical explanation point: *“Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh”* (Matthew 19:6). The entire focus of the debate was resolved in this God-ordained fact. The Pharisees were asking about the various legalities of splitting the two individuals up. However, Jesus attempted to change their entire way of thinking, informing them that contrary

to what they were thinking, the married couple remained no longer as two individuals that even *could* be split up: “...*they are no more twain, but one flesh.*”

What God Has Put Together

Jesus then concludes the question of whether or not it was ever allowable to permit divorce with this weighty command, “*What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder*” (Matthew 19:6).

This phrase suggests the idea of a covenant—a covenant in which God was an active witness in the marrying process. This is a significant point because it takes the question about the validity of a marriage out of the numerous human scenarios and possibilities, and places it entirely in the hand of God. He is saying that man may contrive any manner of legal proceedings and name it all kinds of various things, but the bottom line is that marriage is a covenantal unity between man and woman that the Lord God himself has performed. Regardless of how oblivious the couple may be to the mystery of the spiritual truth of the union, it is God who has made them one flesh.

The prophet Malachi, more than any other writer, bears testimony to this covenantal aspect. When the people of God were crying to God because they didn’t understand why their prayers were not being heard, Malachi told them it was because they were divorcing (“putting away”) their wives. He warned them that by doing this they were breaking their covenant and violating their “one flesh” relationship.

“Yet ye say, Wherefore? Because the LORD hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant. And did not he make one? Yet had he the residue of the spirit. And wherefore one? That he might seek a godly seed. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth. For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away” (Malachi 2:14-16).

The covenantal aspect of marriage cannot be overlooked. Unfortunately, conservative commentators on divorce and remarriage usually divide, for the most part, into two camps—those who believe that marriage is simply the forming of “one flesh,” and those who believe that marriage is strictly a covenant. I believe both concepts are involved in a biblical understanding of marriage. While I believe the emphasis of Jesus’ and Paul’s words were certainly on the “one flesh” relationship,

the covenantal concept, especially as it pertains to the heart of God, is undoubtedly expressed in the Scripture and should not be disregarded. To ignore this aspect of God's involvement in the marital union would be dishonest and perhaps even irresponsible. We are to uphold the entire Word of God. Let's remember, too, we are told it is a "mystery."

Contemporary thinking makes very little of covenants, vows and promises. Almost every culture has some kind of marriage ceremony. The prophet Malachi is telling us that God is witness to these ceremonies and does not take the vows spoken lightly.

Ronald Martin, in his paper "Divorce, Remarriage and Reconciliation" speaks strongly about vows and covenants, saying, "The only vows that did not stand as spoken, were the vows of a wife or an unmarried daughter, and then only if they were disallowed at the first hearing by the husband or father. All other covenants, based on a promise to God, stood as they were uttered (Numbers 30:2, Deuteronomy 23:21-23). Oaths that turned out to be for the hurt of the one who uttered them stood (Psalm 15:41). This keeping of covenants was considered so important to God that He required that an animal dedicated to him could not be switched for another animal even if the dedicated animal turned out to be flawed. He would rather have a sacrifice that was less than perfect than to have a man change a vow (Leviticus 27:9-11). Ecclesiastes 5:4-6 clearly teaches us that it is a sin not to perform our vows, even ones that we later realize were in error. Jephthah discovered this much to his dismay (Judges 11:30-36). Joshua also realized this after he made a covenant that clearly violated the command of God (Exodus 23:32-33, Joshua 9:15-21). Yet this covenant needed to stand: and even generations later, God punished Israel for violating it (2 Samuel 21:1)."

Can Any Vows Ever Be Broken?

Some ask about vows that have been made to satanic secret societies like the Masons, or vows of celibacy by converted Roman Catholic priests, such as Menno Simons. Others ask about religious groups which require vows at membership, many of which are spoken without any true sincerity or conversion of the heart. What happens if the person later realizes their vows were made fraudulently, out of peer pressure or for any other insincere, illegal or dishonest reason? Can these vows be "broken"? I can't answer all the various angles in this particular article on marriage. Perhaps we will be able to address this concern in a future article, but let it suffice to say that vows have always been a

very serious thing in the eyes of God, from the Old Testament right on through to the teachings of Jesus. Do you think it is just coincidence that after Jesus' teaching on adultery, divorce and remarriage in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus immediately introduces His teachings on oaths? (Matthew 5:36, James 5:12) I don't think so.

To Conclude

The essence of the teaching of Jesus is the cross—complete self-denial, complete abandonment of self-rights and self-interest. To look at our marriages through the eyes of the cross puts our marriages in their proper perspective. A healthy marriage is about each partner seeking to lay his or her life down for the other. This world's pursuit of a happy marriage, with its barrage of self-help books, self-improvement seminars and “getting the most out of your spouse” attitudes are not to be the focus in a marriage where Christ is Head. As God has mysteriously joined man and wife together into one person, He has done so for a reason. He does this for a channel of grace—to seek a godly seed, a receptacle of the divine image, a beacon to the world, which testifies magnificently of the existence of another realm, one which exists for no other reason than to bring glory to God! May our marriages and all of our lives, by the grace of God, do just that.

2. One Flesh, One Covenant (Cont.)

The prophet Malachi prophesied of a time when nations would weep and cry to God but would not receive an answer. He writes that the people, bewildered by God's silence, would then cry out to Him asking *why* He no longer responds to their prayers. The reason God gives for holding back His blessing is surprising—it had to do with the way they were regarding marriage and divorce. Much like the time that was prophesied in the book of Malachi, many Christians today across our nation are raising up their voice to God with “tears and weeping,” crying to God for revival. When the results do not come, we ask God—*why*? Revivalists often quote 2 Chronicles 7:14, “*If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.*” Exactly what are the “wicked ways” spoken of here in 2 Chronicles? Certainly, it is more than divorce. But perhaps the prophet Malachi is providing us with some valuable insight into the heart of God on this matter:

“And this have ye done again, covering the altar of the LORD with tears, with weeping, and with crying out, insomuch that he regardeth not the offering any more, or receiveth it with good will at your hand. Yet ye say, Wherefore? Because the LORD hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant. And did not he make one? Yet had he the residue of the spirit. And wherefore one? That he might seek a godly seed. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth. For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away” (Malachi 2:13-16).

These are hard words for the church of today. The book of Hebrews tells us: “*For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart*” (4:12). Throughout time, there have been many who have experienced the laceration of this two-edged sword, following Christ literally *as lambs to the slaughter*. Enduring the savage beast of the Roman arena, the burning cross along the Thebes, or the drowning in Zurich, these precious saints clearly demonstrated their holy devotion to the world around them. Others, like the apostles

James and John, who after hearing the words of Christ *immediately left the ship and their father, and followed him*, must have also felt this divine sword pierce their hearts, although they did not physically die. If truth be told, although free of the pain of burning crosses and severed limbs, many saints confronted with the austerity of their calling have surely looked upon the quick, sanctified vindication of martyrdom with longing, saying with Paul, “*For me to live is Christ but to die is gain.*”

Whenever a soul has reached out and dared to take the words of Christ literally, the outcome has never resulted in anything less than a complete and radical change of life. In my own life, I have come across many brave saints who have taken the words of Christ seriously when He said, “*If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it*” (Matthew 16:24-25).

For some, accepting Jesus’ teachings on nonresistance meant leaving a promising career in the army to face an uncertain future. For others, Jesus’ words on materialism have caused them to deny themselves the “American dream,” and give up comforts and luxuries some would consider necessities. Countless others have walked away from a multi-generational inheritance within a strong community of people, full of wealth, comforts and security, all in exchange for a shameful disinheritance and a new identity as the stranger in the land. I have seen men give up positions as varied as trial attorneys, Catholic priests, contemporary Christian musicians, and corporate executives. I have seen men forgive murders, deny lawsuits and accept the plundering of their personal possessions. However, I must say that I have hardly seen any teaching more painfully misunderstood and more blatantly ignored than Jesus’ commandments on divorce and remarriage. Furthermore, witnessing this flagrant disregard for God’s Word in the world is one thing, but to see it so prevalent in the church is simply heartbreaking.

For the saints who have embraced Jesus’ hard teachings on divorce and remarriage, the path has not been easy. Allowing the painful incision of this *two-edged sword* to truly affect their lives, they have chosen to follow Jesus in “the narrow way that leads to life.” Others look on with astonishment and ask, “*Whatever would cause a man to choose such a life—such self-denial? Is it necessary to take Jesus’ words so literally?*” Like the holy martyrs, they walk in an uncommon power to live out the precious commandments of their Savior, no matter the

cost. As living testaments, they show forth a beautiful, living testimony of the very power and truth of God's holy Word.

The few who do accept Jesus' teachings on divorce and remarriage have now found themselves in the vast minority. Witnessing the church's greatest departure from this truth in the history of the world, these seekers have discovered that this realization, at least to some degree, changes the way they view the mainstream church. After all, if Luke was accurate when He recorded the words of Jesus, "*Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery: and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband committeth adultery*" (Luke 16:18), what are we to think of the wholesale abandonment of this teaching across Christendom? The tragic consequences of such a thought have led most to simply dismiss Jesus' teachings altogether. Still others, however, have begun to brave the challenge and to cry out to the church for repentance.

Noted radio evangelist and author, John Piper, speaks of his difficulty in accepting Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage, stating:

"All of my adult life, until I was faced with the necessity of dealing with divorce and remarriage in the pastoral context, I held the prevailing Protestant view that remarriage after divorce was biblically sanctioned in cases where divorce had resulted from desertion or persistent adultery. Only when I was compelled, some years ago, in teaching through the gospel of Luke, to deal with Jesus' absolute statement in Luke 16:18 did I begin to question that inherited position. I felt an immense burden in having to teach our congregation what the revealed will of God is in this matter of divorce and remarriage. I was not unaware that among my people there were those who had been divorced and remarried, and those who had been divorced and remained unmarried, and those who were in the process of divorce or contemplating it as a possibility. I knew that this was not an academic exercise, but would immediately affect many people very deeply. I was also aware of the horrendous statistics in our own country, as well as other Western countries, concerning the number of marriages that were ending in divorce, and the numbers of people who were forming second marriages and third marriages. In my study of Ephesians 5 I had become increasingly persuaded that there is a deep and profound significance to the union of husband and wife in "one flesh" as a parable of the relationship between Christ and his church. All of these things conspired to create a sense of solemnity and seriousness as I weighed

the meaning and the implication of the biblical texts on divorce and remarriage. The upshot of that crucial experience was the discovery of what I believe is a New Testament prohibition of all remarriage except in the case where a spouse has died.”

Review

As was discussed in Part 1 (April/May/June 2007) Jesus’ prohibition against divorce stemmed not so much from a new teaching about divorce, but from reinstating God’s original heart on marriage from the beginning. When Jesus was challenged about divorce, he took them back to a teaching about marriage. Quoting from Part 1:

“To these basics of marriage, Jesus added his profound, dominical explanation point: *‘Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh’* (Matthew 19:6). The entire focus of the debate was resolved in this God-ordained fact. The Pharisees were asking about the various legalities of splitting the two individuals up. However, Jesus attempted to change their entire way of thinking, informing them that contrary to what they were thinking, the married couple remained no longer as two individuals that even could be split up: *‘They are no more twain, but one flesh.’*”

A few years ago, in a teaching on divorce and remarriage, Bro. Rick Leibe used a very graphic illustration to help us better understand the concept of “the two becoming one.” He took two lumps of clay, one of them yellow and the other blue, and began to knead the two together until eventually they became one large, bright green lump. When he was finished, he held the lump up and said, “Now, someone come up here and take out the blue clay.” The point was clear: the change was irrevocable. Similarly, marriage fuses together two individuals into one—irrevocably.

The Divorce Question

For study purposes, the scriptures that deal with the issue of divorce and remarriage are generally regarded as: Genesis 2:24, Deuteronomy 24:1-4, Ezra 10:1-3, Malachi 2:6-16, and Jeremiah 3:1-14. In the New Testament they are: Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:3-12, Mark 10:2-12, Luke 16:18, Romans 7:1-6, 1 Corinthians 7:10-15, 1 Timothy 3:2, and Ephesians 5:15-33.

The question that the Pharisees asked Jesus about divorce was, “*Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?*” After Jesus gave them the basics of the marriage covenant by accenting this “one

flesh” theology, He boldly answered their question by stating, “*What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.*” This alone should be sufficient to establish an absolute prohibition against divorce and remarriage. However, like the reply of the Pharisees, several questions naturally tend to come up.

What About the Old Testament Law of Divorce?

The Pharisees seemed to understand that Jesus was indeed saying that divorce with remarriage was not permissible at all. However, being good students of the Law, they naturally questioned Jesus about the law of divorce found in Deuteronomy 24, “*Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?*” To this Jesus responded, “*Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so*” (Matthew 19:7-8).

Like many of the Old Testament laws, Jesus further expanded this “law of divorce” to include the spirit and intent of the heart. Jesus’ focus challenged the way the Pharisees looked at marriage, and now He was even telling them that they had viewed the Mosaic Law incorrectly. One of the most common misconceptions held about the Deuteronomy passage has been that the Old Testament Law *instituted* a “law of divorce.” A closer look reveals that divorce was already happening; Moses did not *institute* “divorce,” he simply *regulated* it.

Adding to this misconception is a problem of translation. Although this misconception obviously predates the King James translation, it is possible to make a false assumption based upon some of the wording in our King James version. Look in your Bibles at Deuteronomy 24. It states: “*When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favor in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house*” (Deuteronomy 24:1).

Unfortunately, the word “then” was not part of the original Hebrew, even in the “Textus Receptus,” from which the King James was derived. No doubt it was put there by the translators to allow the sentence structure to flow better. However, this addition actually changes the emphasis entirely. It creates a “law of divorce” which was not part of the original language.

As Andrew Cornes points out in *Divorce & Remarriage: Biblical Principles & Pastoral Practice*, this “divorce law,” instead of being a

“law of divorce,” was actually a law regulating against a type of remarriage. When looked at in the original Hebrew, as opposed to a simple one-sentence, cause-and-effect law *commanding* divorce, it rather reads as a four-sentence regulation against putting a woman into this particular situation. “The circumstances under which the Law applies continue throughout the first three verses; the action to be taken—what the husband must (or must not) do—only comes in verse 4” (ibid.).

Cornes gives the translation as: “***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, (2) and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, (3) 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, (4) 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***” (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

Regardless of how the KJV reads, the context of the passage is instructive. The context reveals that divorce was already practiced by the Hebrews at this time. This passage *assumes* its existence in the regulation. The law was created as a way to protect the woman, not to reject her. It is important to remember that Moses gave the law as a response to “the hardness of your hearts.” Again, this passage indicates that Moses did not *institute* divorce, he merely *regulated* against a type of *remarriage*. This passage provided at least three regulations: (1) It prevented the women from being traded and passed around like merchandise; (2) It curtailed remarriage for a woman in this condition; (3) It restrained the husband, causing him to know that he cannot just act indiscriminately about sending his wife away.

The Words of Jesus

Jesus spoke on the subject of divorce and remarriage in several places. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus began by defining the sin of “adultery” in the eyes of God, stating, “*Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.*” To the Jewish man of that day, these words must have sounded absurd. According to Old Testament Law, a man would be found guilty of “adultery” only by taking ***another man’s wife***. For the man, everything else was merely

“fornication,” which was considered a lesser offense by Old Testament standards.

In a sense, Old Testament marriage and divorce law seemed to have more to do with authority and ownership of the women than it did the mutual, marital oneness that Jesus stressed in the New Testament. In this way, polygamy was thereby tacitly allowed. However, Jesus was now focusing on the man’s original union with his wife and going so far with it, He said that even *looking* at another woman lustfully made a man guilty of adultery! Again, this would have been radical and absurd to the Jewish men of that day. To make matters worse, instead of softening these hard statements, Jesus went on to say that if the offending eye or hand was causing the problem, it would be better (still not best) that we pluck them out or cut them off.

Concluding this severe train of thought, Jesus then touched on the subject of divorce and remarriage. To their surprise, Jesus added divorce and remarriage to His list of those things which were now being called “adultery.” He explained that a man, by divorcing his wife, was guilty of *causing* her to fall into adultery if she should remarry. Because of this, he is therefore guilty of her adultery along with her. The only exception Jesus gives was if the woman was *already* guilty of adultery. In that case, then he, of course, would not be held guilty of this adultery. However, concerning a remarriage, Jesus caps off his list of adulterers, including even the man who simply marries a woman who has been divorced: *“It hath been said, ‘Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement.’ 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”* (Matthew 5:31-32).

Similarly, in the Matthew 19 passage, Jesus repeated the Sermon on the Mount teaching saying, *“And I say unto you, whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery”* (Matthew 19:9).

These “exception clauses” of Matthew 5 and 19 will be discussed in more detail in the next issue. Here in Matthew 19, the sin of adultery is given both to those who would divorce a woman wrongfully, and to those who would marry a woman who has already been divorced.

In Mark 10, the same scene that was recorded in Matthew 19 is in view, only this time we get to peek into the private discussions of

the apostles about the issue after they got home. This time, the topic of *remarriage* is more in focus. Mark also makes it clear that the sin of adultery applies to both men and women: “*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’*” (Mark 10:10-12).

Finally, in Luke 16:18, stemming from a discussion about the Law, Jesus again focused on the sin of marrying a divorced person and stated, “*And it is easier for heaven and earth to pass, than one tittle of the law to fail. Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery: and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband committeth adultery*” (Luke 16:17-18).

To summarize, Jesus taught that:

- Divorcing a spouse for any reason except for fornication is to be guilty of *causing* your spouse to commit adultery (Matthew 5:32, 19:9).
- Divorcing a wife **and marrying another** is adultery (Mark 10:11).
- Marrying someone who is divorced is adultery (Luke 16:18).

How Long Does the Sin of Adultery Last?

Finally, concerning the sin of adultery, the question remains: is this a one time sin, or is it an ongoing sin? For example, is it like asking forgiveness for a lie you told years ago, or is it more like keeping something that you stole while asking God for forgiveness? John Coblenz, in his book *What the Bible Says About Marriage, Divorce & Remarriage*, touches on the Greek word used in Mark 10 saying:

“The Greek verb tense translated ‘committeth adultery’ in Mark 10:11,12 is present indicative, suggesting continuous action. It means ‘is committing adultery.’ The adultery is not in the past only. It began when the second relationship began and continues as long as the relationship continues—the remarriage is ongoing adultery against the former companion as long as that companion lives.”

These words are hard, and as I said in the beginning, I believe that I have hardly seen any personal cross more painful, misunderstood or ignored in the American church today than Jesus’ teaching on divorce and remarriage. Sadly, the consequences have been devastatingly tragic, leaving victims suffering in the wake of the damage.

Because of the magnitude of the situation, it almost seems impossible to regain the lost ground. Generations of families, churches and even whole denominations have been birthed into this inherited position. Yet I believe it is not too late to make a change. Once the problem is admitted, churches might differ on how to respond to it; however, at the very least, a church-wide moratorium on *remarriage alone* could turn the tide of this epidemic completely around in one generation. One thing is certain, ignoring the situation will not make it go away. May God open our eyes to the need, and give us the grace for the work. May His gentle sword cut away our burdens, define our path and enlighten our future.

[In the next issue, we would like to discuss the “exception clause” in detail, followed in future issues by Paul’s view of divorce in the Epistles, and finally ending with a glimpse at divorce and remarriage in the early church.]

3. The Exception Clause

Denomination or Religion	% who have been divorced
Non-denominational	34%
Baptists	29%
“Born again”	27%
Mainline Protestants	25%
Mormons	24%
Catholics	21%
Lutherans	21%
Atheists and agnostics	21%

When we step back and look at the practice of divorce and remarriage in the church today, it is hard to imagine that Jesus ever gave *any* prohibition against divorce and remarriage at all. Recent studies have indicated that the divorce rate among people who call themselves “born again” fares even worse than non-Christians, coming in at 27%. Catholics and atheists tie for the lowest divorce rate, averaging around 21% .

A Quick Review

As was discussed in Part 1, Jesus’ prohibition against divorce and remarriage stemmed not so much from a new teaching about divorce, but rather from reinstating God’s original heart on marriage from the beginning. The basics of Jesus’ teaching on marriage can be summed up in His words, “*Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh*” (Matthew 19:6).

When challenged by the Pharisees about when divorce might be permissible, Jesus attempted to change their entire way of thinking by informing them that, contrary to their understanding, a married couple no longer remain as two individuals that even *could* be split up: “*They are no more twain, but one flesh.*” The fundamental nature of this teaching is essentially that marriage, by definition, is actually a miracle from God, whereby two people are made into one indissoluble union.

In Part 2 we examined Jesus’ teachings on divorce, both with and without remarriage. We discussed that Jesus gave His teaching about divorce and remarriage from the standpoint of what constituted “adultery” in the eyes of God. Summarizing these teachings with their

respective scriptures, Jesus taught:

- Divorcing a wife **and marrying another** is adultery (Mark 10:11).
- Marrying someone who has been divorced is adultery (Luke 16:18).
- Divorcing a spouse for any reason except for fornication is to be guilty of *causing* your spouse to commit adultery (Matthew 5:32, 19:9).

Questions

Some questions that naturally come up when discussing Jesus' challenging teaching on adultery in the light of divorce are questions such as:

Why would I be held guilty of the sin of adultery if I have lawfully divorced my spouse and married someone else?

Why would I be committing adultery if I have never been married before but I marry a person who has been divorced from someone else who is still living?

Why is remarriage looked at so negatively in the New Testament scriptures?

The answer to all of these questions, simply put, is that Jesus taught that the marriage bond was indissoluble, outside of the death of a spouse. Therefore, any other union is considered adultery. No matter what we may do—be it to legally divorce, separate, or just plain don't get along, nothing can separate the marriage union except death. As the apostle Paul succinctly put it, "*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*" (1 Corinthians 7:39).

Simple Words

The words of the gospel concerning marriage and divorce are often seen today as culturally insensitive, irrelevant, or confusing. However, they are nonetheless conspicuously plain. The gospel of Mark recorded, in very plain words, the teaching of Jesus concerning divorce followed by a subsequent remarriage as: "*... 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).

The gospel of Luke also puts the teaching of Jesus in clear, simple words: "*Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another,*

committeth adultery: and whosoever marrieth her that is put away [divorced] from her husband committeth adultery” (Luke 16:17-18).

I would certainly agree that these scriptures are indeed out of fashion. However, they cannot be negated simply because they do not suit the cultural trend. Jesus taught that the marriage bond was permanent and because of that, remarriage is adultery. So why all the confusion today about divorce and remarriage?

When Did the Confusion Start?

The gospel of Matthew contains a phrase that has opportunistically become more and more prominent throughout the passing centuries. The modern theologians refer to this phrase simply as “the exception clause.” It is this phrase that will be the focus of this article. During the Reformation, the Catholic theologian Erasmus, subsequently followed by Martin Luther and John Calvin, taught that Jesus’ strong prohibition against remarriage had one exception, and that was adultery. They claimed that Jesus allowed for remarriage when the *reason* for the divorce was adultery. This view, however helpful it may have seemed at the time, rendered the essence of Jesus’ “one flesh” teaching on marriage as conditional. Furthermore, it caused considerable difficulties in harmonizing the other gospel accounts with the epistles of Paul.

What started out as a small “exception” or “loophole” in Jesus’ strong prohibition against divorce and remarriage, grew exponentially into the crisis situation we now face in the church today. When it was first introduced during the time of the Reformation, the “exception” was considered valid *only* in the case of adultery. Later, however, the “exception” expanded to include desertion, abuse, excommunication, and eventually verbal insults and incompatibility. Finally, the wholesale acceptance of “no-fault divorce” and “new-beginning remarriages” and all manner of special considerations has done well to bring about the complete dissolution of the very nature of what God intended marriage to be in the first place.

The Exception Clause

Matthew records Jesus’ words spoken during the Sermon on the Mount as, “*It hath been said, ‘Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement.’ 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**”* (Matthew 5:31-32).

Similarly, in the Matthew 19 passage, Jesus repeated the Sermon on the Mount teaching to the Pharisees saying,

*“And I say unto you, whosoever shall put away his wife, **except it be for fornication**, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away [divorced] doth commit adultery”* (Matthew 19:9).

The two phrases *“saving for the cause of fornication”* and, *“except it be for fornication”* are the scriptural texts from which the “exception clause” has derived.

Separation Without Remarriage: A Closer Look

The primary mistake by some of these reformers, as well as by modern theologians, is that of sandwiching together the ethics of divorce with those of remarriage. When looked at apart from this unwarranted grouping, the challenging teachings of Jesus, as well as the firm teachings of Paul, harmonize beautifully.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was teaching through the Old Testament laws, and expanding them beyond mere outward obedience. For example, before the discussion on adultery, Jesus was teaching from the 6th commandment, “Thou shalt not kill.” In this teaching He expanded the sin of “murder” to include hating a brother, or even calling someone hateful names. Next, when addressing the 7th commandment against adultery, Jesus added looking lustfully at a woman as “adultery,” and gave a few extreme examples, like plucking out your eye, to highlight the importance of dealing with this lust. Finally, in Matthew 5:32, Jesus added both *divorce* and also the act of *remarriage* to His list of those who would be considered guilty of the sin of adultery.

What is most significant about Matthew 5:32 to this current study, is that Jesus held the man guilty of adultery simply for divorcing his wife, even without remarriage. Jesus said that the man who divorces his wife actually shares in the guilt of the woman’s remarriage by **causing** his wife’s future adultery! Let’s read the passage again: *“Whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, **causeth** her to commit adultery”* (Matthew 5:32).

In reference to the guilt of causing his wife’s adultery by sending her away, Jesus gave only one exception: *“...saving for the cause of fornication.”* Why did Jesus grant this exception? It is very clear; the man was obviously not going to be held guilty of **causing** his wife to become an adulterer if she was an adulterer already.

Please take special note of this fact—because that is all the exception clause is saying. The only “exception” that was given here in Matthew 5:32 is from the guilt of *causing* a woman to commit adultery. It says absolutely nothing about an exception for remarriage. As Bible commentators Dale Allison and W.D. Davies state, “The question of freedom after lawful divorce is just not addressed, and we cannot wring from the text what it will not give” (*International Critical Commentary, Edinburgh: T&T Clark*).

So again, what exactly is the “exception”? Jesus said the man is allowed this one reason to separate from his wife—sexual immorality. Remarriage is still not granted here—it is not even hinted at. Trying to make this “exception” in Matthew 5:32 apply to remarriage would be stretching this text to say something that it simply does not say. Jesus allows for separation, but not remarriage. This is the same teaching echoed by the apostle Paul to the Corinthians, “*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 Corinthians 7:10-11). [Note: There will be more on Paul’s writings in the next issue.]

Marrying a Divorcee

Concluding His loving instruction that marriage was permanent and that remarriage was always wrong, Jesus ended His entire teaching concerning those who will be held guilty of the sin of adultery by saying, “...*and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.*” This phrase stands, like all the other gospel accounts, as a blanket prohibition against marrying a divorced person. Why? Again, even though a physical separation has occurred, the marriage bond remains intact.

Simple? It was for 1500 years, but unfortunately today, numerous teachers and centuries of inherited precedents have confused this simple teaching significantly. Even the NIV Bible has tried to “help” the situation by adding its own interpretative corrections. In Matthew 5:32b, the NIV reads, “...*and anyone who marries **the** divorced woman commits adultery.*” But as Cornes points out, “There is nothing whatsoever in the Greek to make this connection. The Greek simply says, ‘*and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery*’” (*Divorce and Remarriage*, p. 206). This statement, like all the other statements of Jesus on remarriage, simply says that to marry a person who has been married before is to be guilty of the sin of adultery.

Jewish Betrothal

Some conservative theologians who agree that remarriage is wrong, preserve the harmony of the gospel accounts by drawing attention to the word “fornication” used in Matthew 5 and 19. (The NIV uses the words “marital unfaithfulness.”) Those supporting this “betrothal view” legitimately bring out that the word rendered here as “fornication” (*porneia*) could possibly indicate a lesser offense than the word “adultery” (*moichao*). Because of this differentiation in the Greek, they deduce that the word “fornication,” as it is used in Matthew 5 and 19, must be something other than infidelity during a regular, lawful marriage. They suggest that this different use of the word “fornication” is given as a reference to pre-marital infidelity during a Jewish betrothal period.

The advocates of the “betrothal view” point to the example of the courtship between Joseph and Mary (Matthew 1:18-25). They say that in the Jewish custom, the betrothed couple was considered “man and wife” even though they had not yet come to live together. In this Jewish custom, if physical immorality was to occur during this time period, the man could divorce his “wife” and marry another, based on the fact that they were not actually married yet. With this in mind, it is said that the “exception clause” was given to allow for remarriage only if the “fornication” occurred during this betrothal period. Furthermore, they would say that the Matthew account was the only one mentioning this exception simply because his gospel was the only one written originally to a primarily Jewish audience.

Although this view nicely harmonizes the gospel accounts, I personally find it difficult to accept for the following reasons. First of all, to restrict the use of the imprecise word *porneia* to such an exacting definition as “betrothal period fornication,” when it is so commonly used in other places representing all kinds of sexual sins, from prostitution to incest, is questionable. Secondly, as a pastor, I find it difficult to counsel and make decisions on such important and potentially life-changing issues, based upon a purported Jewish custom that cannot be explicitly stated or emphatically quoted from the Bible. Ancient Jewish records of manners and customs are impressive, but even the oldest documents are still literally hundreds of years separated from the time of Jesus.

And finally, and most importantly, I find the use of the “betrothal view” unnecessary. When divorce and remarriage is examined in light of the clear passages of the gospels, as well as the writings of the early

church, the prohibition against remarriage does not hang on the exact syntax of the word “fornication” (porneia). The word is still important, of course. However, the need to overly scrutinize every nuance of the word “fornication” becomes superfluous. Nevertheless, I say this carefully, not wanting to dismiss the “betrothal view” altogether.

The Matthew 19 Account

In Matthew 19 the language is more ambiguous than in Matthew 5, but the meaning is still the same:

*“And I say unto you, whosoever shall put away his wife, **except it be for fornication**, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away [divorced] doth commit adultery.”*

The difficulty with this passage is that the placement of the “exception clause” in the original Greek allows it to be read in two different ways. You can read it as the early church read it, and that is to harmonize it with the Matthew 5:32 account as an exception to the guilt of adultery for divorcing an adulterous wife. With this view, the scripture reads just like Matthew 5, including its blanket prohibition against remarriage.

On the other hand, the construction of the Greek will permit that it can be read, as the modern theologians have read it since Erasmus, as an exception to both the sin of divorce and the right of remarriage. Advocates of this view, like J. Murray, admit that the passage can be read in more than one way. Surprisingly, even Murray, who sides with the modern view, acknowledges that the early Christian view “does in itself make good sense and would solve a great many difficulties in ... the accounts given in the three synoptic gospels” (ibid. 219).

How does one decide which view they like best—or more importantly, how does one discern which is right? Which method of interpretation should be used to arrive at our conclusion? Should we consider the surrounding context and similar passages? Should we research the original Greek? Should a historical witness ever bear any weight of consideration? Perhaps we would do well to consider all three.

A Look at the Context

The fundamental principle of scriptural interpretation is that scripture is the best interpreter of scripture. Ambiguous passages ought to be compared with clear passages that speak on the same subject. When applying this approach, we would take into consideration the emphatic

prohibition against remarriage found in Mark 10:11, Luke 16:17-18, Romans 7:1-3, and 1 Corinthians 7: 10-11,39. In this case, it would be illogical *not* to lean the interpretation toward the early Christian view.

Also, considering the immediate context, the response of the apostles following this scripture in the next verse is revealing. Their response was one of shock and amazement. They cried, “*If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry.*” Surprisingly, instead of consoling the apostles by reminding them of any “exceptions” which would allow them to remarry, Jesus went on into a discussion telling them that at times men will be called on to become eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven! (Matthew 19:10-12)

Examining the Greek

Jacques Dupont, speaking on a Greek exegesis of Matthew 19:9 states: “There is only one way of understanding the syntax of 19:9: it is a double conditional clause in which an elliptical phrase is placed immediately after the first condition, ‘to put away’. The elliptical phrase, ‘except for immorality’, does not contain a verb, and one must be supplied from the context. The only verb that has been stated for the reader to understand is the one immediately preceding the ‘exception clause’—‘put away’—the verb Matthew’s readers just passed over. Matthew 19:9 would then be read: ‘If a man puts away his wife, if it is not for immorality that he puts her away, and marries another, he commits adultery’” (Mariage et divorce, 102-3).

Dupont says that the “exception clause” is grammatically connected to the phrase before it and simply acts as a parenthetical clarification to the original question asked by the Pharisees: “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all?” Therefore, just like in Matthew 5:32, the exception is from the guilt of divorcing a woman who is already an adulterer. Summing up the Greek approach and surrounding context, Heth and Wenham in their book *Jesus and Divorce* conclude:

“When Matthew 19:9 is analyzed into its constituent parts, the ambiguity disappears and it makes a fitting punch line to the dispute with the Pharisees. They asked: ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all?’ Jesus replies: ‘It is always wrong to divorce what God has joined together: what is more, divorce, except for unchastity, is adulterous; and remarriage after divorce is always so.’ Naturally the disciples object: ‘If the relationship of a man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry.’ Unabashed, Jesus replies in a vein reminis-

cent of His remarks about cutting off hand or eye to avoid committing adultery (5:29-30) ‘You are able to live up to this teaching, for there are some who are even able to become eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven.’” (pp. 71-72).

Historical Consideration

Drawing from a historical interpretation, the early church would have unanimously understood the exception to be dealing only with divorce—not remarriage. There was no significant change to this view for the first 1,500 years of the church! [Note: In a future issue, a historical look at divorce and remarriage will be examined in greater detail.]

An Example

When considered outside of such a hot topic as divorce and remarriage, it is much easier to follow the mode of speech used by Jesus in Matthew 19:9. Consider for a moment a limited analogy, taking the 6th commandment dealing with anger and murder in Matthew 5:22, in place of the controversial 7th commandment dealing with adultery and divorce found in Matthew 5:32. The following scripture quotes will be an inference to the corresponding verses dealing with divorce and remarriage.

- Anyone who is angry with his brother, unless it is for a just cause, has committed a sin (Matthew 5:32a).
- Anyone who is angry with his brother and kills him, has committed a sin (Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18a).
- Anyone who has killed his brother after being angry with him, has committed a sin (Matthew 5:32b, 19:9b, and Luke 16:18b).
- Anyone who is angry with his brother, unless it is for a just cause, and kills him, has committed a sin (Matthew 19:9).

In the last example, I do not believe anyone would find it difficult to make the “exception clause” apply to the first part of the phrase and not the second. Likewise, in conclusion, I sustain that in the time of Christ and the apostles, continuing on into the early church, the “exception clause” of Matthew 5 and 19 would have applied just as naturally to separation and not to remarriage as it would for us today in the analogy above.

Summary

In this issue we reviewed the teaching of Jesus about the essence of marriage, noting that Jesus taught that marriage was an indissoluble union.

Next we reviewed Jesus' teaching on adultery, noting that Jesus added remarriage to His list of what He considered adultery. On this point we also saw that even divorce, itself, without remarriage, would make a person guilty of their spouse's adultery—unless, of course, their spouse was already an adulterer.

Finally, we looked at the “exception clause” found in Matthew 5 and 19, and suggested that the “exception clause” was only an exception from the guilt of causing a spouse to commit adultery—when the basis for the divorce was adultery. We asserted that we believe that this was not an exception granting the right to remarry. In addition, we stated that all the gospel accounts are in agreement, and that they give an overriding prohibition against all remarriage.

As the modern church has drifted so far from this ancient teaching, the sight of such a far-off resolve can seem almost a fantasy. Many Christians may find themselves in situations which seem hopeless, or they may feel there are no answers to their discouraging situations. And as we said before, once many of these truths are realized, people or churches may differ as to how to deal with each case. However, I think it has been proven well enough through the centuries that turning a blind eye and ignoring the situation has only made matters worse. The first step toward recovering lost ground is to come to grips with the words of Christ Himself—to truly take Him at His Word, by faith. After that...remember, *“Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ”* (Philippians 1:6).

4. Not Under Bondage

A few days ago I was at work when a nurse handed me a newspaper and pointed to a small article asking me what I thought about it. The article was about a radio station in West Virginia that boasted that it was “giving away a free divorce.” The article from the Associated Press read:

A Charleston radio station is observing Valentine’s Day with a reminder that Cupid sometimes misses his mark. WKLC-FM, better known as Rock 105, is giving away a free divorce. Valentine’s Day isn’t all hearts and flowers, says WKLC Program Director Jay Nunley. There is a darker side, he said, “where maybe you despise your spouse and resent the entire day.” Through 4 p.m. on Thursday, Valentine’s Day, applications for the free divorce will be accepted on the classic rock station’s website, and the winning name will be drawn at 5 p.m. Nunley cautions that this is a real divorce and people shouldn’t enter if they aren’t serious. Also, people expecting a long, drawn-out legal battle should hire a lawyer because the Rock 105 contest is for a relatively uncomplicated divorce. Charleston attorney Rusty Webb will handle the actual filing. “Sure, we can give away concert tickets, and we do,” said Nunley. “That’s going to make you happy for a little while. This is the chance to make someone happy for the rest of their life.”

That last line really got me, “This is the chance to make someone happy for the rest of their life.” The sad fact is that in most cases, this is the furthest thing from the truth. Not even considering eternity for a moment—the damage, misery, suffering and child neglect that has resulted from the epidemic proportion of divorce in the last century is nearly incalculable.

Jesus Has a Better Way

Sometimes the way of Christ seems hard, unapproachable, or even out of touch. We try to better ourselves and our society with new ways, new ideas and new solutions to our problems. Often it takes a lifetime, or sometimes even generations, to realize that serious mistakes have been made. Even though His way is often very challenging, Jesus told us that He supplies the ability to perform anything He is asking us to do. He said, “*My yoke is easy and my burden is light.*” Surprisingly, in the end we always find there is joy in His way. Jesus said, “*These*

things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 11:16:33).

In the last three articles on marriage and divorce we primarily focused on the teachings of Jesus. We saw that in these teachings, like many other teachings of the New Testament, Jesus made radical changes in the way things were done under the Old Covenant. Many things concerning marriage were affected. In the Old Testament, polygamy was allowed and divorce was permitted. Divorce and remarriage often went on in rapid numeration, with very few restraining circumstances, particularly for the man. A man could commit adultery only by taking another man’s wife, and unfaithfulness to his own wife was only considered fornication.

But then Jesus came, and in the Sermon on the Mount, right there alongside anger, war, lust, lawsuits, public prayers, storing up treasures, etc., Jesus made radical changes in the way we understand divorce and remarriage. When the teaching of Jesus was looked at in total, it became evident that the essence of His teaching was that marriage, by definition, is actually a miracle from God, whereby two people are made into one indissoluble union. His teaching can be summarized in His words, “*Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh*” (Matthew 19:6).

Summarizing Jesus’ teaching, we saw that:

- Divorcing a wife **and marrying another** is adultery (Mark 10:11-12).
- Marrying someone who **has been divorced** is adultery (Luke 16:18).
- Divorcing a spouse for any reason except for fornication is to be guilty of **causing** your spouse to commit adultery (Matthew 5:32, 19:9).

We took special note of this last point. The teaching of *causing* your spouse to commit adultery is often quickly passed over in our reading of this passage. This teaching should put a special check on our hearts when we begin to contemplate divorce—these are indeed challenging words. We saw in the last issue, however, that Jesus did give one exception to the guilt of causing your spouse’s future adultery, and that was if they were an adulterer already. However, even in the case of adultery where separation was permitted, remarriage still was not

granted. This would have meant to live the rest of your life single. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we saw that even with such difficult teachings as these, we were not to accomplish them in the flesh but to trust God, who has promised the needed grace to accomplish what He has called us to.

Jesus' teachings are not popular today, and unfortunately, numerous different interpretations abound, turning the words of Christ into nonsense. Modern interpreters disagree on how to interpret the words of Christ. Over the centuries, Jesus' teachings have grown increasingly figurative. Interestingly, the further you go back in history, the more literal you find the church on the subject of divorce and many other controversial teachings.

What Did the Apostle Paul Think?

The writings of Paul give us the priceless opportunity of having an infallible interpreter of the words of Jesus. It takes the burden of interpreting these passages away from us and puts it onto Paul. The seventh chapter of 1 Corinthians is vitally important in the understanding of the teaching of Jesus on divorce and remarriage, because many topics discussed there provide actual real-life examples of the teachings of Jesus. The points most contested by modern interpreters are dealt with directly in his writings.

The book of 1 Corinthians is actually a letter that Paul wrote to the Corinthian church in reply to many questions that they were asking him. We don't have that original Corinthian letter, but throughout the book, little clues and phrases such as "Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me" supply us with a glimpse of what the Corinthians were asking him. Chapter 7 is particularly helpful because it deals with several contemporary concerns such as:

- The permanence of the marriage bond
- A summary of Jesus' teaching on divorce, and what is permissible after divorce
- How we should consider our marriage bonds made before conversion
- Serious considerations dealing with young people in courtship or betrothal situations

Finally, Paul caps off the chapter with his final dictum on divorce and remarriage to avoid any misunderstanding.

The Context

Coming into chapter 7, Paul has just finished a difficult and heated rebuke to the men of the church for going to prostitutes. From the context, flowing into chapter 7, it would appear that Paul may also be correcting overly-strict chastity standards by the Corinthian wives, implying that this may partly be a cause for the failure of their husbands. Whatever the case, it is safe to say that they were dealing with some very difficult, real-life situations there in Corinth. Paul was taking Christianity to the formerly pagan, idol-worshipping, unlearned, and often illiterate Gentiles. This was clearly a clash of two worlds and a clash of two ways of life. But Paul had faith that the ways of Christ had answers for their lives.

One of the most important things to do when reading 1 Corinthians is to pay special attention to Paul's textual markers. All throughout the book, Paul uses phrases like "Now concerning," "I say therefore," "And unto," and "But to the rest speak I..." Each of these phrases is given to present a new thought, or to address a separate point of the Corinthian letter.

Paul's Summary of the Teaching of Jesus on Divorce and Remarriage

After addressing the question of marital abstinence and Paul's preference for the single life, Paul introduces Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage, underlining its importance by exhorting them that this is not merely a suggestion but rather a command, "*And unto the married I command, yet **not I, but the Lord**, Let not the wife depart from her husband.*" This passage is important because he is saying here that this is the teaching of Jesus. In other words, Paul's understanding of Jesus' teaching, simply put, is that a person should not divorce their spouse. Consistent with the gospel accounts, Paul does not soften the message for the Gentiles, nor does he try to explain it away. This is about as straightforward as you can get.

However, the question remains: what do you do if the divorce happens beyond your control? Or even following in line with the teachings of Jesus, what do you do if a separation occurs because of fornication? Paul taught that Jesus did not leave us to wonder. He finished this command of Christ saying: "*But and if she depart, let her remain **unmarried** or be **reconciled** to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife.*" Very simply put, Paul is telling the Corinthian

church that Jesus taught:

- Divorce is not allowed.
- If a divorce or separation should occur, only two options are open to us: reconciliation or remaining single.

Marriage to an Unbeliever

After quoting these teachings from Jesus to the married, Paul begins to discuss the curious problem of unequally yoked marriages. What do you do when you're a Christian but your spouse is an unbeliever? What if you got into this marriage even before you were a Christian? Should you take into account Paul's teaching about not mixing with the world, and separate from your ungodly spouse? Paul starts the discussion by telling them that he does not have a specific teaching from Jesus dealing with this topic. That should not diminish these teachings for us, but it does again underline the point that what he was saying above in verses 8-11 was explicitly from his understanding of the teachings of Christ.

Concerning these unequally yoked marriages Paul said: *“But to the rest speak I, not the Lord: If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy”* (1 Corinthians 7:12-14).

Paul lets them know that their relationship with God actually shields them from spiritual defilement. Furthermore, Paul says that if their spouse is willing to stay with them, they should not leave them or send them away. Interestingly, he encourages them that their faith provides a spiritual cleansing or sanctifying protection over their children, even when an unbeliever is living in the house. He concludes by saying that if the unbelieving spouse is willing, they should do everything they can to make the marriage work and stay together.

But what if they are not pleased to dwell with you and they demand that they are going to divorce or leave?

This was a difficult situation for the Corinthians because Jesus said that divorce, even without remarriage, was wrong. Remember that Jesus taught that to separate from a spouse for anything other than adultery was to actually *cause* your spouse's future adultery. *“Whosoever shall*

put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery” (Matthew 5:32). What were these new Corinthian believers to do if their unbelieving spouses left them or demanded a divorce?

In this case Paul tells them that they do not need to fret and fight with them to keep them at home. He releases them to let their unbelieving spouse go. *“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. For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband? or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save thy wife?”* (vs. 15-16).

Modern Views of “Not Under Bondage”

Some have taken Paul’s words *“not under bondage”* or especially the NIV translation, *“is not bound in such circumstances,”* to imply that because the spouse left home or rather “deserted,” that the marriage bond is now *broken* and the person is free to marry again.

However, the overall context of this chapter does not support this view. Considering what Paul said a few verses before this, and even a few verses after these verses, where Paul is specifically addressing the permanence of the marriage bond, the view that the divorcee is free to remarry is particularly misleading. It would seem extremely unlikely that in verse 11, when the context might possibly even be dealing with fornication, as Paul says *“but and if she depart, let her remain **unmarried** or be **reconciled** to her husband:”* that he would now give the complete opposite counsel on the matter and say that you **don’t** have to remain unmarried, and you **don’t** need to worry about reconciliation! The clear language of what to do after divorce was already clearly established, *“remain **unmarried** or be **reconciled.**”* Why stretch this passage to say something that it simply does not say?

What about the Greek word for bond? Is this the same word in Greek as the marriage bond?

Many modern interpreters have also made an argument based on Paul’s wording for “marriage bond,” suggesting that it is linked with Paul’s words, *“not under bondage,”* or again as the NIV reads, *“is not bound in such circumstances.”* They suggest that the words are similar in origin and share some kind of root word similarities. With this thought they once again conclude that the marriage bond is broken and the person is free to remarry. This is also an unfortunate teaching.

While it is true that these words are close in English, and may even share some kind of Greek “root family” similarities, the *actual* words used in the Greek are very different. John Piper makes these observations about the use of these Greek words:

“The word used for ‘bound’ (douloo) in verse 15 is not the same word used in verse 39 where Paul says, ‘*A wife is bound (deo) to her husband as long as he lives.*’ Paul consistently uses *deo* when speaking of the legal aspect of being bound to one marriage partner (Romans 7:2; 1 Corinthians 7:39), or to one’s betrothed (1 Corinthians 7:27). But when he refers to a deserted spouse not being bound in 1 Corinthians 7:15, he chooses a different word (douloo) which we would expect him to do if he were not giving a deserted spouse the same freedom to remarry that he gives to a spouse whose partner has died (verse 39). The last phrase of verse 15 (‘*God has called us to peace*’) supports verse 15 best if Paul is saying that a deserted partner is not ‘*bound to make war*’ on the deserting unbeliever to get him or her to stay. It seems to me that the peace God has called us to is the peace of marital harmony. Therefore, if the unbelieving partner insists on departing, then the believing partner is not bound to live in perpetual conflict with the unbelieving spouse, but is free and innocent in letting him or her go.”

John Piper concludes this controversial passage: “1 Corinthians 7:15 does not mean that when a Christian is deserted by an unbelieving spouse he or she is free to remarry. It means that the Christian is not bound to fight in order to preserve togetherness. Separation is permissible if the unbelieving partner insists on it.”

What If All This Happens Before Conversion?

This discussion about unequally yoked marriages brings up a serious question about the marriage bond itself. The argument is often made today that Jesus and Paul might have taught against divorce and remarriage but all of that counts only if it happened *after* what is considered to be a true conversion. They say “If all of this happened *before* my conversion, then I conclude that it no longer applies to me.” These people feel that since the *sin* happened before their conversion, it can be forgiven like any other sin. Andrew Crones directly addresses this common misconception by pointing to the very essence of the marriage bond: “It is frequently stated in Christian circles today that the teaching of the New Testament on the subject of divorce and remarriage only applies to those who become Christians before or during their first marriage... This argument, which one meets very frequently among

contemporary Christians, makes a number of very serious mistakes. Most important of all, it assumes that it is the sin (of divorce) which prevents remarriage. If this sin can be removed, by forgiveness, then no barrier to remarriage remains. This view is so obviously flawed that it is amazing how tenacious it is. If sin is really the barrier, what does the time of conversion to Christ have to do with it? Surely sin committed after conversion can be fully forgiven and removed? ...Jesus does not base his prohibition of remarriage on the sin of divorce. He bases it on the fact that remarriage would be legalized adultery. In other words, He bases it on the fact that the marriage bond continues to exist despite the divorce. It is not the (sin of) divorce which makes remarriage impossible for the Christian; it is the (original) marriage. Only death dissolves the marriage bond, and therefore only death sets a person free to remarry” (Divorce & Remarriage, pp. 246-247).

To the Unmarried and Betrothed

In verse 25 Paul is clearly beginning a new section, making the statement, “*Now concerning virgins...*” As mentioned before in dealing with unequally yoked marriages, Paul tells them that he has no direct commandment from Jesus on this issue, “*Now concerning virgins I have no commandment of the Lord: yet I give my judgment, as one that hath obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful.*” In this section, from verses 26-38, Paul is addressing what betrothed couples should do during the difficult times they were experiencing. Paul had just made the argument that everyone should remain in the state in which they were called. He also lifted up the single life, even rivaling that of married life as respects devotion to God. Now, concerning “*the present distress,*” the natural question that had arisen in Corinth was what to do with couples that had established betrothals and arranged marriages already. In these verses Paul again lifts up the single life, but he makes it clear that these couples are not sinning if they go ahead and get married. This entire section reads very naturally as a discussion addressing these courting couples.

Modern Confusion

Some have ignored the indications that this is the beginning of a new section (“*Now concerning virgins*”) and have tried to turn the words, “*Art thou loosed from a wife? seek not a wife. But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned,*” into a license to remarry. They again attempt to tie this passage back to the previous verses dealing with the “deserted.” They insist that Paul is still addressing the issue of the deserted spouse

from the preceding section and thereby conclude that Paul is making yet another argument for remarriage. Some support this argument by saying that the word “wife” in this passage demands that this section refers to a married person. While this point might be substantiated in English language, it must be taken into consideration that the word “wife” in the Greek is simply the word “woman” and does not make a distinction. Furthermore, when considering the totality of the passage, pressing the word beyond this becomes a big stretch.

These are all unfortunate interpretations of this passage. A natural reading of the passage, coupled with Paul’s subject marker “*Now concerning virgins,*” makes this whole argument pretty unlikely. With this in mind, verses 26-38 read very naturally from start to finish concerning the marriage of people involved in a betrothal or prearranged marriage. Do not forget, instructions as to what to do if a married person divorces had already been specifically and explicitly addressed back in verses 10-16. To say now that the divorcee is free to remarry would completely contradict all the instruction given back in the previous passage.

The Betrothed Couple

A small, but significant point worthy of mention here, is the wording “*and if a virgin marry*” from verse 28. Andrew Cornes brings out that in the Greek, Paul uses the definite article “he parthenos” which is properly translated “*the virgin,*” not “*a virgin.*” As the Young’s Literal Translation reads, “*But and if thou mayest marry, thou didst not sin; and if the virgin may marry, she did not sin.*” The way it is worded currently almost implies two completely separate subjects. This doesn’t necessarily change the section all that much, but the proper wording would make the flow even more clear. The discussion is clearly about the betrothed couple, not two different subjects.

Paul’s Final Word on the Marriage Bond

Concluding this whole section Paul, or rather the Holy Spirit through Paul, wanted to make sure that no one misunderstood this chapter. Once again he proclaimed his final dictum concerning the marriage bond and remarriage in very simple, clear and concise words: “*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.*”

Interestingly, a very similar statement was made to the Romans when the topic being discussed had nothing to do with divorce and remar-

riage at all. In Romans, it came instead from a discussion about the Law. There, Paul said:

“Know ye not, brethren, (for I speak to them that know the law,) how that the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth? 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. So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man” (Romans 7:1-3).

Paul made some pretty strong statements here. He once again spoke in unmistakable clarity that the marriage bond was for life, and that only death made a person free to remarry. It would be hard to wiggle out of this statement and start looking for loopholes and exceptions. However, as clear as his words are, the Romans passage is usually quickly dismissed because the context under discussion here in Romans 7 is the use of the Law, not divorce and remarriage. For the most part, I would agree with this reasoning and dismiss the statement as well. However, the fact that Paul repeats almost the exact same thought over in I Corinthians makes it difficult for me to completely dismiss the Romans passage. Whatever the case, there can be no doubt that in I Corinthians 7:39 Paul is specifically dealing with remarriage, and there he *distinctly* states that the marriage bond is for life and that only the death of a spouse makes a person free to remarry.

Conclusion

At the beginning of his discussion on marriage and divorce, Paul summarized the teaching of Jesus:

“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 Corinthians 7:10-11).

Now at the end of the chapter Paul summarizes all his teaching as:

“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” (1 Corinthians 7:39).

Paul begins and ends his discussion on marriage and divorce very succinctly:

- The marriage bond is for life; therefore any divorce in the eyes of man is merely a separation.
- Therefore, if a divorce occurs, only two options are open to us: reconciliation or remaining single.

As I have tried to stress in each article, I realize that these teachings are hard. Divorce is not just a doctrine or an argument; it affects real people with real lives, in real painful situations. Nevertheless, the church is called to minister in every painful situation. Admittedly, mopping up the mistakes of hundreds of years of deep-seated precedent and preconceived ideas is a challenge for any serious-minded church today. However, we cannot just turn our back on them, malign them, or wish they would just go away. We must start with the words of Scripture, without compromise, and pray for direction. *“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness”* (2 Timothy 3:16). At times this all may seem like majoring on a minor point of Scripture. I hope this is not the case. However, let’s not forget Jesus’ initial words to us at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, *“Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven”* (Matthew 5:19). Holding on to every word of God’s truth, we can count on God’s promises to bless, provide and guide our way.

5. Divorce and Remarriage in the Early Church

After the death of the apostles, Christianity continued to grow and flourish, even though it was beset by poverty and persecution. When we read the writings of the early church, we enter a world that is in some ways very different from ours. Persecution and ridicule helped to keep the church free of converts who would come merely to seek worldly advantage. Closeness to the apostles was strength. Some churches could even speak of the times when the apostles actually sat in their midst and explained the ways of Christ.

Language was also an advantage. Their faith was one that was “handed down,” more than one that was determined merely by studying ancient languages and trying to guess the root meanings of words. I find it kind of funny when I read of some university professor today, claiming that the ancient Greek plainly and emphatically says something, and then find out that the very people who lived in ancient Greece said just the opposite. With this advantage, the early church often cuts through many of our longstanding facades and institutional excuses.

On the other hand, the early church was in many ways very much like we are today. A casual read through the book of Corinthians reveals that the early Christians certainly were not immune to the problems of worldliness, compromise, and sin. The early Christians clashed with their culture—and that clash came with many hard situations that forced the church to seek the face of God.

And just as we are today, they were just regular men and women. Their words are not gospel, authoritative, or inspired. In their day, as much as in ours, the words, life, and calling of Jesus stand without comparison or exceptions. Regardless of the changing times and opinions of men, the Word of God stands forever.

That said, the closeness to the apostles, the natural understanding of ancient languages and cultures, and the purification of persecution—not to mention the sheer antiquity of their age, makes the early church an invaluable commentary, to say the very least.

Divorce—and Also—Remarriage

A few pointers in early Christian theology will help in understanding the ancient view of divorce and remarriage.

First, the early church saw marriage as a lifelong, unbreakable bond until the death of one of the partners. You can't miss this point and understand their view. Modern discussions about divorce and remarriage never seem to grasp this point.

The modern Christian frequently cries out, "Can't my sin be forgiven?" The answer is, "Of course, Jesus can forgive your sin." However, the modern mind misses an important point. The problem preventing the person from considering a second marriage is not the "sin" *per se*. Yes, the sin must be dealt with and repented of. However, as the early church saw it, the actual barrier preventing the new marriage is not the "sin," but rather the fact that the person is still married in the eyes of God.

To enter into another marriage would have been serial polygamy to the early church. Jesus said, "*Whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.*" Today we ask, "Why does Jesus call the remarriage 'adultery' if the woman is legally divorced?" The early church answered that it was called "adultery" simply because the woman was still married in the eyes of God—regardless of what divorce procedure she went through.

Second, the issues of divorce and remarriage are looked at as two separate entities. The title of this section is a bit clumsy to stress this very point. In our modern understanding, justification for a divorce also grants justification for remarriage—but the early church would disagree. As the apostle Paul said, "*But and if she depart [divorce], let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband*" (1 Corinthians 7:11). As we will read, the early church did at times allow for separation. However, this understanding would harmonize with Paul's teaching that the separated person was expected to "*remain unmarried.*"

When the early church is considered as a whole, a conspicuous unity is seen considering the subject of divorce and remarriage. Heth and Wenhem, in their book *Jesus and Divorce*, say, "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... In all, twenty-five individual writers and two early councils forbid remarriage after divorce" (p. 38).

Hermas

Heth and Wenhem tell us that the earliest Christian teaching on divorce is found in *The Shepherd of Hermas*. Many of the early Christians quote from this work. In this book, Hermas is seen as a man questioning

his heavenly guardian about what a man should do if he learns that his wife is guilty of adultery and persists in it:

“I say to him, ‘Sir, permit me to ask thee a few more questions.’ ‘Say on,’ saith he. ‘Sir,’ say I, ‘if a man who has a wife that is faithful in the Lord detect her in adultery, doth the husband sin in living with her?’ ‘So long as he is ignorant,’ saith he, ‘he sinneth not; but if the husband know of her sin, and the wife repent not, but continue in her fornication, and her husband live with her, he makes himself responsible for her sin and an accomplice in her adultery.’ ‘What then, Sir,’ say I, ‘shall the husband do, if the wife continue in this case?’ ‘Let him divorce her,’ saith he, ‘and let the husband abide alone: but if after divorcing his wife he shall marry another, he likewise committeth adultery.’ ‘If then, Sir,’ say I, ‘after the wife is divorced, she repent and desire to return to her own husband, shall she not be received?’ ‘Certainly,’ saith he, ‘if the husband receiveth her not, he sinneth and bringeth great sin upon himself; ... For this cause ye were enjoined to remain single, whether husband or wife; for in such cases repentance is possible.’”

Here it should be noted that Hermas allowed for separation because of adultery, but like the apostle Paul, required that the man remain single in hopes of his wife’s future repentance. He even quoted Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:11 as support.

Justin Martyr

Justin Martyr was an early convert to Christianity around the year A.D. 130. Patristic scholars suggest that Justin is quoting from some kind of ancient catechism. Whatever the case, Justin has some pretty strong words against remarriage. Commenting on the need for Christian chastity, Justin teaches on the different uses of the words “adultery,” as used by Jesus. Justin mentions Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount warnings, as well as His teaching from Matthew 19 concerning the “eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven.” After discussing the problem of lust, Justin brings up Jesus’ words on remarriage saying:

“And, whosoever shall marry her that is from another husband, commits adultery. And, there are some who have been made eunuchs of men, and some who were born eunuchs, and some who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake; but all cannot receive this saying.

“So that all who, by human law, are **twice married**, are in the eye of our Master sinners, and those who look upon a woman to lust after her.”

Look at those words “twice married” that I highlighted. They are from the Greek words *διγαμίας ποιούμενοι*, which literally translate “double marriage,” or rather—bigamy. These are some challenging views for our modern times. Notice that he said that even though “by human law” the divorce was accepted, in the eyes of God it was sin.

Athenagoras

In A.D. 177, Athenagoras from Athens wrote “A plea for the Christians.” In this writing he says that a Christian:

“...should either remain as he was born, or be content with one marriage; for a second marriage is only a fair-seeming adultery. ‘For whosoever puts away his wife,’ says He, ‘and marries another, commits adultery’; not permitting a man to send her away whose virginity he has brought to an end, nor to marry again.”

In this statement, Athenagoras states that he recognizes that his culture is allowing remarriage so he called it “fair-seeming adultery.” Others have translated this statement as, “for a second marriage is only auspicious.”

Clement of Alexandria

Clement of Alexandria, teaching some kind of a catechism class around A.D. 194, speaks out strongly on marriage saying:

“Now that the Scripture counsels marriage, and allows no release from the union, is expressly contained in the law, ‘Thou shalt not put away thy wife, except for the cause of fornication;’ and it regards as fornication, the marriage of those separated while the other is alive.... ‘He that taketh a woman that has been put away,’ it is said, ‘committeth adultery; and if one puts away his wife, he makes her an adulteress,’ that is, compels her to commit adultery. And not only is he who puts her away guilty of this, but he who takes her, by giving to the woman the opportunity of sinning; for did he not take her, she would return to her husband” (Stromata, 2:24).

When debating against several heretical groups that were renouncing marriage altogether by quoting Jesus’ words on becoming eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven, found in Matt. 19:9, Clement defends the passage. He says that the passage is obviously teaching about what a man should do if his wife leaves him because of fornication.

“Concerning the words, ‘Not all can receive this saying. There are some eunuchs who were born so, and some who were made eunuchs

by men, and some who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven; let him receive it who can receive it,' they do not realize the context. After his word about divorce some asked him whether, if that is the position in relation to woman, it is better not to marry; and it was then that the Lord said: 'Not all can receive this saying, but those to whom it is granted.' What the questioners wanted to know was whether, when a man's wife has been condemned for fornication, it is allowable for him to marry another" (Stromata, Bk. 3, Ch. 6).

Origen

Origen, another philosopher-turned-Christian, speaking sharply against remarriage said: "Just as a woman is an adulteress, even though she seems to be married to a man, while a former husband yet lives, so also the man who seems to marry who has been divorced does not marry her, but, according to the declaration of our Savior, he commits adultery with her" (Commentaries on Matthew 14).

Summary

Even after the age of Constantine and his legalizing of Christianity in A.D. 312, the doctrine remained strong. Stephen Wilcox, in his article, "The Authoritative Teachings of the Early Church on Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage," offers an impressive summary of the teachings of the early church, and outlines the writers who spoke explicitly on that point. His summary goes beyond the Constantine era. However, I think the consistency and force of the later writers bears witness to the uniformity of this doctrine. Ironically, most of these later writers are venerated, even by modern Reformed theologians today. Quoting Stephen Wilcox:

Summary of Early Church Doctrine on Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage 90 A.D. – 419 A.D.

If a spouse persists in adulterous behavior and there is no other alternative, the marriage relationship can be terminated by the innocent party (Hermes, Clement, Jerome, Augustine).

Spouses that are divorced for any reason must remain celibate and single as long as both spouses live. Remarriage is expressly prohibited (Hermes, Justin Martyr, Clement, Origen, Basil, Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine).

To indulge in lust with the mind is to be guilty of adultery of

the heart (Justin Martyr).

Whoever marries a divorced person commits adultery (Hermes, Justin Martyr, Clement, Origen, Basil, Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine).

Whoever contracts a second marriage, whether a Christian or not, while a former spouse lives is sinning against God (Justin Martyr, Ambrose).

God does not, and the church must not, take into account human law when it is in violation of God's law (Justin Martyr, Origen, Ambrose).

God judges motives and intentions, private thought life and actions (Justin Martyr).

The marriage covenant between a man and a woman is permanent, as long as both husband and wife are alive (Clement, Origen, Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine).

It is a serious offence against God to take another person's spouse (Basil).

The church must charge all persons who are in possession of another living person's former husband or wife with adultery (Basil).

Marriage and affection with a remarried spouse while a former spouse lives is the sin of adultery (Hermes, Justin Martyr, Clement, Origen, Basil, Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine).

It is a serious mistake to believe that it is simply one's right to divorce a spouse and take another. Even though human law may permit such a thing, God strictly forbids it, and cannot, and will not honor it (Clement, Origen, Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine).

Anyone who follows human customs and laws regarding marriage, divorce and remarriage, instead of God's divine instructions should stand in fearful awe of God Himself (Clement, Ambrose).

All lawmakers, in and out of the church are warned, to their peril, to hear and obey the Word of the Lord in regard to His commands on marriage and divorce (Ambrose).

Christians are to stop making excuses and trying to find justification for divorce and remarriage. There are no valid reasons acceptable to God (Jerome, Augustine).

A marriage is for life. No matter what a spouse turns out to be, or how they may act, what they do or don't do, or the sins they commit, the covenant remains fully in effect. A remarriage while a former spouse lives is not marriage at all, but sinful adultery. God does not divide the one flesh relationship except by physical death (Hermes, Clement, Origen, Basil, Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine).

Marriage is a lifelong covenant that will never be invalidated by God while both parties live (Hermes, Justin Martyr, Clement, Origen, Basil, Ambrose, Augustine).

It never has been lawful, it is not now lawful, and it never will be lawful to divorce and remarry. To say and do otherwise is to worship and adopt the adulterous superstitions of a different God than the one to which we have to do (Augustine).

Conclusion

How often we hear the cries and pining supplications for a return to early Christianity! How often we beat our chest and ask God “how long” before we will see revival in His church like the days of old! How frequently do we amuse ourselves with complaints about “liberal influences” within the church as we fashion ourselves the brandish of conservative crusaders! Are our conservative Christians today holding onto biblical truths, or just shifting a few paces behind the world? I remember hearing an old man once say, “I used to be in the middle of the road—but the road moved.”

Brethren, the road on which marriage, divorce, and remarriage has traveled has moved considerably throughout the ages. We can raise our heads and dismiss the early Christians as fanatics, ascetics, or heretics, but when we find ourselves chipping away at the very foundations on which we stand, we might just find ourselves shouting from a crumbling facade: “*If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?*” (Psalm 11:3)

Scriptures About Divorce

Genesis 2:24

Deuteronomy 24:1-4

Ezra 10:1-3

Malachi 2:6-16

Jeremiah 3:1-14

Matthew 5:31-32

Matthew 19:3-12

Mark 10:2-12

Luke 16:18

Romans 7:1-6

1 Corinthians 7:10-15

1 Timothy 3:2

Ephesians 5:15-33

The lives affected by divorce are real people with real pains. Many have suffered betrayed trusts and bear deep scars. They are not an “argument” or a “doctrine,” they are souls—souls that Jesus died for. With these hard situations, like all hard situations, the temptation is to ignore it and hope it will just go away. But as a people of God, we are called to minister Christ to those caught in difficult, dark, painful circumstances. Moreover, as a church in America, we must recognize that these issues are an ever-increasing element of our morally declining society.

This series of articles examines the biblical guidelines for marriage, divorce, and remarriage. The author’s prayer is that the truth of Jesus will be uplifted, and not his opinion or the opinion of an agenda or a denomination. “Yea, let God be true, but every man a liar” (Romans 3:4). May this teaching encourage all of us to reach out and minister to the scores of souls which feel caught in “impossible situations”—that they would discover the light of the gospel, and find Jesus there waiting with the key of faith that opens any door!