

Divorce and Remarriage

KLYNE SNODGRASS

Modern society faces a major problem in the issue of divorce and remarriage. The church's message on these subjects tends only to complicate the issues. At no point is the teaching of the church more out of step with the practice of the society than in what it says about sexual relations, marriage, divorce, and remarriage. The society in which we live has changed so rapidly in its opinions and practice that the church's teaching is viewed at best as a rearguard action and at worst as merely irrelevant.

The frequency of divorce is a surprise to no one. In 2005 there were approximately 2,230,000 marriages in the United States, a decrease from earlier years. The same year the number of divorces was over half as large (approximately 1,200,000 divorces, about 3.6 per 1,000 persons, one of the highest divorce rates in the world). A dramatic increase occurred in the rate of divorce in the United States from the mid to late seventies, the peak being 5.3 divorces per 1,000 persons in 1979. This peak rate is unrivaled in any other period, except for the time just after World War II.¹ (The current reduction in the rate of divorce is at least partly due to the fact that more people do not marry but merely live together.) With current trends, about 40 percent of all new marriages and 66 percent of all remarriages are expected to end in divorce. Surveys indicate that even though 90 percent of people want to stay married to the same person, of those planning marriage only 39 percent expect the marriage to last. Twenty-five percent fully expect the marriage to end in divorce. In another survey half of the women said that

they would not marry the same man and 41 percent said that they married for the wrong reasons.

Why has divorce increased so much? One reason obviously is that the church is increasingly marginalized. The church is less and less successful in addressing or directing people's lives. The church's efforts are too frequently minimal and ill-timed to have any effect. We have failed to speak frankly about some of life's most important issues, especially sexual ones. We have not taught people early enough or sufficiently enough about the relation of the sexes. This must be done long before people are thinking of marriage. We have been silent about the emotional and physical abuse inflicted on women, or even worse, we have remained silent when some suggested women can only submit to such abuse. Both the suggestion and the church's silence are sins.

Second, we live in a self-centered culture that has thrown off most restraints. Marriage is not understood as "till death do us part," but, "as long as I am fulfilled." We live in a throwaway culture, in which relations that we find boring or no longer satisfying are jettisoned as easily as out-of-style clothing. If our marriage partner no longer enhances our self-image, we cut ourselves free to find another person to make us look and feel good.

Third, sociological changes have also fostered the increase in divorce. Women have more options and independence, and society does not pressure women to put up with male aberrations as it used to. One can understand women reacting against the stupidity, insensitivity, moral weakness, egotism,

Klyne Snodgrass is Paul Brandel Professor of New Testament Studies at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago. This material was originally presented at the annual meeting of the Ministerium of the Evangelical Covenant Church in Tacoma, Washington, in June 1989, and was published by Covenant Publications as an Occasional Paper. It was revised in 2008. Copyright © 1989, 2008 Covenant Publications, Chicago.

or abuse of men. One can, of course, understand men rejecting the same in women, but the societal changes have *legitimately* given women license for self-determination in unprecedented ways. Previously, families tended to have only one self-centered person in the home, but now there may be two. When a young woman says in the presence of her husband and two-year-old son, “The most important thing in the world to me is getting my Ph.D.,” life has become distorted. Not surprisingly, this woman’s marriage ended in divorce in a very short time. A similar comment by a man is no more acceptable. Life, especially life as a Christian, cannot be lived with that kind of self-centeredness. The gospel offers something better.

Fourth, the entertainment media must take a good portion of the blame for the increase in divorce. Monogamy is presented in the media as almost unattainable, and for most people undesirable. Divorce is presumed and presented as the dominant reality. Sexual relations are assumed to have virtually no limits within or outside marriage. Self-fulfillment at almost any cost is proclaimed as an inalienable right, regardless of questions of sexual ethics or previous commitments. The gospel offers something better.

Fifth, certainly the increase in the divorce rate is a result of the ease with which divorce is both obtained and accepted within our society. Exactly at this point some of the difficulties are obvious. If divorce is difficult to obtain, the trauma inflicted on people is enormous; if easy to obtain, marriage is diminished. If divorced people are not accepted, we only increase their pain and loneliness; if they are easily accepted, they may never deal with the problems that led to divorce or with their own need for repentance.

What shall we do about divorce? Should the attitudes of Christians really be different from non-Christians? Why should a forty-year-old man not divorce his weary wife and get a younger one? And why should a forty-year-old woman not divorce her uncaring, insensitive, lazy husband and get a caring, energetic one? What should pastors do when asked to marry persons who have been divorced? If a church indiscriminately marries people, it loses its witness and integrity. If a church refuses to marry people, they will only go to another church nearby, and any chance of ministry will be lost.

The increase in divorce has not been without cost. Injustice, pain, grief, and loss have been inflicted on

spouses and children—and oneself. Does no one care about injustice and pain? The destructive effect of divorce, especially on children, cuts deeper and lasts longer than most of us are willing to admit.

The Evangelical Covenant Church *has* addressed the subject. In 1961 the Annual Meeting of the church adopted a statement on divorce and remarriage that allowed the remarriage of the “innocent” party. A second statement was approved at the 1976 Covenant Annual Meeting, which also allows remarriage, but does not contain the clause about the “innocent” party. This statement was “updated” by the Board of the Ministry and published in *The Covenant Companion* (LXX, May 1988, pp. 16-17).² These statements are helpful, but no summary statement can be viewed as an adequate treatment of the variety of issues involved. Four weaknesses of the 1988 statement should be mentioned:

1) Inadequate rationale is provided for the movement from the statement that marriage is “for life” to the consideration of the possibility of remarriage.

2) Inadequate attention is given to the problem of divorce among church leaders. The question of church membership is addressed, and the problem of divorce among the clergy is treated briefly. Assumedly if clergy can be reinstated to ministry, lay leaders would not be disqualified from office, but the statement needs to give more attention to questions about the impact of divorce on leadership, whether lay or pastoral.

3) The treatment of the phrase “except on the grounds of unchastity” in Matthew 19:9 is unclear and unconvincing.

4) Reliance on the inferior manuscript tradition in John 8:1-9 is ill-advised. Especially with the questions about the origin of this material, this text should not be used as a means of escape.

The Church’s Task

The church cannot go on as if nothing has happened in this society in the way we approach divorce and remarriage. One should, at least, ask how the church got in the “marrying business.” We take for granted that the church should be involved in solemnizing marriages, but there is no biblical mandate for this practice. I am not suggesting that the church should stop being involved in people’s marriages, for this is an important avenue of ministry. Still, are we really sure about what we are doing? Often, our difficulties occur in those areas where our practice is without scriptural warrant.

The church's primary task in this and other areas is to tell the truth. There are five words that sum up the Christian faith: grace, truth, faith, love, and hope. There is an order to these five. Grace always comes first and provides the basis on which we tell the truth. We cannot allow ourselves the self-indulgence of suppressing the truth. The first statement about sin in Romans 1:18 describes its tendency to suppress the truth. The task of a family is to tell the truth lovingly to each of its members. The church has the same task of telling the truth lovingly. If this is the case anywhere, surely it should be the case with the Evangelical Covenant Church, which understands itself as a family of faith. In the church we provide grace that gives people the basis on which to face the truth.

Grace is cheapened if truth is sacrificed. As Wendell Berry pointed out, "a school's worth and integrity depend upon its willingness to call things by their right names."³ While this statement was made with reference to universities, it is certainly true of churches. Our integrity depends on our willingness to call things by their right names. With regard to divorce and remarriage, we need to tell the truth in three areas: about ourselves; about the scriptural teaching on this subject, which will receive the most focus in this paper; and about ministering to divorced persons.

The Truth about Ourselves

Apart from our relation to God, no area requires truth in our inner being more than our relations with the opposite sex. The truth is we are a thoroughly self-centered and sexually driven people. This is true of Christians as well, even though, hopefully, there is an opposing desire to serve God. Christians are just as much driven by self-centered needs, societal norms, and our own sexuality as anyone else. Given that, do we really care what God wants with the subject of divorce and remarriage? Do we derive our views from Scripture? Would it really make any difference if we became convinced that Jesus said, "Divorce is prohibited"? How as a church would we implement the conviction? Our self-centeredness often distorts even our desire to please God.

The truth is that we do not handle our sexuality well. All of us are much more conditioned in all our activity by our sexuality than we dare admit. Certainly women do not realize how thoroughly most men are driven by sexuality—for whatever reasons, and men, no doubt, do not understand how women

are controlled by their sexuality. We may choose to present an image of righteous relations, but our eyes, thoughts, comments, and demeanor—if not our actions—indicate otherwise. Marriage does not change our sexual drivenness; it can, however, provide a God-given arena in which our sexuality is ordered and freed for real intimacy, which is what people crave and often seek to find in all the wrong places. Unfortunately, too often our understanding of marriage is not integrated sufficiently with our faith. We do not want Christian weddings; we want church weddings, weddings that use the church building to make a romantic statement. As the surveys show, people *do* get married for all the wrong reasons.

Christians must stand against egotism, egocentrism, and the wrong types of sexual drivenness—after we have addressed ourselves on the same subject. The truth is that Christians, including pastors, do not handle these areas very well either. A disturbing book about divorce among pastors reports on 200 case studies of divorced pastors and wives. (Clergy rank third in divorces among professionals.) The summary of the book is that too often pastors are sleeping with counselees, have tremendously insecure egos, need to be stroked, and are liable to both seducing and seduction.⁴ How lamentable! All of us need to tell the truth about our self-centeredness and about our sexuality, and we can do so without exhibitionism. The New Testament does, and we can afford to as well. Only as we are truthful with ourselves, God, and each other can we begin to understand ourselves and live our lives within the purposes of God.

The Truth about Divorce and Remarriage in Scripture

If people are aware of any of the Bible's teaching about divorce, they usually will know that Jesus prohibited divorce except for adultery. This conclusion is drawn from Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, but it is an oversimplification and is illegitimate. The meaning of the "exception clause" is debated but almost certainly is not so narrow. Furthermore, numerous other passages should be considered as well in order to have a more complete picture of what the Bible says on the subjects of marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Several of these passages contain difficulties for interpretation; the Bible is an ancient text addressing different contexts from our own. Also, one must remember that the questions we bring to the text are *not* the ones the text is answering. We must

seek the intention of God for humanity in the *whole* of Scripture.

The following texts should be considered in any discussion of divorce and remarriage. A brief translation or summary will be offered here, sometimes with comments about interpretive difficulties. More detailed discussion will follow.

1) Genesis 1:26-27—“...male and female he created them.”

2) Genesis 2:23-24—“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh” (NIV).

3) Exodus 21:7-11—Divorce is *permitted* to protect the wife when a husband does not provide food, clothing, or marital rights to a woman who has been purchased as a female servant. Note verse 11: “If he does not provide her with these three things, she is to go free, without any payment of money” (NIV).

4) Leviticus 21:7 and 14—Priests are not to marry prostitutes, divorcees, or widows.

5) Deuteronomy 21:10-14—Divorce is *permitted* to protect a woman who was captured in war and taken as a wife and then is found displeasing. She cannot be sold or mistreated since she has been dishonored.

6) Deuteronomy 22:19—Divorce is *prohibited* to protect the wife when her husband dislikes her and falsely accuses her of not being a virgin.

7) Deuteronomy 22:28-29—Divorce is *prohibited* to protect the wife who has been the victim of the husband’s premarital rape.

8) Deuteronomy 24:1-3—This text does *not* legitimate divorce; it assumes divorce is taking place and attempts to regulate it by not allowing a woman to return to her first husband after the death or divorce of the second. This is the text that the Pharisees quote to Jesus in Matthew 19:7/Mark 10:4. Compare 2 Samuel 3:14-16 and Jeremiah 3:1-14, where David and God do not abide by the regulation in Deuteronomy 24.

9) Ezra 10:2-3 and 10-44—Compare Nehemiah 13:23-27. Divorce is *required* for those who have married foreign wives. The attempt by some to say this action is only to nullify unreal marriages is special pleading.

10) Malachi 2:14-16—This is a strong statement about the covenant character of marriage and God’s hatred of divorce. There is probably an allusion to Genesis 2:24.

11) Matthew 5:32/Luke 16:18—This saying has several differences between the two accounts. Note

especially the “exception” clause in Matthew. In Matthew, the divorced woman is made to commit adultery if she remarries and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. In Luke, the man who divorces and remarries also commits adultery, as does the man who marries a divorced woman. That a man commits adultery by remarrying after divorce surely was surprising to many of Jesus’ contemporaries, for the prevailing view was that men commit adultery only if they have sexual relations with another man’s wife.

12) Matthew 19:1-12/Mark 10:1-12—This is the classic treatment of the issue. Genesis 2:24 is viewed as the primary source for understanding marriage. Again, but in different words, Matthew alone has the “exception” clause. Mark extends the prohibition of divorce to the woman, since in the Roman world women could initiate divorce, something they typically could not do in Judaism. Clearly Jesus’ view in Mark is an absolute prohibition of divorce. The same is true in Luke 16:18 and 1 Corinthians 7:10-11.

13) Romans 7:1-3—Paul assumes that marriage is till death. Compare 1 Corinthians 7:39.

14) 1 Corinthians 7:8-15—Paul quotes Jesus’ absolute prohibition of divorce and adds that if Christians do divorce they should remain unmarried. He also adds that marriage to unbelievers does not require divorce, but that an unbeliever who wishes to leave may leave. The brother or sister is not “bound” in such cases. Note also the assumptions about sexual relations and the dependence on Genesis 2:24 in 1 Corinthians 6:15-18.

15) Ephesians 5:18-33—The context of being Spirit filled and of mutual submission is the proper place for this section to begin. This text does not discuss divorce, but its treatment of the marriage relationship and its reference to Genesis 2:24 cannot be ignored, even if this passage is one of the most abused in all of Scripture because of unwarranted conclusions about what is meant with the statement that the husband is “head.”

16) 1 Timothy 3:2/Titus 1:6—The phrase “husband of one wife” is debated, but the expression points to marital fidelity, rather than to only having been married once. Compare 1 Timothy 5:9.

Some of these texts witness to the low status of women in the ancient world and its tragic effects. Recognizing this is part of speaking the truth about Scripture. These texts seek to regulate the tragic circumstances, but it is clear from other texts that the

low status granted women has nothing to do with God's intent. The most important texts in this list are the ones from Genesis 1:26-27; 2:23-24; and Malachi 2:14-16. Genesis 2:24 not only is the basis of the statement in Malachi 2:14-16, but it becomes *the* paradigmatic statement about marriage for Judaism, Jesus, and Paul. These texts along with the New Testament texts that quote them (Matthew 19:4-6; 1 Corinthians 6:15-18; Ephesians 5:18-33) provide an understanding of marriage that must be the starting place of any biblical discussion of divorce. From these texts emerges an exalted view of marriage. Marriage is viewed as a gift of God, and the male-female relationship established in creation in some way reflects the very image of God. Something new is created in the oneness of male and female so that one has to speak of the "ontological" character of marriage. A new entity is created in marriage, which is viewed as the work of God. Malachi 2:14-16 underscores that marriage is viewed as a covenant (compare Proverbs 2:17), a promise relation, and that God hates divorce.

Ephesians 5:18-33 views the two marriage partners as bound together in mutual submission under Christ as Lord. Marriage is a metaphor for the church and reflects the relation of Christ to the church. Marriage is an expression of discipleship requiring a double commitment: to Christ and to the spouse. In fact, the command for husbands to love their wives seems to be the specific application to the wife of the command to love one's neighbor. The relation to spouse is so much a mirror of the relation to God that unhealthy relation with the spouse threatens relation with God (1 Corinthians 7:5; 1 Peter 3:7). Such a high view of marriage cannot treat divorce lightly.

Even though this exalted view of marriage is based on Old Testament texts and even though Malachi stated that God hates divorce, the Hebrew Scriptures also know the reality of divorce. The Old Testament teaching on divorce is surprisingly varied. Exodus 21:7-11 and Deuteronomy 21:10-14 *permit* divorce to protect the wife. Deuteronomy 22:19 and 29 *prohibit* divorce to protect the wife. Clearly in these texts—as dangerous as it sounds—the underlying theology of caring for persons has precedence over marriage laws. These texts also assume that the wife is the one most likely to be abused. However, these texts cannot be viewed as license for divorce. They reflect the pain and grief of life and seek to regulate the level of injustice in an ancient society.

Any application of these texts requires honesty and integrity before God.

Ezra 10 and Nehemiah 13:23-27 are difficult texts to treat. Here divorce is *required* because Jews had been guilty of marrying foreign wives and following them into idolatry. Concern for the existence and the purity of the chosen people led to the harsh decree requiring divorce, and no doubt to tragedy and trauma in the lives of women and children. The theological assumption of these texts is that one's relation with God takes precedence over marriage laws. The same theology will operate in a different way for Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:15.

The sayings about divorce in the Gospels are loaded with exegetical difficulties. Adequate treatment of these texts must address at least the following:

1) The relation of the sayings of Jesus in Matthew 5:31-32; 19:1-12; Mark 10:1-12; Luke 16:18; and 1 Corinthians 7:10-11.

2) The meaning of the word *porneia* (often translated "adultery") in the so-called "exception" clauses.

3) The significance of this "exception" clause in the Matthean texts.

4) The identification of the test the Pharisees put to Jesus and an assessment of the hermeneutical significance of the fact that Jesus' statement is in response to a test.

5) The intent with the statement concerning "eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom" in Matthew 19:10-12. Is the reference to celibacy or to people who remain single after a spouse has left? (Compare the discussion in 1 Corinthians 7:15.) Does "this word" ("this teaching" in NRSV) in 19:11 refer to Jesus' statement in 19:9 or to the disciples' response in 19:10? Does "not everyone is making use of this word" in 19:11 refer to disciples of Jesus (i.e., believers) or to people who are not disciples (non-believers)?

Matthew 19:1-12 and Mark 10:1-12 are clearly parallel and are the foundational texts. Matthew 5:32 and Luke 16:18 could reflect an independent saying unrelated to the longer discussion in Matthew and Mark, but this seems unlikely. As with other examples, Matthew appears to have provided a short summary of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount and then later in his Gospel provided a longer treatment of the subject. (Compare 6:14-15 and 18:21-35.) If so, then all four sayings in the Gospels and 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 probably de-

rive from one incident in the life of Jesus. Whether the “exception” clauses are from Matthew or Jesus cannot be determined on exegetical grounds. One’s conclusions about synoptic relations will bias an answer, but given a Jewish context, the “exception” could derive from Jesus.

The meaning of the word *porneia* is debated, but almost certainly the word does not mean “adultery.” In other words, the traditional statement that divorce is prohibited except for adultery is simplistic. If *porneia* meant “adultery” in Matthew 5:32, the statement would be redundant. Jesus would then be saying: “If anyone divorces his wife except for the reason of adultery, he makes her become an adulteress.” She would be an adulteress already. One should also notice in Matthew 15:19 that the word *porneia* is used after *moicheia*, the more precise word for “adultery,” and, therefore, some other sin is referred to. A second option is that *porneia* refers to sexual unfaithfulness during betrothal. In Judaism betrothal was viewed as an oath and required divorce to break the agreement. This option is unlikely. The two most likely meanings for *porneia* are: 1) any sexual sin; 2) incest. There is no question that *porneia* is capable of referring to a broad range of sexual sin (including adultery), and such a meaning would make sense in Matthew. Some, however, are drawn to the view that *porneia* in the “exception” clauses refers to incest. This is clearly the meaning of the word in 1 Corinthians 5:1 and is probably the intention of Acts 15:20 and 29 where the only commands placed on the Gentiles after the Jerusalem council were to avoid meat sacrificed to idols, blood, meat from animals that had been strangled, and *porneia*. The basis for these four restrictions is the holiness code of Leviticus 17 and 18, which is concerned partly to prevent sexual relations among family members. If “incest” is the meaning of *porneia*, the “exception” clause is not an exception at all, nor does it provide grounds for divorce. It merely recognizes that incestuous relationships ought not be continued. A conclusion on the meaning of *porneia* is difficult, but it seems preferable to understand the word as a general reference to sexual immorality.

Even if *porneia* does not refer to incest, it may be wrong to speak of exceptions to the prohibition of divorce. In both the Jewish and the Gentile world divorce was mandatory for a man whose wife committed adultery. Rather than offering exceptions, the clauses in Matthew may merely recognize the obligations required by law.⁵ Neither Jesus nor Matthew

was attempting to provide grounds for divorce. Jesus’ teaching on divorce is clearly very strong. His primary concern is not divorce, but the divine intention with marriage. At the same time, however, on any interpretation of the Gospel sayings he gives a strong prohibition of divorce.

But, why is the question put to Jesus in Matthew 19:3/Mark 10:2 a test? In good rabbinic fashion, the Pharisees ask about the grounds of divorce. Almost certainly their question reflects the rabbinic debate between the houses of Hillel and Shammai over how to interpret ‘*erwat dābār* (“a thing of nakedness [or shame]”) in Deuteronomy 24:1. *Gittin* IX.10 of the Mishnah describes the debate:

The School of Shammai say: A man may not divorce his wife unless he has found unchastity in her, for it is written, *Because he hath found in her indecency in anything*. And the School of Hillel say: [He may divorce her] even if she spoiled a dish for him, for it is written, *Because he hath found in her indecency in anything*.

The House of Shammai emphasized the word ‘*erwat* (“nakedness” or “shame”) and concluded that *unchastity* was the ground for divorce, whereas the House of Hillel emphasized the word *dābār* (“word” or “thing”) and concluded that *anything* could be a ground for divorce. In addition, the Essenes from Qumran apparently prohibited divorce completely. (See 11Q Temple Scroll 57:17-19 and CD 4:12b-5:14a).

Why was it a test to ask Jesus if it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife? If he answered, “You may divorce her for any reason,” he would be siding with the Hillelites. If he answered, “You may divorce her only for unchastity,” he would be siding with the Shammaites. If he said, “You may not divorce at all,” he would be siding with the Essenes. Any of the answers is a legitimate answer within Judaism and would create no threat to Jesus. The key to understanding the test is in the geographical description of Matthew 19:1-2/Mark 10:1. The place where the question is put to Jesus is the area of Judea east of the Jordan. This region was controlled by Herod Antipas and was not far from Machaerus, the fortress where John the Baptist was imprisoned and beheaded for his condemnation of Herod’s marriage to his brother’s wife. (See Matthew 14:1-12, especially 14:4 in comparison with 19:3; see also Josephus, *The*

Antiquities of the Jews XVIII.116-119.) The Pharisees' question is an attempt to get Jesus to make the same condemnation and suffer the same fate.

The hermeneutical implications of the fact that Jesus was facing entrapment are significant. He was not responding to our pastoral questions about divorce and remarriage. (Note the different attitude in John 4:16-18 toward the Samaritan woman who had had five husbands.) He did not respond to the question of the Pharisees in the way they wished. He both deflected the test by focusing on God's intention with marriage and gave a strong prohibition of divorce. He emphasized the ontological character of marriage (Matthew 19:6) and viewed Moses' discussion of divorce as a concession made to the hardness of people's hearts. In effect, Jesus did not grant any legitimate cause for divorce. *Divorce always partakes of sin, and like any sin, is always contrary to God's intention.* Jesus' prohibition of divorce may be hyperbole, as Robert Stein has argued,⁶ but it is not utopian any more than is his call to avoid oaths and retaliation. His statements on divorce are a radical call to discipleship in keeping with the rest of his teaching.⁷

The most difficult of the exegetical questions is the statement about "eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom" in Matthew 19:10-12. If "this word" (or "this teaching"), which only those to whom it is given can accept (19:11), refers to the disciples' statement in 19:10 ("it is better not to marry"), the teaching is about celibacy and is parallel to 1 Corinthians 7:7-8. In this case the verses do not relate to a discussion of divorce and remarriage. If, on the other hand, the reference is to Jesus' statement in 19:9 prohibiting divorce, obviously they are relevant. The teaching accepted only by those to whom it is given could indicate that only Jesus' disciples accept this teaching or that only *some* of his disciples make use of this teaching. The implication of the former would be that the kingdom requires that disciples remain single after divorce. (Compare 1 Corinthians 7:11.) The implication of the latter would be that remarriage is possible for disciples for whom this teaching was not given. However, the attempt to legitimate remarriage on the basis of 19:11 is difficult to square with Jesus' strong rejection of divorce and remarriage in 19:9. These verses more likely refer to celibacy.

When Paul encountered questions about divorce involving Christians (1 Corinthians 7:10-15), he based his discussion on Jesus' prohibition of di-

vorce. Neither partner should leave a spouse, and if they do leave, they should remain unmarried or be reconciled. Paul apparently could not imagine Christians divorcing and not being reconciled. That is not the end of the discussion, however, for Paul had to address a situation that Jesus did not—the question of Christians married to non-Christians. Apparently some Corinthians felt that such alliances were "unholy" and should be dissolved. Paul rejected such an idea. One did not need to leave a non-Christian spouse who was content to stay in the relationship. Paul did, however, add an exception to Jesus' prohibition of divorce. If a non-Christian wanted to leave the marriage, he or she should be allowed to leave. The brother or sister is not "bound" (literally "enslaved") in such cases. Do Paul's words imply that the Christian who had been abandoned was free to remarry? The text is not clear, but his comments concerning widows in 7:39 seems to suggest this. Also, the fact that Paul does not tell such people to remain single suggests they are free to remarry. (Contrast 7:11.)

The analysis of passages on divorce shows the biblical texts are more varied and less precise than we would like. The Old Testament texts point to the difficulties of marriage relationships more than do the New Testament texts, but none of the texts discusses divorce and remarriage in a comprehensive way. Even given the variety of the texts, however, the Bible, especially the New Testament, takes a much more restricted view of divorce than we do. Despite the exegetical issues in the texts above, only some of which have been mentioned, the teaching of the New Testament is clear. Divorce is contrary to the divine intention, and the early church shows virtually no sign of lessening Jesus' absolute prohibition of divorce. The problem is not really with what the text says, but with how we should apply it in the world in which we live. One has only to look at the casuistry of the church throughout history as it annulled marriages or distinguished sacramental from non-sacramental marriages (divorce being allowable for the latter) to see the problems.

The Truth about Ministering to Divorced Persons

No matter how seriously we take the biblical teaching on divorce, problems still exist. Some of the problems are hermeneutical. How do we apply the variety of texts that are addressed to specific circumstances in the ancient world that are more limited

than our own? How do we deal both with Jesus' rejection of divorce and Moses' concession to the hardness of human hearts? Some of the problems are caused by the ambiguity of our circumstances. Paul gave specific directions about believers and unbelievers, but often the identification of a believer is not easy. One or both marriage partners may be believers in name only or may have turned their backs on what they know they should do. (Compare 1 Timothy 5:8.) Should conversion after divorce change the way remarriage is viewed? Other problems arise because of questions about the character of divorce and remarriage. Forgiveness is available for any sin. But, given the ontological character of marriage, is sexual sin of a different character than other sins? (Note 1 Corinthians 6:18.) Is the avoidance of legalism merely an open door to license? Is adultery an act or a state in which one lives? Still other problems arise because of human actions. Is a mistake made in one's youth meant to be a life-long destructive entanglement? Should one partner be punished for life because the other refuses to stay in the relationship?

The problems are real, but the determining question is "For what do we as Christians stand?" Can we ignore the New Testament view on divorce? Does the Covenant stand for anything other than tolerance? Karl Olsson correctly noted that "the only constituting principle of the Covenant is new life in Christ and without that we have no principle of coherence."⁸ Does new life in Christ change the way we handle our egos, our sexuality, our marriages, and the way we treat the question of divorce?

The truth is that we must still minister to divorced people with all the difficulties of their lives. There are no easy answers to the problems of people's lives. The temptation exists to create answers and force people to conform. As one scholar put it, "Doctrine should never be compromised by cases."⁹ Such a view of theology is sterile and incomplete. Theology is to be applied to life with all its difficulties. Paul's method is instructive. He was a task theologian reflecting on the "cases" of his churches in the light of the gospel. The problem, of course, is that in dealing with cases we easily become hopelessly entangled in casuistry and are open to charges of inconsistency. What is required is integrity in following Christ.

Even where integrity has been compromised, divorced people need ministry. They find themselves in a world that has been destroyed. They need accep-

tance, grace to face the truth, mercy, and discipline.

The attempts of the church to deal with the problem of divorce and remarriage have been and continue to be varied. They include:¹⁰

1) The rigorist position, which argues for the absolute indissolubility of marriage. Neither divorce nor remarriage is acceptable.

2) The legislative approach, which allows two reasons for divorce: adultery (based on Matthew's "exception" clauses) and desertion by an unbeliever (the Pauline privilege based on 1 Corinthians 7:15). The "Erasmian" understanding would allow remarriage; others would argue that remarriage is not permitted even under these circumstances.¹¹

3) A double standard approach, which is more restrictive for Christians and less restrictive for non-Christians (based on 1 Corinthians 7:11 and 15).

4) The dispensational approach, which views Jesus' statements as part of the kingdom teaching offered to the Jews and, therefore, the church is not bound by them.¹² Remarriage would be allowed.

5) The pastoral (or more liberal) approach, which seeks to take the lesser of two evils. The Reformers allowed divorce for desertion, cruelty, and refusal of conjugal duty. Remarriage is usually allowed.

6) The Roman Catholic approach, which can annul marriages and dissolve non-sacramental marriages (the Petrine privilege). Remarriage is allowed.

Few of us will be attracted to the Roman Catholic approach or the dispensational bracketing of the teaching of Jesus. One can understand why the other approaches developed, but in the end none of them is satisfying for the sheer reason that there are no easy answers on this subject. If one limits divorce to cases of adultery, some people will commit adultery to escape a hopeless marriage. Further, on the more restrictive approaches, we find ourselves unjustly more tolerant of people who have been promiscuous prior to marriage than of people who have been faithful within marriage, but seek remarriage after divorce.

The real question is "What do we do when the unthinkable happens, when the indissoluble is broken?" There can be no soft reaction to divorce. Divorce may be understandable in a given circumstance, but it cannot be made a light affair. Recent attempts to see divorce in a more positive light because of longer life expectancy or as a new pattern for marriage must be rejected forcefully.¹³ Nor is it appropriate to speak of the grace of divorce. With-

out doubt, divorce is necessary at times due to abuse and destructive relationships, but it is always tragic and partakes of sin. People must be helped to speak the truth about their own lives and sin and to confess their failures and repent of their sin. They do not need to be made to grovel, but they do need to speak truth with God, their families, and themselves. Divorced people need the grace and support of the church while they piece their lives back together. The failure of the church to minister to divorced people, even to seek them out, is unconscionable.

Divorce is only part of the problem. Most people would agree that divorce is at times necessary, but the problems escalate when remarriage is the subject. With the exception of the works of W. A. Heth and G. J. Wenham, nearly all recent works on this subject allow for remarriage after divorce. The grounds on which they argue for divorce are often unconvincing, especially when the New Testament is at best hesitant on the subject.

If marriage is for life, what is the rationale for remarriage? One basis is in texts like Exodus 21:7-11 and Deuteronomy 21:10-14 that permit divorce to prevent abuse. No one is forced to stay in an abusive relationship.

A second basis is in recognition of the *ad hoc* character of the New Testament statements. They are not intended as comprehensive teachings on divorce and remarriage.

A third basis is in Jesus' statement that Moses permitted divorce because of the hardness of people's hearts. Divorce is not the will of God for his people, but hardness of hearts is as real as it ever was. If divorce was required to deal with the problems in Moses' day, it is necessary in our time for the same sins. Remarriage after divorce was assumed in ancient divorce contracts.

A fourth basis for remarriage is found in the "exception" clauses in Matthew. Whether a true exception or a recognition of divorce required in cases of unchastity, it would make little sense to speak of the exception unless remarriage were permitted.

A fifth basis exists in Paul's statement that "the brother or sister is not bound" when an unbelieving spouse departs (1 Corinthians 7:15). Paul's thinking here as elsewhere is grounded in the fact that God is a God of peace.

However, none of these bases for remarriage can be used to justify the abuse of divorce and remarriage in our time. In short, divorce may be required, but it is never "legitimate." As important as the in-

volvement of the community is in marital difficulties, none of us—including pastors—grants license to another person to divorce or remarry. Such decisions are private affairs and must be made individually before God, even though the community is a partner in the discussion. Nor is divorce the unforgivable sin. In fact, the placement of the discussion of divorce in Matthew 19:1-12 immediately after the parable of the unforgiving servant may be relevant. If so, it would underscore that divorce too should be forgiven.

In a world that views bigamy as illegal but accepts promiscuity and serial marriages, the church has the task of helping people understand the sanctity of marriage and of helping them establish healthy marriages. The church also has the responsibility of ministering to divorced people, and yes, of helping them decide if remarriage is appropriate. We must know the difference between showing grace and being soft, between helping people deal with the reality of guilt and being harsh. Our task is to help people both speak and live the truth in love. ■

Endnotes

1. *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2008* (127th edition). Washington, D.C.: U. S. Department of Commerce. See also the 108th edition and Marvin B. Sussman and Suzanne K. Steinmetz (eds.), *Handbook of Marriage and the Family* (New York: Plenum Press, 1987).
2. The "updating" of the 1976 statement by the Ministerium involves several changes.
3. Wendell Berry, "The Loss of the University," in *Home Economics* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987), 87.
4. Mary LaGrand Bouma, *Divorce in the Parsonage* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1979).
5. Bruce Vawter, "Divorce and the New Testament," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* XXXIX (1977): 528-42.
6. Robert H. Stein, "Is It Lawful for a Man to Divorce His Wife?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* XXII (1979): 115-21.
7. David Catchpole's argument ("The Synoptic Divorce Material as a Traditio-Historical Problem," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* LVII [1974-75]: 92-127) that Jesus was setting the Hebrew Scriptures aside in not allowing divorce is misguided. The Essenes rejected divorce and certainly did not view themselves as rejecting the Hebrew Scriptures.
8. Private letter.
9. Charles C. Ryrie, "Biblical Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage," *Grace Theological Journal* III (1982): 192.
10. Four of these views are represented in H. Wayne House

(ed.), *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990).

11. See W. A. Heth and G. J. Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce: The Problem with the Evangelical Consensus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985). To sustain their view they argue that the exception clause in Matthew 19:9 refers only to divorce, not to divorce and remarriage.

12. See Dwight Harvey Small, *The Right to Remarry* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1975), pp. 122f. and 132-37.

13. See Amy C. Gregg, "Is Every Marriage God's Will?" *Daughters of Sarah*, XV.1 (1989): 3-6; and Jeanette Blonigen Clancy, "Liberating the Chained," 10-13 of the same issue, the whole of which is on women and divorce. Unjust marriage relationships must be addressed, but exalting divorce or diminishing God's purposes in marriage are not the way to do it.

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