

DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

ONE

GRACE OR LAW?

Tertullian, a renowned third-century Christian lawyer and philosopher, wrote a treatise on the Christian doctrine of marriage. In it he laments the lowered standards of his day, and the ease with which many people were changing spouses. He says that such careless divorce and remarriage were never part of God's law nor even true to the best standards of the pagan Roman world. Then he makes the remarkable statement –

"So true, moreover, is it that divorce `was not from the beginning' (Matthew 19:8; Mark 10:5), that among the Romans it is not till after the six hundredth year from the building of the city that this kind of `hard-heartedness' is set down as having been committed." ¹

Six hundred years without a divorce! Is that true? Who can tell? But it certainly shows that the stern early Roman republic held a high view of the sanctity of marriage. However, by the time of Tertullian Rome had been mistress of a vast empire for two hundred years, and a moral collapse had begun. This decay of virtue greatly alarmed thoughtful people, who saw in it the first signs that Roman hegemony was doomed.

The same kind of moral decline is again becoming epidemic in our own time, which is marked by a steadily increasing divorce rate. What is worse, is that the divorce rate among church-goers is now nearly equal to that in the outside world. Both secular man and saint have abandoned the old standards.

How should a Christian respond to the rampant wrong, the collapse of the family, that is unravelling the fabric of our society and undermining the ethical integrity of the church? Different people will answer that question differently; but my own response is to strive to establish a balance between two attitudes:

- stern adherence to the highest standards of marriage; and
- compassionate yielding to the desperate pain of divorce.

Therefore this study will try to establish the following things –

- that the divine ideal for marriage is its sacred inviolability and permanence;
- that divorce should ordinarily be allowed on two grounds alone:
 - porneia (Matthew 19:9); and
 - the Pauline privilege (1 Corinthians 7:15); ²

1 On Monogamy, ch. 9.

2 Both of these grounds are explained fully in chapters Two and Three below.

- that where divorce is allowed, re-marriage must also be allowed as a necessary and humane corollary;
- that re-marriage is ordinarily not permitted if divorce occurs on any grounds other than the two stated above.

But how should those two grounds be interpreted? Plainly, people will choose to read them in different ways. But how do I read them? My choice is to define them as broadly, not as narrowly, as possible. Do I mean that personal opinion is more important than scripture in solving these problems? Of course not! But scripture does have to be interpreted – that is, a decision has to be made about what its words mean, and how they should be applied to life in our time. Before presenting you, then, with my conclusions, it is fair that you should know how I reached them.

(I) PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION

No one can approach the task of interpreting any document with a truly neutral attitude. Each interpreter is predisposed to read things in a certain way, and every reader is inclined to emphasise some ideas above others. We are all conditioned by temperament, culture, education, and by life experience, to adopt certain presuppositions, to look at the world through a particular set of eyes. The inevitable result is that, consciously or unconsciously, we interpret any piece of writing within an established framework; we are already disposed to construe in a foregone way whatever evidence is presented to us.

Whether wittingly or not, therefore, people must (and do) make certain choices before they begin reading any piece of literature; and those choices establish the way they understand and apply what they are studying. That is true for anybody reading anything.

So, dear reader, you and I alike are already pre-conditioned, by who we are and where we have come from in life, to interpret things in a certain way, to view them against a particular background, to respond to them according to our own inner necessity. This means that some readers will be profoundly convinced by the arguments contained in these pages, while others will remain unmoved, adamant still that my conclusions are less than sure!

Of course, the preliminary choices we make are not always subconscious. Sometimes the interpreter will be at least partly aware of what he is doing. If so, he has examined the options, and has openly decided to adopt a certain approach to his task. This is what I have done in the following study. Let me then tell you honestly the choices I have made, and why.

(A) THREE NECESSARY CHOICES

One thousand years ago a godly abbot ruled the great monastery at Cluny in France. His name was Odilo, and he became famous for his extraordinary ability in matching strong leadership with cheerful generosity, and in linking a deep piety with much sympathy for the struggling people around him. His most noted saying was: "I would rather be damned for being too merciful than for being too severe!"

That seems to me to be an admirable philosophy. But it does highlight the fact that several options are available to those who seek to understand what the Bible teaches about human behaviour and relationships. In the main, there are three choices –

(B) A STRICT OR A FLEXIBLE INTERPRETATION?

(1) YOU CAN CHOOSE TO FOLLOW EITHER A STRICT INTERPRETATION, OR ONE THAT IS GENEROUS AND FLEXIBLE.

Life will certainly be easier for the pastor or teacher who generally says "No!" to divorce and absolutely rejects re-marriage. He is spared the distress, the ethical dilemma, of struggling to decide what is right in each case. He can just quote (say) Matthew 5:31-32,³ and for him that ends the matter. But I am suspicious of such a rigid approach. I want to ask those stern moralists, "Why do you not follow the same strict rule when you interpret other sayings of Christ – especially those that occur right alongside his comments on divorce?" For example, consider Jesus' plain instruction in Matthew 5:29-30,

"If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away ... If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away!"

That command, like his rule about divorce, is part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Yet how many people (including the harshest interpreters) do you know who have literally obeyed it? I do not observe many one-eyed or one-handed teachers in the church! But are we not all drawn into sin by eye and hand? How is it we do not heed the Master's doctrine, and chop off these offending limbs? "Absurd!" you say, and I agree with you. But if softening one pungent saying is warranted by common sense, who can rightly prevent us from softening another? Do you remain unconvinced? Look then at verses 40-42 –

"If someone wants to take your coat, give him your shirt as well, and if he forces you to carry a load for one mile, offer to carry it for two miles! Give to everyone who begs from you, and don't turn aside anyone who wants to borrow from you."

Even the dourest teachers find ways to avoid taking those uncomfortable injunctions too literally! Yet it is surely arbitrary and unfair to read some of Christ's sayings with adamant strictness, while modifying other sayings to suit either a more rational interpretation, or modern cultural mores. Either be inflexible or flexible; but at least let the interpreter be consistent! Perhaps also those severe moralists should be asked why they are so determined to read narrowly scriptures that readily admit a broader, more compassionate message? Why do they not have more of the gentle heart of Abbott Odilo – or better, the gracious compassion of Jesus?

It seems to me that fear more than faith motivates such people. They are governed by law rather than by grace. Disliking the daring liberty God has given us in Christ, they yearn to bring the church under the command of unyielding rules. Perhaps they trust neither the integrity of the people of God nor the personal guidance of the Holy Spirit. They seem to be under some necessity to turn ethical principles into imprisoning chains. If that is an unfair judgment, then I apologise. But I remain puzzled about the motivation of those who impose such harsh yokes upon others. Ordinary people who are struggling to restore their shattered hopes and happiness need something more than a cruel rod flailing their shoulders; they cry for generous and compassionate counsel. Which brings us to the second choice the interpreter must make –

3 "I tell you," said Jesus, "that any man who divorces his wife, except for immorality, makes her an adulteress; and any man who marries a divorced woman is committing adultery."

(a) YOU CAN CHOOSE TO BE TRUE TO THE GOSPEL IN ONE OF TWO WAYS; EITHER

- by refusing re-marriage on the ground of upholding a high standard of love and fidelity in marriage (and thus risk a charge of legalism that denies the grace of Christ); or,
- by allowing re-marriage on the grounds of mercy and grace (and thus risk a charge of sentimentality and compromise).

If I have to bear my opponent accusing me either of holding too much law or too much grace, then, like Odilo, my own choice will usually be to carry the latter stigma. Grace is always a happier burden to shoulder than law! Indeed, I say this boldly: the only thoroughly biblical approach to the question of divorce and re-marriage is one that is compassionate and therefore flexible. The legalistic, unyielding rigidity displayed by some moralists seems far removed from the spirit of the New Testament. I think the gospel allows much freedom of choice within general ethical guidelines.

Then a third choice must be made –

(2) YOU CAN CHOOSE TO RESPOND TO THE SECULAR ENVIRONMENT EITHER

- by standing firm against "the world", resisting all its influence, deaf to all its wisdom; or,
- by recognising that God sometimes speaks to the church through "the world".

The history of Christian ethics unhappily shows there have been times when the world has surpassed the church in comprehending (without realising it) the mind of God. We must always remain sensitive to what the Spirit may be saying to the church through events and trends in secular society. So those are the three choices you can make.

Which one should you choose?

You will have to answer that question for yourself; but my own response is this –

(3) THE PRINCIPLE GOVERNING THIS STUDY

Whenever a passage of scripture is open to different interpretations, I have adopted the alternative that seems more humane and more consistent with the compassion of Christ.

Where scripture permits a choice, I always prefer to be generous rather than strict. Legalistic interpretations arouse in me suspicion. To paraphrase the Master: "The Bible was made for man, not man for the Bible." Scripture should be read in a way that offers solutions to human need, not in a way that builds intolerable burdens.⁴ Nonetheless, the diversity of opinions among sincere and godly people practically compels each searcher to strike in his own fashion the ore from the mother-lode of scripture. As William Blake once wrote –

The vision of Christ that thou dost see
Is my vision's greatest enemy . . .
Both read the Bible day and night,
But thou read'st black where I read white!⁵

4 Compare Jesus' fierce indictment of the Jewish legalists, Matthew 23:1-4; Luke 11:45-46.

5 English poet and artist (1757-1827); from his poem "The Everlasting Gospel" (4.50.1,13).

You will have to judge for yourself whether or not, in this study, I have written "black" or "white"!

Then added to the above, the following ideas also have shaped my conclusions –

(II) FURTHER GUIDELINES

(A) THE ROMAN CATHOLIC VIEW

The Roman Catholic church allows no divorce at all. But Catholics have adopted a special interpretation of porneia (Matthew 5:32) and of the "Pauline privilege" (1 Corinthians 7:15), which enables the Church to declare a marriage "defective" and to annul it. The parties are then reckoned never to have married, and of course are free to enter into marriage with another partner. That is a practice based more on the traditions of the Church than on scripture.

(B) THE STRICT PROTESTANT VIEW

The strict Protestant view is that porneia and the "Pauline privilege" permit divorce but deny any right of re-marriage. Some severe ethicists modify that stern rule a little: they do allow re-marriage by the innocent party when the divorce was solely on the grounds of porneia, but not otherwise. But who will determine who is innocent of any fault when a marriage collapses because of infidelity? It may sometimes be true that the offended spouse is wholly free of blame; but the straying spouse often has just cause for complaint – which of course does not justify adultery, but it does muddy the issue of innocence.

(C) A MORE NATURAL VIEW

(1) A FALSE ASSUMPTION

A false premise undergirds rigorous views on divorce. Those who want to make firm rules on these matters tend to assume that the New Testament contains all the ethical guidance needed to form their policy. Their unyielding rules imply that scripture contains an exhaustive treatment of the subject of failed marriages. In fact, discussion of the ethics of marriage is minimal. The New Testament nowhere presents a formal or comprehensive Christian approach to divorce and re-marriage. When the subject occurs at all it does so in response to actual situations, as, for example, when "the Pharisees came to Jesus and tested him by asking . . . etc" (Matthew 19:3)

Jesus adroitly stepped out of their trap; nonetheless, his comments must be limited by that setting. Likewise, Paul did not volunteer any teaching on the matter, but replied to a question: "and now, concerning the matters you wrote about . . . etc." (1 Corinthians 7:1). The answers given are appropriate to the questions asked, but they do leave other questions unanswered, whose solution must be sought elsewhere – whether in scripture, or in the larger world, or both.

(2) THE ERROR OF CASUISTRY

"Casuistry" is the pejorative term used to describe the kind of moralising that strives to reduce all human behaviour to a set of rules. The word was coined in the 18th century, initially to describe people who yearn to close every gap in an argument. A casuist, it was said, is a person who cannot bear to leave any question unanswered. Later, the word came to include those who make every decision according to a pre-determined system, who insist that every choice must fall under a regulation, who cannot bear to leave any ethical dilemma unresolved.

Since casuists have a prescriptive rule to cover whatever problem people face, individual action, and freedom of personal decision, are inevitably severely limited.

Alexander Pope, that biting satirist, had no patience with such legalism –

See skulking Truth to her old cavern fled,
Mountains of casuistry heap'd o'er her head!⁶

Here is the great fault of casuists: they bury the truth under mountains of suffocating law, they cause her to hide her head in shame. I cannot find the heart of Christ in such hair-splitting legalities. In a similar vein, the great 19th century novelist, George Eliot, wrote –

"The great problem of the shifting relation between passion and duty is clear to no man who is capable of apprehending it: the question whether the moment has come in which a man has fallen below the possibility of a renunciation that will carry any efficacy, and must accept the sway of a passion against which he had struggled as a trespass, is one for which we have no master-key that will fit all cases.

"The casuists have become a byword of reproach; but their perverted spirit of minute discrimination was the shadow of a truth to which eyes and hearts are too often fatally sealed – the truth, that moral judgments must remain false and hollow, unless they are checked and enlightened by a perpetual reference to the special circumstances that mark the individual lot.

"All people of broad, strong sense have an instinctive repugnance to the men of maxims; because such people early discern that the mysterious complexity of our life is not to be embraced by maxims, and that to lace ourselves up in formulas of that sort is to repress all the divine promptings and inspirations that spring from growing insight and sympathy. And the man of maxims is the popular representative of the minds that are guided in their moral judgment solely by general rules, thinking that these will lead them to justice by a ready-made patent method, without the trouble of exerting patience, discrimination, impartiality – without any care to assure themselves whether they have the insight that comes from a hardly-earned estimate of temptation, or from a life vivid and intense enough to have created a wide fellowship with all that is human."⁷

I like to think that I am one of those "people of broad, strong sense, (who) have an instinctive repugnance to the men of maxims." I look for a better way of solving the moral dilemmas of life, and of interpreting scripture. Join with me now as we search for that way in the following pages.

6 "The Dunciad", 1.641, written in 1728.

7 The Mill on the Floss, Book VII, the closing paragraphs of Chapter Two. "George Eliot" was actually a woman, Mary Ann Evans (1819-1880). She is reckoned to be among the half dozen greatest of all English writers.

TWO

WEDDED FOR LIFE

Jesus was sitting in Moses' chair.
They brought the trembling woman there.
Moses commanded she be stoned to death.
What was the sound of Jesus' breath?
He laid his hand on Moses' law;
The ancient Heavens, in silent awe,
Writ with curses from pole to pole,
All away began to roll.⁸

The compassionate grace of the gospel is lacking from the cold rules, the forced conformity, the unbending moralisms of the casuist. See how Jesus, confronted by the trembling adulteress, did not pronounce against her Moses' fierce sentence of death, but spoke a compassionate word of pardon.

Why then are some Christian teachers eager to interpret scripture narrowly and harshly? Why are they reluctant to permit a broader and more generous reading of the sacred text? What motivates them so unfeelingly to impose crushing burdens upon people who are already desperately hurting? Why are they so thirsty for law and so angry at grace? They love God, they are zealous for scripture, but they seem to me to pluck out of the earth of God's word not flowers but weeds, not medicine but poison, not an easy yoke but galling chains.⁹

(I) EACH CASE IS DIFFERENT

Before trying to determine what the Bible says about divorce and remarriage, the reader must first ask what problem each passage is addressing. As we saw in the previous chapter, this issue is never discussed in a vacuum, but only in response to a particular need, or to a specific question. The author records the solution to the problem, but other aspects of the matter are usually ignored. Scholars call this a "situational context", and it means that a wise reader will not jump to hasty conclusions based on inadequate evidence. You need to know what the question was before you hang too much weight on the answer.

In the same way, just as different questions called forth sensitive and different responses from the biblical authors, so in our time the background and circumstances of each couple must be carefully considered before one can fix on a godly remedy for their pain. I think that ethicists who hold a very strict view of divorce are unrealistic in their handling of the complex

8 William Blake, op. cit.

9 How differently Jesus spoke! See Matthew 11:28-30.

situations that arise. How different are the circumstances, the hurts, the needs, that surround each struggling couple!

Furthermore, a doctrinaire approach fails to take proper account of the new insights into marriage and divorce provided by modern medicine, psychology, and sociology; nor does it give due recognition to the comparative paucity of scripture data; nor does it allow sufficient credence to alternative views. All of these are given more space below; but first, look at

(A) THE OLD TESTAMENT VIEW

The absence from the New testament of any formal statement that deals with the issues created by an unhappy marriage may seem surprising. But it shows that the apostles accepted the teaching of the Old Testament on the subject. They apparently thought that the ethics of the prophets were still generally applicable to the church. They added to those ethics some specifically Christian dimensions, but otherwise left them unchanged.

(B) WHAT THEN DID THE PROPHETS TEACH?

(1) ACCOMMODATING HUMAN FRAILTY

The Old Testament forcefully argues for a high view of marriage as a divine institution; yet it looks also with compassion upon human frailty. The impression conveyed is that the sanctity, beauty, and joy of marriage are hardly preserved by compelling an unhappy couple to remain together in hostility. Corrosive human tension, ugly conflict, incessant pain, bring neither glory to God nor honour to the institution –

"Eating a dry crust alone and in peace is better than sharing a feast in a house that is full of conflict ... A quarrelsome spouse is more aggravating than a tap you can't turn off ... Life on top of the roof is more pleasant than staying inside with a nagging spouse ... Living alone in the desert is better than sharing a house with a complaining and quarrelsome spouse ... Why stay inside the house and be nagged to death? You would be happier living on the roof! ... Like rain that never stops, so is an endlessly nagging spouse."¹⁰

Several hundred years later, similar sentiments were expressed by the aged and shrewd Rabbi Sirach –

"Cage me up with a lion or a dragon rather than house me with a malicious woman. Her rancour eats away her beauty; she grows worse than a bad-tempered bear. Listen to the bitter sighs of her husband whenever he can escape to a neighbour's house! . . . Ask an old man to climb a sand dune! Ask a quiet man to endure a railing wife! . . . Deep depression, a gloomy countenance, a broken heart, these are all wounds inflicted by a mean-spirited wife. Show me a man whose wife fails to bring him happiness, and I will show you one whose hands are weak and whose knees tremble. . . . Would you put up with a constantly dripping tap? Then why do you allow a garrulous woman to say whatever she likes? If she will not accept your correction, then bring the marriage to an end!

"But how happy is the husband of a good wife! She will prolong his years upon the earth. Standing always at his side, she is his greatest asset, and he dwells each

¹⁰ Proverbs 17:1; 19:13; 21:9, 19; 25:24; 27:15.

day with her in peace. How great a blessing is a good wife! What a splendid gift from the Lord she is to her husband! Riches or poverty make no difference to him, for nothing can cloud the smile on his face, and his heart is content." (Sir 25:16-26:4).¹¹

The issues of divorce and re-marriage never touch the latter fortunate spouse; but what about others, whose marriages have plunged from heaven to hell? Have they no escape? Must they abandon all hope of happiness?

Consider the passages quoted above from Proverbs. They offer no suggestion that divorce provides an immediate and easy escape from an unhappy union. The nagging wife and her spousally victim are still wedded, even if he has fled to the rooftop, or run away into the desert! But they leave no doubt that a marriage where love has failed has been stripped of most of the benefits that should result from the conjugal state. An impression is left that while no marriage should be too readily dissolved, a level of distress can be reached that leaves no rational choice except to dissolve the union.

Sirach was more forthright than Solomon, for he plainly counsels the tormented man to bring his marriage to an end. Sirach was a devout rabbi who could not have given such advice without believing that the laws of Moses sanctioned it. The question we must ask is, "Did Sirach rightly interpret Moses?"

(2) FULFILLING MARITAL DUTIES

Moses declared that every wife was entitled to expect from her husband three things: "food, clothing, and marital rights." If he failed to provide these, she was free to leave him without penalty or restraint (Exodus 21:10-11). In other words, each spouse had certain responsibilities to the other, and if those duties were not done, then no marriage remained that was worth the name.

Moses also forbade any man or woman to allow their marriage vows to hinder their service of God; on the contrary, "the one who seeks to entice you away from the Lord your God" must be taken out and stoned to death! (Deuteronomy 13:6-10).

Further, a man who had taken a slave girl into his bed as his wife, but then wearied of her, was not permitted to reduce her again to slavery. He was bound by law to release her "to go wherever she may choose" (Deuteronomy 21:14).

All those injunctions, and others like them, show that marriage had a relative importance in the mind of the great Lawgiver. It was not the ultimate expression of virtue; other strictures had a higher moral claim upon the people, and if observance of those loftier principles meant the dissolution of a marriage, then so be it.

11 I apologise for the unabashed chauvinism of the old rabbi. What he says about the benefit a man receives from a good wife, I would say equally for a woman with a good husband. Notice also his confident claim that a happily married man will enjoy a long, healthy life. Remarkably, modern research has demonstrated the truth of that assertion. Many surveys in recent times have shown that happily married men have an average lifespan considerably longer than men who are single. Indeed, even those who are unhappily married tend to live longer than men who have never married. Divorced men (especially when the divorce was bitter) have the lowest average of them all.

(3) MODERN RESEARCH ENDORSES THAT OLD TESTAMENT VIEW –

"It is common knowledge with psychologists that a bad marriage is psychologically destructive. It creates bitter, hostile, and unforgiving attitudes in the couple. It may work all sorts of psychological damage on the children. To maintain a destructive marriage on the basis of being loyal to a Christian ethic of no divorce is hardly justifiable.

"Love, justice, mercy, and redemption are ground underfoot to preserve a moralistic view."¹²

(C) DIVORCE SHOULD NOT BE EASY

I am not saying that an unhappy or difficult marriage should be quickly dissolved. Divorce always exacts a heavy toll upon families that suffer its trauma. Parents and children together will be long hurt by divorce – especially children. While some children may benefit from a divorce, others remain hurt for years to come.

Research suggests that many children from broken homes experience fierce anger, especially against the father, which takes deep root, continuing for many years, and often for life. Loneliness, resentment, depression, a withdrawal into fantasy, strike in varying degrees at children from broken homes. Their ability to form firm relationships in adult life, especially with the opposite sex, is often harmed. Despite appearances, divorce is neither easy nor cheap. The cost is always high.

However, in other cases, children of divorced parents may show less trauma, less ill effect mentally, emotionally, socially than children forced to live in a conflict-ridden home. They may fare better living with one parent, free of tension or abuse, than they would if they had to share the quarrels of two. This is especially so when the separated parents explain what is happening, and when they exonerate the child from all blame or guilt for the divorce, and affirm their continued love and care for the child. Once again, I find it unreasonable to lay down a hard rule and pronounce it true for every family.

(D) THE DIVINE IDEAL

Let me emphatically state: it is the duty of every Christian couple to struggle earnestly to fulfil God's ideal for their union. Absolutely nothing in scripture supports a careless attitude to divorce or re-marriage; yet the evidence begins to accumulate that there are circumstances in which divorce, though not demanded, becomes the more sensible option. And where divorce is permitted, re-marriage must also be allowed. More of this later.

(1) "ONE FLESH"

God intends marriage to be a life-time union, in which the couple become "one flesh" physically, emotionally, spiritually, and socially.¹³ Therefore, no Christian should ever enter

12 Bernard Ramm.

13 Note however, that marital unity does not necessarily include becoming *one flesh* culturally, intellectually, or personally. Attempts to compel conformity of one spouse to the other in those areas have brought many marriages to ruin. Within the closest marriage each partner should still be able to maintain his or her own individuality and uniqueness. There is no necessity for them to enjoy exactly the same

marriage with anything less than the deepest commitment to complete fusion with his or her spouse.

(2) A DIVINE "MYSTERY"

Marriage must be more than a legal way in which to gain sexual gratification and a housekeeper/provider. It is a divine "mystery" (Ephesians 5:21-32). A Christian couple should strive to achieve and maintain a God-wrought spiritual quality in their union. They should never allow the supernatural (or the heavenly) aspects of their union to become submerged under its physical and material components. Those who treat marriage casually, who do wilful violence to its mystery, usually pay a high price. According to David Larsen, a senior researcher for the US Federal Government –

"Religiously committed people not only have much lower rates of divorce, but their level of satisfaction and enjoyment of marriage is quite high. It's not as though religion keeps people married who would really rather be divorced. On the other hand, divorce leads to all kinds of problems. 'No fault' divorce is an oxymoron. Children of divorced parents have higher rates of school dropout, delinquency, psychiatric disorders, physical diseases, suicide, and drug abuse . . . Divorced males and females have significantly higher levels of psychiatric disorders. The list of social and economic costs could go on and on. Males tend to think that if they divorce they will be better off financially and free from the responsibility of raising the children. Cancer rates for divorced males, however, increase dramatically . . . Divorced men are going to die younger than their friends who stay married." ¹⁴

(3) A PERMANENT UNION

Are you about to enter marriage? You should do so intending a permanent, lifelong union of yourself with your spouse. Christians may not marry thinking they have an option of breaking their vows if the union should prove difficult or inconvenient. God hates divorce! (Malachi 2:14-16). As I write these words, my first and only wife Alison and I have been married above 40 years (since March, 1954). Divorce was unthinkable to us when we first stood together in church and swore to be bound to each other until death alone came to separate us; it has remained unthinkable throughout all the intervening years, and it is still unthinkable for us today.

So let me state this firmly: anyone who reckons this study encourages a casual approach to marriage, or an indifferent attitude to divorce, or to remarriage, is misrepresenting both me and the scriptures! Neither easy marriage, nor easy divorce, nor easy remarriage are proper Christian responses to the demands of scripture and of holy living! Alison and I pledged ourselves to each other for life by the most solemn vows made in the presence of Almighty God. Nothing less than a truly catastrophic collapse could change either her commitment or mine to the permanence of our marriage. We believe passionately in life-long marriages that reflect the integrity, selfless love, and steadfast faithfulness of the Lord himself.

Short relationships are shallow ones. How is that? Let me answer by asking, "How old are you?" As I write these lines I am approaching my 62nd year, yet I am still learning about

music, or read the same books, or pursue the same hobbies, and so on. No man has the right to squash the personal interests and desires of his wife, to subjugate her to his whims and pleasures; nor should a woman do so to her husband. The very expression "one flesh" precludes any thought of the woman being inferior to or subject to the man. They stand equal together in the sight of God (Galatians 3:28).

14 From an interview in Christianity Today magazine, November 23, 1992.

myself. A lifetime is scarcely sufficient for anyone to begin truly and fully to know even himself! How much more difficult it is then to discover the hidden depths in another person! Permanent marriage alone provides the degree of intimacy and the constancy of association that are required to experience the wonder, the joy, of exploring the mysteries and of revealing the beauty that lies in one's spouse –

"If marriage is not considered a permanent trust for life, it is in permanent crisis. If the `freedom' to leave is regarded as a real option, it becomes a spectre which haunts the marriage. Consequently, there is not the requisite freedom to develop an authentic relationship."¹⁵

(4) NOT PLEASURE, BUT HOLINESS

Has your marriage become painful or difficult? That by itself is no reason to dissolve it. Despite the self-indulgent yearning for unsullied happiness and total personal gratification that characterises this generation, there remains an important place for suffering. Patience under pain is an integral element in the development of Christian character, and in preparing the Christian to inherit the kingdom of God. A petulant envy of the apparent happiness of other couples is not an adequate reason for a Christian to try to escape a burdensome union. The goal of our lives is not pleasure, but holiness –

"Every time I stand before a couple and recite the words, `for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health,' I declare the outrageous proposition that happiness is neither the goal nor the promise of marriage. Both Christianity and marriage teach us that life cannot be chiefly about happiness. If life is learning how to tell the truth and how to receive strangers, then how on earth can life be about happiness? For neither truth nor hospitality occur without some pain."¹⁶

Indeed, Clement of Alexandria, writing circa 200, declared that it required more grace to remain true to Christ in marriage than in celibacy –

" ... it is not he who merely controls his passions that is called a continent man, but he who has also achieved the mastery over good things ... (One) is not really shown to be a man in the choice of a single life; but he surpasses men, who, disciplined by marriage, procreation of children, and care for the house, without pleasure or pain, in his solicitude for the house has been inseparable from God's love, and withstood all temptations arising through children, and wife, and domestics, and possessions. But he that has no family is in a great degree free of temptation. Caring, then, for himself alone, he is surpassed by him who is inferior as far as his own salvation is concerned, but who is superior in the conduct of life, preserving certainly, in his care for the truth, a minute image."¹⁷

(5) THE WRONG SPOUSE?

Most people discover eventually that they have married the "wrong" person! The thought (even if it soon passes) seizes them, "I have made a terrible mistake!" Three things commonly cause this feeling:

15 Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics, ed. by Carl F. H. Henry; Baker Book House, Grand Rapids; 1973; article "Marriage", pg. 407,408.

16 William H. Willimon, in an article in "The Christian Century", June 4-11, 1986, pg. 544.

17 Miscellanies, Bk 7, ch 12; "The Ante-Nicene Fathers", Vol 2, pg. 543; Eerdman's Pub. Co; 1979 reprint.

- they meet a new person whose virtues alone are visible, who seems more desirable, more compatible than the spouse whose faults and blemishes have become all too plain.

Men in particular are often surprised to discover that they, like Solomon, are quite capable of "loving many women" (1 Kg 11:1). Nonetheless, the law of God requires that we (both men and women) should choose one spouse, and strive to be faithful to that choice for so long as our first partner lives.

- they come to the dismaying realisation that the image of themselves, built with such care to impress their partner when they were courting, has now been exposed for the sham it always was.

Some people cannot bear to have their camouflage removed, their disguises torn away, their self-delusions exposed. The knowledge that a spouse has come to know them as they really are is too painful to be endured. They seek another whom they can once again deceive.

- they discover that their spouse constantly interferes with the crazed goals of our present culture: personal autonomy, unrestrained consumerism, unhindered self-fulfilment, undarkened happiness.

Incredibly, many people enter marriage, which is the antithesis of those goals, in order to achieve them! They take a spouse to escape parental control; they view marriage as an expression of adult freedom instead of responsibility. They treat their vows as the purchase price of untrammelled sexual enjoyment; their spouse is simply another consumer item they have paid for. They expect their spouse to be the means of making them happy and of fulfilling their personal dreams. Such pitiful illusions deserve to be, and quickly will be, shattered. Rather, let us be Christians indeed, seeing in marriage a proving ground of real holiness, where the love of God is mirrored in an unflinching love for each other. Here the security of the kingdom of God is reflected in the absolute trust the Christian man and woman show toward each other; the gates of hell cannot prevail over their mutual vows. Here they find what happiness really means as they work and play, laugh and cry, worship and pray together. Here they discover the best opportunity to learn the grace of Christ as they forgive each other, cling together in hope, rejoice in the darkest night, and master the virtues of patience, kindness, tolerance, and gentleness.

Then, to the three reasons given above, we may add another –

- sometimes the fading of outward beauty causes people to feel that they married the wrong spouse.

That is a shallow folly which has often been rebuked by wiser minds over the centuries –

O Beauty, but a dubious boon
 Art thou to man, brief gift of little stay,
 Lent for a while and all too soon passing away . . .
 Passing . . . as the field's spring glory
 Fades in the summer heat, when fiercely
 Burns the high sun at noon, when night's
 Wheels roll too rapidly. As lilies
 Languish and their leaves grow pale,
 The head must lose its glory of hair,
 The glowing cheek of youth
 Be ravaged by the hand of time.
 Each day that passes takes its toll
 Of body's beauty. Beauty cannot stay;

Would any wise man trust so frail a thing?¹⁸

Marriage possesses a great bourn of happiness; but there is a price to be paid of integrity and discipline, of fortitude and perseverance. Yet the rewards, both now and in eternity, are immense! Can you doubt that I strongly favour lifetime unions between people who are totally committed to each other in Christ? Yet having said that, I must now add that scripture does recognise human frailty, and so provides for those situations where even the most earnest saint cannot achieve the ideal. I have been singularly blessed with a devoted and utterly faithful wife. Others are not so fortunate. For some men and women marriage turns into a living hell. Is there no relief? That question is taken up in the next chapter.

18 Seneca, in his play "Phaedra", Act Two; tr. by E. F. Watling; Penguin Books, London, 1970; pg. 128, 129.

THREE

THE SAYINGS OF CHRIST

The major passage is Matthew 19:3-12; but see also Matthew 5:31-32; Mark 10:2-12; Luke 16:18.

The primary saying of Christ is simply this: divorce, and re-marriage after divorce are both forbidden. That was a harsh statement, and it caught the Pharisees (also the disciples, Matthew 19:10) quite by surprise. They all had expected either a cautiously ambiguous statement, or else a much laxer standard.

Why was Jesus so stern? He was responding to the two schools of thought that were dominant among the Jews of that time –

- there was the liberal school of the rabbi Hillel, which permitted divorce for almost any reason; and
- there was the conservative school of the rabbi Shammai, which permitted divorce only for infidelity.

The Pharisees (in Matthew 19:3) were pressuring Jesus to declare whose side he was on, Hillel's or Shammai's? It was a trap. Whichever answer he gave would anger many hearers.

Jesus knew that both schools based their arguments on certain rules Moses had given Israel, which the Pharisees had referred to in their question: "Why then did Moses ... etc." (Matthew 19:7). He realised that they were "testing" him by trying to force him either to favour one school, thus antagonising the other, or to make enemies of both by countermanding Moses altogether. So they said (echoing Hillel), "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife on any and every ground?"

Would Jesus agree with Hillel's broad and loose reading of Moses, or would he choose the sterner rule of Shammai?

Christ artfully avoided the trap simply by going back to a still earlier authority: the record of Genesis! There the scripture shows –

(I) GOD'S ORIGINAL STANDARD

In the beginning the Creator made the human race male and female, and revealed his ordinary intention that they should live together as man and wife. This union is so complete, and the attraction that leads to it so strong, a man will leave the social group in which he has spent all

his previous life and unite himself to a woman he has but recently met. The bond of family is deep; but the bond between a man and his wife is deeper.

(A) ONE MAN, ONE WOMAN

God gave Adam but one wife, and Eve but one husband, which indicts both polygamy and polyandry. God reckons one mate is sufficient, and he wants the man and his wife to apply themselves to the vocation of finding satisfaction only with each other, and of living only with each other, for life.

(1) JOINED BY GOD

The deeper reason for this exclusive union is given in the words "they shall be one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). By his emphatic repetition of that quotation, Christ showed its crucial importance (Matthew 19:5-6). And then he added also the solemn injunction, "What God has joined together, human hands must not separate."

(2) HOW ARE THEY JOINED?

A problem arises: what is the significance of the phrase "one flesh"; and just when are a couple actually "joined together" by God?

Some say that both declarations become true on the first occasion of sexual intercourse, whether or not the two people are married, and that any subsequent union with another partner (even with a spouse) is adulterous. Others say only a marriage where both partners are God-fearing is wrought by God, and only in such a union do the couple truly become "one flesh".

The third view, and the one favoured in this study, argues that this is –

(3) NOT A CASUAL RELATIONSHIP

Outside of marriage, how can a casual relationship, or even an extended one, fulfil the requirements of the statements in Genesis? There the couple become "one flesh" only on the basis of the man leaving his former home and "being made one with his wife"; or, in the words of the old version, "cleaving" to his wife. The words "cleave" (to glue, to cling, to adhere) and "wife" imply a union that is lawful, exclusive, and permanent. No adulterous or illicit relationship can fit those terms.

Someone may ask, "What about 1 Corinthians 6:15-16?" I do not think that passage disturbs what I am saying. Although Paul does use Genesis 2:24 to make an ardent protest against harlotry, he is engaging in a kind of special pleading. He is plucking a single idea out of the passage and using it in a very restricted sense. A harlot is not a wife. No holy covenant exists when a man has intercourse with a prostitute. It is unthinkable that such a union should be made indissoluble. A whore and her lecher become "one flesh" only in a limited and corrupted sense.¹⁹

¹⁹ Note also the several references in the early books of the Bible to men visiting a prostitute (e.g. Genesis 38:15-18). There is never any suggestion that intercourse with a harlot had any significance beyond a temporary satisfying of sexual desire.

(4) A PRIMEVAL LAW

The statement "what God has joined together" is a commentary by Christ on the meaning of "one flesh". The couple are "joined" (literally, "yoked") and become "one flesh" only in the sense that God intends their commitment to each other to be permanent and exclusive. Married couples are "joined together by God", not by personal divine intervention in each marriage, but because the primeval law of God stands behind every wedding. That law mandates, for the entire human family, that a man should cleave to his wife, and to her alone, for the remainder of his life. And, of course, the law expects the same fidelity from the wife.

Thus the ancient law of marriage goes beyond the bounds of the church, and embraces the whole of humanity. It declares that any couple who vow to live together as man and wife, and who wed according to the laws and customs of their own social group, are "God-joined", and in his sight have become "one flesh".

(B) GOD HATES DIVORCE

A further ground for the inviolability of marriage, and a further revelation of the purpose God has ordained for marriage, is given in Malachi 2:14-16,

"The Lord was watching when you and your young wife made your vows to each other. But now you have been unfaithful to her, although she is your companion and your wife by a holy promise. Have you forgotten that God made you both into one? Is not the same Spirit of life in you both? Was it not God's purpose that you should bring godly children into the world? So beware! Control your behaviour. Let none of you be unfaithful to the wife of your youth. This is what the Lord God says, *'I hate divorce!'* and the Lord of Hosts demands, *'Why are you so cruel to each other?'* So take hold of your feelings and be done with all this treachery!"

God hates divorce! Why? Because

- it involves breaking solemn oaths and covenants; and
- it hinders the creation of godly homes where parents can raise their children in love and security (compare Ephesians 6:1-4); and
- it is a source of cruelty, violence, and sin.

Christ himself drew attention to this third reason: "If a man divorces his wife ... he drives her into adultery" (Matthew 5:31-32). In those days that was often literally true. There were no government pensions, nor any alimony. A discarded wife might well have to resort to prostitution to sustain life. Perhaps also, re-marriage, where the grounds of divorce were insufficient, might fall under God's judgment as an act of harlotry; or, the divorce might cause her neighbours to believe she had been guilty of adultery.

(C) RE-MARRIAGE PROHIBITED

"If you divorce your wife and marry another woman, you commit adultery; and anyone who marries a woman divorced from her husband is also committing adultery" (Luke 16:18).

That passage further enforces the prohibition against divorce. The Lord God refuses to permit people casually to destroy his law about the inviolate nature of marriage. No human decree can by itself countermand a divine fiat: "What God has joined together, let no man put asunder" (Matthew 19:6). A couple may divorce, but in the reckoning of God they are still

bound to each other, and any subsequent marriage is therefore adulterous. That is the basic law of God. Any later exceptions or amendments to that law do not remove the law itself. It remains the divine standard for every marriage.

When the Pharisees heard Jesus state that austere rule, they at once pounced on him: "Why then did Moses command a man to give a certificate of divorce, and to put his wife away?" (Matthew 19:7)

The Master's reply completely silenced them –

"Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so" (vs. 8).

People often think that Christ reproached Moses for passing an inferior law. That is not so. Rather, Jesus neither commended nor condemned Moses' rule, as the following comments will show –

(1) A DECAYED IDEAL

The original ideal of marriage, which had sadly decayed before the time of Moses, was largely restored by him. So wise are the Mosaic statutes that they still form the basis of the marriage codes of the whole Western world. Those statutes allowed both divorce and re-marriage. But what did Jesus think about them?

(2) COMMANDED OR PERMITTED?

Christ did not abrogate the Mosaic statutes; but he did countermand the distorted teaching of the Pharisees. This is shown by the difference between the words of Christ and those of the Pharisees. They said, "Moses commanded us ... " But Christ countered, "Moses permitted you ..."

The passage they were quoting is Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Some of the older translations do not fairly render the original Hebrew text. Moses was not instructing the man to divorce his wife, as some versions seem to say, and as the Pharisees taught. Christ properly interpreted the passage to mean that while Moses may have allowed divorce his real purpose was to regulate that unhappy practice and so prevent promiscuity.

Most modern translations give the passage the following sense –

"If a man takes a wife, and if she then falls into disgrace in his eyes ... and if he chooses to divorce her ... and if she goes off and marries another man ... and if the latter husband divorces her ... or if the latter husband dies ... then her former husband may not take her again to be his wife."

The "ifs" all refer to existing practices, which Moses, because of the hardness of their hearts, was prepared to "suffer". But to find the actual command of Moses you must look in the last clause: a divorced woman who has married another, may not return to her former husband. That command is apparently still valid, and is a strong rebuttal of those who claim that divorced people who have married again should break up and return to their original partners.

(3) THE RULE CHRIST GAVE

Moses allowed a man to divorce his wife if "she found no favour in his eyes because he had discovered something shameful in her."

The school of Hillel gave those words such a broad meaning that a man could dismiss his wife for almost any cause, including such trivial things as a badly cooked meal, or gossip, or talking too loudly. The school of Shammai insisted that Moses was referring exclusively to unchastity.

Which school would Jesus endorse?

He ignored both of them! He made no attempt to explain the words of Moses. He cited only two authorities: the primeval law (Genesis 2:24); and his own command: "And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another, commits adultery."

That is surprising, for at first sight, Shammai's view might appear to be the same as Christ's. But it was not. Shammai interpreted Moses too strictly, Hillel interpreted him too loosely. Christ declined to approve either of them. He allowed Moses' words to stand, and left their interpretation an open question (although, as I shall show in a moment, he did give a further explanation to his disciples in private, vs. 10-12).

But then, on his own authority, and confirmed by the primeval law (Genesis 2:24), Jesus asserted that divorce was not permissible except on the ground of "unchastity" (porneia). By this emphatic statement he tried to ennoble the discussion, to call his hearers back to a high view of marriage as a holy estate, and to fortify the sacredness of its obligations. But did Jesus want his words to be turned into an absolute ethical rule? Was he asserting an inflexible, undeviating moral law, one that must be imposed upon every married couple regardless of their circumstances? I think the answer must be, "No!"

Note again how Jesus sidestepped the immediate demand made by the Pharisees (to choose between Hillel and Shammai). Note also that he did not actually countermand Moses' rule. He avoided both an explanation of what Moses meant and any suggestion that Moses was at fault. He simply called them back to the pure state of things "in the beginning," and set that before them as God's highest goal.

Yet in the face of human frailty how severe this demand seems! Did Jesus really mean to be so harsh? His disciples at first took him literally, for in a later private discussion they reacted with some heat: "If that is the rule for a man with his wife, then it would be better never to marry!"

Why were they so upset? Simply because they knew (as we do) that many things can smash the dream of a happy marriage:

- one of the spouses may have a serious neurosis, or an impossible obsession that was hidden during courtship;
- one of them may prove to be sexually deviate;
- one of them may become hopelessly alcoholic, or become involved in crime, or addicted to drugs; and so on.

Must an innocent partner be condemned to remain in a house that has become hell? If so, then we may well agree with the disciples: it is wiser to remain unmarried! The risk is too fearful.

Jesus' reply was surprising, and showed a compassionate relaxation of the dour austerity of his earlier public statement. In public, confronted by the hypocritical Pharisees and their friends, he allowed no easing of the severest possible standard. Into the crass slackness of their selfish view of marriage he threw the unyielding demand, "There shall be no divorce nor remarriage!" But in private, confronted by an inquiry from men who sincerely desired to do the will of God, he allowed, "Not everyone can receive this precept, but only those to whom it is given" (vs. 10-12).

Here is a definite softening of his earlier demand. Yet still, Christ does not satisfy our quest for more detail, nor does he offer any further comment on the grounds Moses allowed for divorce (that is, a "shameful" act by a spouse). The meaning of Moses' rule, and the explanation of who can "receive" Christ's own strict precept, both remain open questions.

So we come to a reasonable conclusion: the ethicists in each generation must remain free to apply the broad principles given by Moses and Christ to their own contemporary societies. Sometimes that will require them to call people back to "the beginning"; sometimes it will require them to accommodate human "hardness of heart".

FOUR

A GROUND FOR DIVORCE

Let us now go back to Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Notice that Moses allowed divorce if a wife no longer pleased her husband because he had discovered in her "erwath dabhar".

Translators offer various renderings of that phrase: "scandalous behaviour, indecency, something improper, unchastity, lacking favour, a shameful thing, something displeasing" – and so on. Hillel emphasised the idea "found no favour", and permitted divorce for the most flippant reasons; Shammai emphasised the idea of "scandalous behaviour", and understood it to mean adultery. The one was too loose, the other too strict.

Today we can safely assume that Moses was referring to divorce for reasons other than adultery. Why? Because under his law the death penalty, not divorce, was the proper response to gross immorality (Leviticus 19:20-22; 20:10-12; 21:9; etc.). But just as clearly, "erwath dabhar" means something more serious than careless housekeeping, or slovenly dress, and the like.

The problem with the Pharisees was that

"they were always emphasising the Mosaic concession, whereas Jesus constantly emphasised a greater principle: that husband and wife are, and must remain, one." ²⁰

That is the main effect of Deuteronomy 24:1-4. It is a law, not about easy divorce, but about the sanctity of marriage. Moses accepted the destruction of the first union, but he was anxious to enhance the sacredness of the second. This new marriage, he said, is just as binding and as inviolate as the first. The former husband has lost all claim upon his wife. The wife has lost all claim upon her former husband. If they have remarried after divorce, they must devote all zeal to making the new union successful. Further, this law protected wives from being treated like chattels. They could not be passed randomly from man to man. Thus Moses enhanced the social status of women.

Men also were affected by the law. It made a first husband pause before he casually dismissed his wife; for once he had sent her away, and she had married another, he could never bring her back to his bed.

²⁰ Hendriksen, in loc.

(A) DEFINITION OF "PORNEIA"

Christ allowed divorce on the ground of porneia. Out of the controversy about the meaning of this word, three common interpretations have stood –

(1) PRE-MARITAL UNCHASTITY

Some limit porneia to unchaste behaviour before marriage that had remained undiscovered until after the marriage had taken place. But death, not divorce, was the prescribed OT method of handling that offence (Deuteronomy 22:13-21). After which, of course, the surviving spouse was free to marry again.

No doubt serious hidden pre-marital unchastity still provides adequate grounds for divorce (since the death penalty is happily no longer applicable); but there do not seem to be any strong reasons for limiting porneia to such a narrow meaning. One might also object that giving porneia such specific definition provides too easy a means of dissolving too many marriages – for there are few unions in which both partners are wholly free from pre-marital moral blemish.

(2) CONSANGUINITY

Some scholars argue that porneia was the technical word for a sexual union that violated one of the forbidden degrees of relationship (cp. Leviticus 18:6-18). Jesus used porneia, they say, in this narrow sense. Therefore he allowed divorce only when a couple, after the wedding, discovered their union was illicit because they were closely related.

But how often would people find themselves in that plight? Rarely enough to make it improbable that Jesus would give it special attention. Anyhow, the proper solution to a consanguineous marriage is not divorce, but annulment, which is a legal assertion that there was no true marriage. In that case, the now separated couple are surely each free to take a valid spouse. Why would Jesus forbid them to do so? Why would he speak about divorce instead of annulment?

The evidence that porneia should be restricted to a forbidden blood relationship remains forced and unconvincing. So we are left with a third choice –

(3) ADULTERY AND/OR FORNICATION

(a) "PORNEIA" IN THE NT

I can easily show that the New Testament uses porneia to describe a wide variety of sexual immorality, perversion, deviation, and fornication: see Mark 7:21; Romans 1:29; 1 Corinthians 7:2; Galatians 5:19; 1 Thessalonians 4:3; Revelations 14:8; etc.

The several lexicons I have consulted all agree that the Greeks (and the apostles) used porneia to describe "every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse".

(b) "PORNEIA" IN THE O.T.

Likewise, in the Greek version of the Old Testament, porneia has a wide meaning; thus we find it in Genesis 38:24 ("prostitution"), in Numbers 14:33 ("fornication"), in Isaiah 47:10 ("harlotry"), 57:9 ("whoredom"), and likewise in Ezekiel 16:15,22,25,33-36,41; and in more than a score of other places.

Several of those passages link porneia with both pre-marital and post-marital immorality, and with various kinds of fornication. A Greek-speaking Jew would therefore have used porneia to describe not only the behaviour forbidden in Leviticus 18:6-15, but also in 16-23; 20:10-21; etc. See also the following verses, which use the closely related word porneuo (to practise prostitution, or sexual immorality in general) – Deuteronomy 23:17-18; Psalm 106:39; Ezekiel 6:9; etc.

Thus the Greeks applied porneia to: pre-marital immorality that remained hidden until after the marriage; infidelity after marriage; sexually deviate behaviour that occurred after marriage; and to forbidden consanguinity. It is surely unreasonable to limit porneia either to pre-marital unchastity, or even to adultery, when it plainly includes a wide range of sexually corrupt or banned behaviour.

(4) A GROUND FOR DIVORCE

Where such porneia exists, said Jesus, divorce becomes the right of the offended spouse. He did not command it in such cases; but it is certainly permitted. A wronged partner may have good reasons to overlook an offence and to welcome back the erring spouse. However, there is no compulsion to do so.

Of course, a Christian spouse does have an obligation to forgive any and every fault, and never to waver in offering the love of Christ. But forgiveness does not necessarily require the restoration of the wrongdoer to a position of trust, or to a level of partnership. We must all earn those privileges.

(B) AN ETHICAL PROBLEM

We now encounter a problem similar to the one we faced above: an ethical fuzziness. Scripture uses porneia so broadly that opinions will always differ about its application to a given marital problem. The narrowest view would limit it to adultery; the broadest would apply it to any violation of marital trust, whether moral, fiscal, physical, mental, social, and so on. The truth probably lies in the conservative centre.

Godly ethicists therefore have the task of defining porneia for each new set of social conditions, and for each new spousal conflict. In other words, what level of porneia becomes an adequate ground for divorce must be separately determined by and for each couple, with the proviso that the pressure of scripture is always toward saving a marriage rather than too easily destroying it.

(1) THE BURDEN OF THE LEGALIST

If you are a rigorous moralist, I suppose that the prospect of allowing one couple to divorce for a given act of porneia, but not another, will seem appalling. People who find it necessary to structure life around stern rules tend to value their rules above the needs of individuals. They insist that every family must be governed by the same canon. No variation or exception can be allowed. To them, the moral and ethical discretion scripture so daringly allows each Christian is scandalous. They know that people will always corrupt such liberty into licence, that moral chaos will inescapably result from an ethic based on broad principles rather than fixed decrees.

But of course that has always been one of the great tensions in the gospel. God has indeed given us in Christ a startling freedom. Each of us has liberty to conform ourselves to our own unique vision of Christ (for we all see him differently). Sadly, the reaction of the church to

that remarkable, almost frightening, freedom has always been to go either to one extreme or the other; that is, either to legalism, or to licentiousness. Paul's letters are full of this tension. He found himself continually obliged to withstand either the one side or the other, that is, to contend against both legalists and libertines.

(2) PAUL AND THE CASUISTS

Despite the possibility that some profligates might turn Christian liberty into an excuse for casting off all moral restraint, Paul refused to adopt the expedient of law. The casuistic spirit was anathema to him. He could not permit sophists to reduce dynamic Christian life to a list of deadening regulations. He constantly urged people to be filled with the beauty of Christ, to have the mind of Christ, to allow the Holy Spirit to be their personal guide, and thus to live truly as the free-born children of God.

Does that lead to weak marriages and easy divorce? Only to those who want to mock the grace of God (cp. Romans 6:1-2). But where Jesus (and not merely some dictum) truly is Lord in a home, marriage will thrive in holiness, integrity, faithfulness, trust, and love.

(C) TWO OTHER PRECLUSIONS

It is worth noting that there were two other situations where Moses strictly outlawed divorce:

- when a man had falsely accused his wife of pre-marital unchastity (Deuteronomy 22:13-19); and
- when a man had intercourse with a woman and was forced to marry her (22:28-29).

The prohibition in those cases, of course, was only against the man dismissing his wife against her will; although, I suppose, if she became guilty of post-marital infidelity, he would presumably then be free to divorce her.

INTERIM CONCLUSIONS

Let me summarise what I have shown you thus far –

- Christ established a basic opposition to all divorce and remarriage, and there can be no doubt that those who desire to please him will strive mightily to conform to his will in this matter.
- Christ allowed a specific exception to that basic rule: divorce may be allowed on the ground of porneia. However, there is such breadth in the definition of porneia that a separate ethical decision concerning its meaning and its application must be made in each case.
- By default, in that he did not specifically countermand it, Christ apparently intended the Mosaic law (Deuteronomy 24:1-4; etc.) to remain effective, or at least, to be used as a valid guide toward establishing a Christian marital ethic.

(A) IS RE-MARRIAGE PERMITTED?

When a divorce was lawful, Moses said that the woman could go and "become the wife of another man" (Deuteronomy 24:2). I take it that Christ accepted this rule. In other words, the exception stated by Christ ("for any cause other than porneia") is applicable not only to divorce but also to re-marriage. Thus Henry Alford argues that the structure of the Greek text in Matthew 19:9 requires the reading, "He who marries a woman thus divorced (that is, for a cause other than unchastity) commits adultery."²¹

In other words, when a Christian has divorced a spouse on lawful grounds (that is, because of porneia), that Christian is free to remarry, but not otherwise.

The Jews of Christ's day unanimously agreed that the scriptures allowed re-marriage after a lawful divorce. They squabbled about what constituted a lawful divorce, but they never doubted that Moses allowed a couple to re-marry after their marriage had been legitimately dissolved.²² On that point there was no quarrel.

Christ appears to have approved that principle, except for placing a definite limitation on what constitutes a lawful divorce. Subject only to this restriction, the Lord apparently agreed that a divorced couple were free to re-marry.

But someone may protest: "Surely Christ specifically forbids ALL re-marriage in Mark 10:11-12 and Luke 16:18!" I can only reply that you must read those passages in the light of the exception found in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9. But since Christ based that exception on a reference to Deuteronomy 24:1-4 I cannot avoid applying it not only to divorce but also to re-marriage. Hence, a lawfully divorced couple are free to re-marry.²³

21 The Greek Testament, Vol 1, page 194.

22 Notice, for example, how Moses precludes a priest from marrying a divorced woman, but by that very rule implies that other men may do so (Le 21:7).

23 The concept that divorce automatically conveys a right to re-marry seems to be taken for granted in the legal codes of all civilised communities.

Note the subtle way in which Mark differs from Matthew in his account of this debate between Jesus and the rabbis. According to Mark, Jesus asked them, "What did Moses command you?" (Mk 10:3) But the rabbis replied, "Moses allowed . . ." (vs. 4) At once Jesus rejoined that Moses did not merely "allow", but rather "commanded" (vs. 5) them to write a certificate of divorce.

Why? Because only then (as Moses taught) would the woman be free to re-marry. I think Jesus heartily endorsed the need to offer protection to the vulnerable spouse, and he recognised that divorce and re-marriage might be the lesser evil. Nonetheless, he steadfastly stressed that God's original and unchanged purpose was toward a lifelong union (Mark 10:6-9).

(B) THE INNOCENT PARTY VERSUS THE GUILTY

Because Moses (Leviticus 20:10; etc) decreed the death penalty for persons guilty of adultery, and of other forms of immorality, some have taught that only the innocent party is free to re-marry; they refuse remarriage to the guilty party. Others say the guilty party should be allowed to marry only if the innocent party marries again.

We may ask, though, is any party in a divorce case wholly innocent or wholly guilty? It may be so occasionally. But usually there will be at least some blame on both sides. In any case, Christ confirmed the substitution of divorce for the death penalty (which the Jews were no longer inflicting for adultery), nor is there any suggestion in his words that the privilege of re-marriage should be restricted to the innocent party.

(C) A LAWFUL DIVORCE DISSOLVES THE MARRIAGE

So it seems that a lawful divorce completely dissolves a marriage. The former partners then become as though they had never married. They are therefore free to proceed as single persons, except for whatever restraints or obligations the laws and customs of their own society may place upon them. As single persons they are wholly released from their former bond, and are free to marry whomever they choose.

This complete dissolution of the former marriage bond is confirmed by the prohibition (mentioned above) against a divorced couple re-marrying each other. They are to be to each other as though they did not exist (that is, providing at least one of them has in the meantime contracted another marriage, Deuteronomy 24:4.)

(D) JESUS ON CELIBACY

Christ's words in Matthew 19:11-12 show his awareness that for many people an unmarried state is fraught with grave difficulties. He freely allowed that a demand for celibacy is within the grasp only of those who are gifted for such continence. This being so, it is not consistent to suppose he would allow divorce without also allowing re-marriage. The one seems to be an unavoidable consequence of the other.

The same ideas occur in 1 Corinthians 7:1-2, 5, 9; 1 Timothy 5:14, upon which further comment is given below. In the meantime, notice again that this principle is applicable only to a divorce on scriptural grounds. If people choose to remain unmarried, or to divorce on grounds other than scripture allows, then they must determine to live in celibacy and chastity.

FIVE

THE TEACHING OF PAUL

At first sight there is a passage where Paul appears to teach that no-one can re-marry while a former partner is alive; see Romans 7:1-3. However, Paul is not dealing there with the subject of divorce, but with two simple facts: that a married couple are ordinarily bound to each other for as long as they live; and that death automatically dissolves a marriage. He makes those ordinary facts an illustration of our relationship with the law and the gospel.

Since the issue of a broken marriage was not in the apostle's mind when he wrote to the Romans, it is not valid to use his comments there to establish a position on divorce and re-marriage. Rather we must turn to a passage where the apostle does deal specifically with the matter of a ruined relationship – see 1 Corinthians 7:1-10.

Once again we find, not a formal statement of all the problems caused by marital infidelity, but a response to particular questions. Hence we must supplement the teaching in this passage with that found in other places in the scripture.

Paul is often criticised for this passage, as if he had reduced marriage to the lowest level of physical gratification. He is scorned for presenting marriage merely as a device for the easy fulfilment of sexual desire. But the statements he makes here, in response to certain inquirers, must be measured against his words elsewhere – for example, Ephesians 5:22-23, where he gives one of the loveliest descriptions in all literature of the beautiful qualities of a true marriage. But in his letter to the Corinthians he was simply answering some questions, which appear to have been:

- is celibacy better than marriage? (1-2, 6-9)
- what are the duties of each spouse? (3-5)
- is divorce permissible for a Christian? (10-11)
- what about an unbelieving spouse? (12-16)
- what about those who are unmarried? (25-38)
- can a woman marry after her husband dies? (39-40)

Paul had a firm answer for each of those questions –

(A) THE QUESTION OF CELIBACY

See verses 1-2, 6-9, 25-38. Celibacy was much admired in antiquity. The ancients reckoned it a higher state than marriage. So it is not surprising that in the church at Corinth there were some forceful advocates of celibacy. Since Paul himself was a bachelor (vs. 7) they no doubt

thought they had apostolic authority for their position. Actually, Paul takes great care to strike a fair balance between the connubial and celibate states; he points out the weaknesses and the advantages of each –

(1) CELIBACY IS GOOD

"It is a good thing for a man to have nothing to do with women" (vs. 1).

Notice, "good" is not the same as "better". There are benefits in celibacy, but the single state is not necessarily superior to the married. Within marriage also there is much "good" – compare Ephesians 5:22-33; 1 Timothy 3:1-4; 5:14; etc.

However, at the time Paul wrote to the Corinthians, they were facing a period of persecution ("in a time of trouble like the present" – vs. 26), and for this reason he recommended they should all remain as they were: "It is best for a man to stay as he is. Have you contracted a marriage? Then do not cast your wife aside. Are you unmarried? Then do not seek a wife" (vs. 27). He said this, not to advocate celibacy, but only to spare them sorrow: "Those who marry will suffer pain because of the present conditions, and my aim is to spare you" (vs. 28-35).

Paul was careful to say that his advice did not stem from any direct command of God, but was his own opinion: "On the question of celibacy, I have no instructions from the Lord, but here is my opinion, which comes from one who by God's mercy is fit to be trusted" (vs. 25). So he added, despite his anxiety about persecution, that they were free to marry if other considerations made it advisable to do so: "If however you do marry there is nothing wrong in it" (vs. 28; and see also vs. 36-38).²⁴

(2) MARRIAGE IS GOOD

Despite the value of celibacy, and despite the problem of worldly distractions (vs. 29-35), the rule for most people is plainly stated:

"Because there is so much immorality, let each man have his own wife, and each woman her own husband" (vs. 2).

And again:

"I say this by way of concession, not command. I would prefer you all to be as I am myself; but everyone has the gift God has granted him, one this gift, and another that" (vs. 6-7).

Here is the weakness of celibacy – it opens the celibate to severe temptation (compare also vs. 5) and to the suspicion of being unchaste. This leads Paul to make a vital statement: continence and conjugality both require, and both are, a gift of God. The grace of God at work in some will draw them to celibacy. That same grace at work in others will draw them to marriage. Both equally depend upon a divine inflow. Neither state can be lived as God wants it lived, without his help.

²⁴ Note: scholars are divided about whether vs. 36-38 refer to a father giving his daughter in marriage, or to a betrothed couple. In either case the meaning is clear: Paul suggests that a couple should delay marriage until the time of trouble has passed; but there is no wrong in going ahead with the marriage.

(3) THREE GROUPS OF CELIBATES

According to Christ, only three groups of people can accept celibacy – see Matthew 19:10-12. He said this because the disciples had exclaimed, "It is better not to marry!" But Christ replied, "You cannot expect everyone to accept that. It belongs only to those who have received a gift from God." He then went on to point out that continence was usually limited to those who

- are "incapable of marriage because they were born that way" (that is, they were born either with a physical disability or with a celibate nature);
- are incapable of marriage because they "were made that way by men" (by surgery or accident);
- have "renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of Heaven."

Then he concluded: "Let those accept it who can!"

For those who can "accept it", celibacy is the proper calling. But for the remainder of mankind marriage is the ordinary and expected state, and should be embraced gladly as the will of God.²⁵

(4) MARRY IF YOU CAN

With all that in mind, Paul writes:

"To those who are unmarried, and to widows, this is my advice: it is good for you to remain single, as I am myself. But if you cannot control yourselves, then you should marry. It is better to marry than to be on fire with passion." (vs. 8-9)

Did you notice that the words "you should marry" are a command? Paul does not support the idea that there is something meritorious in suppressing sexual desire. It is more virtuous to marry than to struggle constantly against passion. Hence the words of both Christ and Paul show that Christian people should normally control sexual desire through the proper use of marriage.

Martin Luther embraced the same good sense. In his commentary on Galatians 5:16, he wrote

"If the flesh begin to wax wanton, repress and bridle it by the Spirit. If it will not be, marry a wife, 'for it is better to marry than to burn.' Thus doing thou walkest in the Spirit: that is, thou followest God's word and doest his will."

Find What is Right for You

Paul concludes: "All this I say by way of concession, not command." That is, he is not instructing them either to marry or to remain single, but is giving permission for either state. Neither is superior to the other. Only one thing is right: find the will of God, and do it.

(B) THE QUESTION OF MARITAL DUTY

See 1 Corinthians 7:3-5 –

²⁵ Note: the renunciation of marriage "for the sake of the kingdom of Heaven" does not sanction any form of self-mutilation, for that is strictly forbidden - Leviticus 19:28; Deuteronomy 23:1-2. The reference here is to those who, like Paul, have received from God the special gift (Greek "charism", a spiritual endowment) that enables them to sustain a single state with joy.

"The husband must give the wife what is due to her, and the wife equally must give the husband his due."

The word "due" could be translated "their debt to each other". It shows that each party owes to the other, equally and habitually, certain conjugal rights. The husband must give full satisfaction to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. They are to concentrate, not on getting their due, but on giving their duty. They should each seek their partner's pleasure above their own.

So pressing is this debt, Paul says a couple should withhold it from each other only for the most compelling reasons, and then only by mutual consent –

"Do not deny yourselves to one another, except when you agree upon a temporary abstinence in order to devote yourselves to prayer ... otherwise, for lack of self-control, you may be tempted by Satan" (vs. 5).

Husband and wife belong to each other so fully that the withholding of the body is (in the stronger word of the old version) an act of "fraud" and therefore reprehensible in the sight of God.

The reason for this rule is stated: the marriage covenant involves a surrender of the right to sole control over one's own body –

"The wife cannot claim her body as her own; it belongs to her husband. Equally, the husband cannot claim his body as his own; it belongs to his wife" (vs. 4).

But the question to be raised here is this: does a "marriage" consist only of two people observing legal forms and thus being pronounced man and wife? Or is there an inescapable presumption that a man is no true husband, nor is a woman a true wife, unless they each honourably fulfil their marital duties toward each other? Should a man still be called "husband" if he incessantly abuses his wife (whether physically, verbally, or emotionally), and denies her his duty of care, protection, love, intimacy, and fellowship? Should a woman still be called "wife" if she refuses to honour and love her man, and withholds from him intimacy, partnership, and joy? Can a marriage that deserves the name be built upon continuing "fraud"? (the Greek word is used in 1 Co 7:5). Is it the business of the church to preserve unions that have become "marriages" in name only, without any of the qualities that are embraced in the very terms "marriage", "husband", and "wife"? Or do we have a higher Christian duty to create marriages that exist, not just on the books of the government registrar's office, but also in heaven? What is a marriage? A legal form alone, or a loving relationship alone? Surely it is both, and if either dimension is missing then can it still be said that the marriage exists?

(C) THE QUESTION OF DIVORCE AND RE-MARRIAGE

See 1 Corinthians 7:10-16; 39-40.

(1) WHERE BOTH PARTNERS ARE CHRISTIANS

The rule is strong, for Christ himself has spoken on this matter (Matthew 5:31,32; etc.). So Paul writes –

"For married couples, this is my rule (which is not mine but the Lord's): a wife must not separate from her husband, and if she does, she must either remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband; and the husband must not divorce his wife" (vs. 10-11).

If you and your spouse are both Christians, what do those words mean?

- Paul's application of the words of Christ to a Christian couple, but not to a couple of which one or both are unbelievers, suggests he held to the view I have suggested above: that Christ directed his prohibition against divorce and re-marriage more toward the godly than the ungodly.

The godly are expected to strive for the highest standards; the ungodly are known to be hard of heart and unable to keep the laws of God.

- Christians ought not to divorce nor separate; rather, they should seek the help of God to reconcile their differences.
- If they find it impossible to become reconciled, and they separate, they should remain unmarried, and continue their search for reconciliation.

The above rules presume that both parties are committed Christians, and that the source of their discontent is entirely personal grievance, for which they should find a solution in the grace of Christ. However, if the source of their marital breakdown is porneia (Matthew 5:32) or something truly "scandalous" (Deuteronomy 24:1) then divorce and re-marriage presumably become a lawful option.

But within the church (as I have already stated), the pressure is strongly towards the maintenance of a marriage, and people should contemplate divorce only when the most serious reasons exist. Divorced Christians, if they re-marry, risk committing adultery in the sight of God, thus incurring his wrath (cp. 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Hebrews 13:4). However, if one of the Christian spouses without consent divorces the other, and goes off and re-marries, then the deserted spouse is presumably free to marry another. The same rule might apply even where there has been no divorce – that is, where one of the spouses has been wilfully deserted by the other. Again the deserted spouse, if there is no hope of reconciliation, might be reckoned free to sue for divorce, and then to marry another.

There are other cases even more difficult to resolve that present a troubling ethical problem for those who yearn to see God's highest ideals fulfilled in marriage. Compassionate pastors, confronted with a collapse of human love and a cruel violation Christian standards, know that no easy answers can be found – whether in simplistic law, or in sentimental pity. The mind of God will have to be discovered in each case, which may require a genuine spiritual struggle. Perhaps much prayer will be needed, along with a careful study of the biblical ethical principles.

(2) WHERE ONE PARTNER IS AN UNBELIEVER

If one partner in a marriage is an unbeliever, how does that affect the marriage, and what attitude should the Christian spouse have? That brings us to

(D) THE QUESTION OF MIXED MARRIAGES

Paul begins his answer with the words, "Concerning the rest I would say this (and this is my personal view, not the word of the Lord), . . . " (vs. 12). By "the rest" he means marriages where one spouse is an unbeliever. Unlike the former case, where he was able to quote a direct pronouncement of Christ, Paul is here not able to cite any precedent. Nonetheless he does not hesitate to express his opinion, as one who can rightly claim divine authority (vs. 40).

Paul's wording once again shows his belief that the saying of Christ (Matthew 5:32; 19:9; etc.) is applicable primarily to marriages where both partners fear God and desire to serve him. In other cases, a different law comes into operation.

Furthermore, when Christ spoke about marriage and divorce to the Jews the church had not been founded, hence the problem of mixed marriages had not yet arisen. Paul reminds the Corinthians of this in order to clear the way for him to make a new rule about divorce, a rule that is applicable only to the Church. He is says in effect –

"Although the Lord did not speak on this matter, I am now able to do so as an apostle speaking by the Spirit of God, and I add this new rule to the law of Christ."

(1) PAUL'S NEW RULE

His rule is this: no Christian should leave an unbelieving partner, or refuse to cohabit with that partner, solely on the ground of his or her unbelief. The marriage is still sanctified in the sight of God, the union "honourable" (Hebrews 13:4), and its duties unchanged. The offspring of the marriage are legitimate; and, at least until they reach an age of personal accountability, hold the same relationship to God as do children of a wholly Christian marriage. Thus Paul writes –

"If a Christian man has an unbelieving wife, and she is happy to live with him, he must not divorce her. Or if a Christian woman has an unbelieving husband, and he is happy to live with her, she must not divorce her him. For an unbelieving husband is reckoned holy by God because of his Christian wife, and an unbelieving wife is reckoned holy by God, because of her Christian husband. Otherwise your children would be unholy, but now they too are holy" (vs.12-14).

But what if an unbelieving spouse has lost all joy in the marriage, and is no longer willing to make any effort to sustain it in love?

That is our next theme.

SIX

WHEN LOVE FAILS

Suppose an unbelieving partner is not willing to live peaceably with a Christian spouse, what then? Paul answers: "If an unsaved partner insists upon a separation, then let him/her have it" (vs. 15). The Christian is not to hinder the unbeliever from going. Two reasons are given (vs. 15,16) –

(A) A CALL TO PEACE

"God has called us to live in peace"

In other words, to cling to a marriage that the other partner is determined to end, leads only to disturbance and unhappiness. But God desires a peaceful life for his children, so that they may freely serve him.

This raises another question. Does Paul's rule apply only, or strictly, to an "unsaved" partner – that is, one who was never a Christian? Or may it be applied also to a "Christian" spouse who has begun behaving more like a sinner than a saint? Here is a Christian woman, for example, who could rightly walk out of her marriage if her "unsaved" spouse treated her with hatred and abuse. But suppose he claims to be "saved"? Is she then obliged to accept such vile treatment patiently? Does a mere profession of faith, without the substance of it, preclude her from divorcing a violent "Christian" husband? My own opinion is that people who insist upon behaving like "unbelievers" should be accorded the status of "unbelievers", whatever their former profession of faith may have been. He who acts like a sinner should be treated like a sinner.

(B) A CALL TO SENSE

"How do you know that you will be able to save your spouse?"

There is no guarantee that clinging to a marriage will lead to the salvation of an unbeliever, so it is better to allow the unbeliever to go. Paul is not in favour of marriage being viewed as a missionary institution. He does not approve of a Christian aggressively taking advantage of the intimacy of marriage to bombard a spouse with the gospel. Within marriage, the believer's witness should be more that of a beautiful life than a verbal assault (cp. 1 Peter 3:1-4).

(C) A GROUND FOR DIVORCE

Says Paul, "In such cases a Christian husband or wife is no longer bound by the marriage vows" (vs. 15). That is, when an unbelieving spouse ²⁶ wishes to "depart", the Christian is released from his/her commitment to the marriage.

The word "bound" probably refers back to the clause in vs. 12, "he must not divorce her;" which means that the rule against a Christian divorcing an unbeliever is effective only if the unbeliever "is happy (that is, willing) to live with" the Christian. But if the unbeliever wants to separate, then the Christian is no longer "bound" by this rule, and may take any steps necessary, including divorce, to secure his or her property, rights, and well-being.

The word "bound" may also refer to the marriage "bond". If so, then Paul is saying that the departure of the unbeliever releases the Christian from all obligation to the marriage. The Christian is then free to turn that moral release into a legal one by divorce, which must then include a right to re-marry.

Notice that the clause "in such a case the Christian is not bound" cannot mean only that the believer is free to be deserted, for that would be absurd. If an unbeliever is determined go, what can the Christian spouse do to prevent it? Therefore, Paul must mean that the Christian is no longer bound to the deserting partner, nor to the marriage vows they had both formerly taken.

(D) SEPARATION UNDER ANOTHER NAME?

So the apostle has given us an additional ground for divorce. But if so, then a Christian who has divorced a deserting partner must also be free to re-marry, for divorce without permission to re-marry is an exercise in futility – it is just separation under another name. Notice Paul's statement again –

"In such cases, the Christian husband or wife no longer has any (marital) obligations. Remember that God has called us to live in peace."

Those words strongly imply that desertion has severed all ties with the defaulting unbeliever, and if the Christian can find peace in a new marriage then he or she is free to do so.

If you still doubt that Paul's use of the word "separate" or "depart" in verse 15 means divorce, with its corollary right of re-marriage, then look at Paul's use of the same word in verse 10. There he talks about a Christian wife "departing" from her Christian husband, and says she may not marry another. But unless such a departure includes divorce, she would not be free to re-marry in any case. The inference is clear. When Paul permits departure, he also permits divorce, and hence re-marriage.

The Greek word translated "bound" literally means enslaved. It suggests that nothing in the gospel endorses the idea that a marriage fallen into a condition of slavery for either spouse deserves to be continued.

26 Which includes, as I have mentioned just above, supposedly "Christian" spouses who insist upon behaving like unbelievers.

(E) WHAT DOES "DEPART" MEAN?

What constitutes "separation" or "departure" by an unbelieving spouse?

Some teachers limit the meaning of Paul to actual physical desertion, a complete "departure" from the conjugal home. But I feel obliged to include also moral and social default. An unbelieving husband, for example, may decide to remain in the house with his wife. But why? Perhaps for no other reason than to torment her. He may also fail to give what is her due as his wife, and so "defraud" her, denying her the rightful claim she has upon him. If so, then he has, in effect, shown himself not "willing to live with her" as man and wife. To me, that is desertion in principle, if not in fact. (I am assuming the default has occurred solely because the wife is a Christian, and that she has not been lax in fulfilling her own obligations.) Where the husband is the Christian partner the reverse would be true.

I am not saying that a Christian must leave, or sue for divorce, under such circumstances, only that he or she has liberty to do so. There may be other reasons (e.g. the welfare of children) that make it more desirable for a Christian to continue living with a defaulting unbeliever.

Christians who choose to remain with an aggravating unbeliever, may find comfort in a more positive translation of vs. 16. Most translations (like the one cited above) give the verse a negative cast, but others make it positive –

"Think of it – as a wife, you may be your husband's salvation; as a husband, you may be your wife's salvation!" (NEB, etc.)

(F) THE QUESTION OF THE PRESENT CRISIS

See 1 Corinthians 7:25-28. I have mentioned this passage above, in connection with celibacy, but it also has something to say about divorce. The gist of Paul's teaching is clear. He saw that a time of trouble was about to fall upon the church, and therefore advised the Christians to remain as they were (whether married or unmarried) until more peaceful days had returned. But in the process, Paul unconsciously alluded to some ideas that are important for this study. Notice verses 27-28, to which several versions give a meaning like the following –

"Are you married? Then do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Then do not look for a spouse. Nonetheless, you will not be doing anything wrong if you choose to marry; and if a virgin decides to marry she will not be committing a sin."

Notice two things –

- Paul distinguishes between "virgins" and the "unmarried", who therefore must have been previously married. But why are they now unmarried? Were they widowed, or divorced? Plainly, they were divorced, because Paul uses the same Greek word (*luso* = to loose) in both places. The passage reads literally –

"Are you married? Do not seek to be loosed. Are you loosed? Do not seek a wife."

- There is no reason (apart from prejudice) to agree with those who translate *luso* as "divorced" in the first place, but as "unmarried" in the second.²⁷ Therefore, the verse in Corinthians may be correctly translated:

²⁷ The gospels use a related verb (*apoluo*) to describe divorce in Matthew 5:31-32 (three times); 19:3-9 (five times); Mark 10:2-12 (four times); Luke 16:18 (twice).

"Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you divorced? Do not look for a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned."

So, having told the "virgins" and the "divorced" not to marry/remarry because of "the present crisis", Paul still says to both groups, "But if you do marry you have not sinned." (There is, of course, an unspoken proviso that those who were divorced had dissolved their marriages on lawful grounds.) I cannot avoid the conclusion that Paul did permit at least some divorced people to remarry.

(1) THE QUESTION OF A SECOND MARRIAGE

See 1 Corinthians 7:39-40. This is the last of the questions the Corinthians submitted to Paul. It concerns the matter of marrying after a former spouse has died. Paul gives two rules, which I will be content simply to mention here, since discussion of them really belongs in another study –

- you can marry again after your spouse dies, but only "in the Lord" – that is, only to a Christian.
- you can marry "whom you will" – which suggests that specific divine guidance in relation to choosing a spouse is not ordinarily available. God expects us to use the normal resources of asking questions, of intelligent courtship, of responsible measurement of temperament and character, as we search for a suitable partner.

(G) CONCLUSIONS

- Under certain circumstances the Bible allows both divorce and re-marriage. Nonetheless it everywhere urges the highest possible view of marriage, and therefore presents a general ban against both divorce and re-marriage, except where a former partner has died (1 Corinthians 7:39). A Christian approach to the matter will reflect that biblical stance: that is, the major focus will be upon the preservation of marriage, not its dissolution; yet allowance will be made for human failure, including the need for divorce and the freedom to marry again. My remaining conclusions, below, spell this out in more detail.
 - However, Christ taught that porneia so destroys the unity of marriage, and so violates the divine purpose for marriage, that divorce can be permitted on this ground. Yet it is not commanded, and the expectation is that reconciliation will be attempted, and that divorce will follow only if the porneia has caused an irrevocable collapse of the marriage. Whether that collapse has in fact occurred is something that must be determined separately in each case.
 - Christ preferred not to offer any other ground for divorce; yet he allowed that human frailty and hardness of heart made it necessary for the Mosaic principle to remain effective. Beyond that, Christ expected his own people to grasp the higher, not the lower, standard.
 - Paul gave permission for a Christian to divorce an unbeliever who wished to separate (or who had destroyed the marriage by default.) We might also construe this to include a "Christian" spouse who has so far denied the faith as to abandon any pretence of fulfilling his or her marital obligations.
 - Where divorce is permitted, re-marriage is also necessarily permitted; but re-marriage following an unlawful divorce may involve the partners in adultery. The scripture allows separation on grounds other than the two just mentioned, but generally not divorce – for in scripture the sanction of divorce involves also the
-

sanction of re-marriage. Christian couples, however, are discouraged from separating (and even more from divorcing), since they should be able to reconcile their differences in the grace of the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). However, nothing in scripture obliges a Christian spouse to endure a situation fraught with abuse, violence, incessant conflict, infidelity, drunkenness, and the like. Spouses who so behave have effectively "departed" from the marriage, and may be treated as if they were "unbelievers"..

- Christians who have never married, or who are lawfully released from a former marriage, are free to marry "whom they wish, except that it must be in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 7:39). That is, Christians are forbidden to contract marriage with an unbeliever, but they may marry any other Christian they deem would make a suitable partner.
- When a Christian is already married to an unbeliever, the Christian is to continue to fulfil with love and devotion all the obligations of marriage. Scripture insists that a divided home can still be a happy one, and that Christian spouses should apply neither social nor spiritual pressure to their unbelieving partners. Sadly, in contrast with Paul, nowadays it is often the Christian spouse who is not "content" with the union, rather than the reverse. That is not an acceptable attitude for a Christian to hold.
- In all marriages, husband and wife are to acknowledge and to fulfil their mutual responsibilities in cohabitation and devoted care of each other.
- The Bible contains ethical guidelines on the issues of marriage, divorce, and re-marriage, but it does not present a comprehensive and definitive set of rules which provide a clear and easy solution to every problem. Many issues are not discussed at all. Ethicists who draw a handful of absolute rules from scripture, and compel every couple to conform to them, are guilty of legalism and of failing to treat fairly all the data the Bible does give.

Given the lack of final definition in what the scriptures say, it is clear the Spirit did not intend to give glib answers to deeply complex human tragedies, but rather to provide a foundation upon which each generation may build its own ethical judgments. These judgments cannot be forged easily, nor by formulating inflexible rules, but rather by prayer and by an earnest endeavour to isolate the real needs of each couple. Then from such revelation as the Bible does give, the counsellor must seek a solution that will best glorify God, honour marriage, and bring healing to those who are hurting.

- The pastor who allows re-marriage should first look for the following in the couple that are being counselled –
- repentance of whatever fault may have been theirs in the failure of their previous marriage(s).

To this repentance there should be added a sense of the offence against divine righteousness that all divorce represents, and of the hurt that divorce does, to the church, to Christian standards, and, most of all, to the people involved. It mars the image of God in them. No Christian can glibly tolerate divorce, as though it were a matter of small consequence. On the contrary, its harvest is bitter, and lifelong, and reaches even into eternity. Divorce should be reluctantly allowed only when it has become the least destructive of the available options.

- a desire to identify the reasons for the previous marital breakdown.

To this there must be added definite steps toward self-improvement, so that former faults will not be repeated.

- a readiness to forgive the offences of the former spouse(s), in a sense of their own need of the forgiveness of Christ.

- a true appreciation of how God views marriage, and a commitment to do all that is humanly possible in the new marriage to fulfil the divine standard.
- a willingness to accept the place of suffering in Christian life.

Too many marriages founder on the shoals of sheer selfishness, torn apart by a crazy notion that people have a right to go through life easily and comfortably, free from conflict, tension, pain. In an article on this subject, Barry Chant writes:

"The true value of suffering is often missed. In today's comfortable world, we are often led to believe that suffering is always wrong, and therefore always to be avoided. However, it is written even of the Lord Jesus Christ that 'he learned obedience by the things that he suffered' (Hebrews 2:10; 5:8). And to Timothy Paul wrote: 'Take your share of suffering' (2 Timothy 2:3). Sometimes the lessons learned through a difficult marriage are of greater value than the pleasures we all look for.

"I do not wish to be misunderstood here. I believe with all my heart that God's plan for marriage is for it to be blissfully joyful and deeply and truly satisfying. When two people build on God's principles, their marriage cannot help but be the most exciting and rewarding relationship on earth. However, if for some reason it does not work out this way, even the suffering may be for good (Romans 8:28). It is not necessarily right to look for an easy way out, especially if it is contrary to God's word."

(H) FINAL COMMENT

The rate of divorce in our society has reached a tragic level. It has been truly said that holy wedlock has become unholy deadlock. Yet the rigid stance that the church has often taken on the issue of divorce and remarriage has not enhanced its moral authority. It may well be true that under pressure of changes in society, and of the better understanding of scripture we now have, the church should re-appraise its ethic on marriage. The aim must never be to weaken what scripture says, but rather to understand what it says, and to apply better its healing balm to the countless broken homes and broken lives that surround us.

Marriage is an honourable and sacred estate (Hebrews 13:4; Ephesians 5:22-33; Colossians 3:18-20; Proverbs 18:22, 19:14; etc.) It should not be entered lightly; nor should it be broken except in dire circumstances. Married people have an obligation not only to themselves but also to the Lord God. Let those who contemplate marriage do so in the fear of the Lord, seeking a partner of God's choosing.

Let those who are married give no thought to dissolving the union, unless they are compelled by circumstances beyond their control.

Let those who have become separated or divorced seek to be reconciled to their former partners. If that is impossible, they must not marry another except within the limits laid down by the scripture.

Thus will our homes be established in the strength and blessing of the Lord, and a godly seed will rise up to praise his glorious name.

ADDENDA

THE MODERN DILEMMA

After writing the above notes, I came across the following passage, in which Colin Brown comments on the inadequacy of the biblical data to cover every marital exigency:

"Remarriage is therefore sanctioned (in the New Testament) in certain clear-cut cases. But there are many cases in modern society where marriage has broken down through incompatibility, drink, cruelty, and sundry other causes on which there are no explicit pronouncements of scripture. There are also many cases in society of divorcees marrying and subsequently being converted.

"Is the church to deny the right of marriage to the former group and to tell the latter to unscramble their marriages? This would be the logical consequence of the rigorist interpretation of Jesus' teaching. But this would not seem to represent the mind of Jesus. The foundation of his teaching – 'what God joined together let man not put asunder' – is a formula for avoiding the breakdown of marriage, and not an iron law putting into equal bondage the callous, the innocent, and the penitent.

"In cases where a believing partner desires to remarry, we should follow the example of Jesus and examine the situation in the light of God's purposes in creation. In creating man and woman it was God's intention that man should not dwell alone (Genesis 2:18), and, as we have seen from Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 7:1-9), the saving knowledge of God was not intended as a substitute for normal human relationships. Just as the sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath, so marriage was made for man. We do not cease to have the need of physical and person-affirming relationships, when marriage breaks down .

..

"To those who would preclude the possibility of remarriage on the grounds that marriage is indissoluble, the question must be put:

'By what right do you, who enjoy the security and warmth of a happy marriage, deny the possibility to others who find that their former marriage has broken down irretrievably and that there is nothing that they can now do to restore it?'

"To those who would seek remarriage, the question must be put:

'Do you believe in your hearts that in your new marriage you can love God, each other, and those around you more fully than if you were to remain as you are?'"²⁸

(I) MARRIAGE IN UTOPIA

That renowned "man for all seasons", Sir Thomas More, wrote in 1516 his equally famous book, *Utopia*. In it he gave some sage counsel on divorce and remarriage. It was counsel he had earned the right to give because of the idyllic quality of his own home life. Here then, first, is an account of his two marriages; and, second, an extract from *Utopia* –

(1) Having abandoned an early inclination to the priesthood, the young Thomas decided to marry and fixed his attention upon the three daughters of a certain John Colte. His heart was drawn to the second of the three girls, but then he reflected on the insult the eldest, Jane, would suffer if her younger sister were married first. Accordingly, he asked for Jane's hand, and they were duly wedded. She proved to be a fine wife, bore him four children, and they enjoyed surpassing happiness for six years, until her death in 1511. A few weeks later he married again. But his second wife, Alice, was a querulous woman, rather shallow in understanding, and unable to bring him the gladness that he and Jane had known. Nonetheless, just as he had resolved to do his duty by Jane, and in it found great contentment, so More conducted himself impeccably toward Alice. Here is a passage from a letter about him written by another to Erasmus –

"There is not any man living so loving to his children as he (More), and he loveth his old wife as if she were a young maid, and such is the excellency of his temper, that whatsoever happeneth that could not be helped, he loveth it as if nothing could happen more happily. You would say there were in that place Plato's academy, – but I do the house injury in comparing it to Plato's academy, wherein there was only disputations of numbers, and geometrical figures, and sometimes of morals and virtues. I should rather call his house a school or university of Christian religion, for there is none therein but readeth and studieth the liberal sciences; their special care is piety and virtue; there is no quarrelling or intemperate words heard, none seem idle; which household discipline that worthy gentleman doth not govern by proud and lofty words, but with all kind and courteous benevolence; everybody performeth his duty; yet is there always alacrity; neither is sober mirth anything wanting."²⁹

(2) In *Utopia*, More expresses his opinion on how an enlightened society should handle divorce –

"And this were they (the Utopians) constrained more earnestly to look upon, because they only of the nations in that part of the world be content every man with one wife apiece. And matrimony is there never broken but by death, except adultery break the bond, or else the intolerable wayward manners of either party. For if either of them find themselves for any such cause grieved, they may by the licence of the council change and take another. But the other party liveth ever after in infamy and out of wedlock. Howbeit, the husband to put away his wife for no other fault but for that some mishap is fallen to her body, this by no means they will suffer. For they judge it a great point of cruelty that anybody in their most need of help and comfort should be cast off and forsaken, and that old age, which both bringeth sickness with it and is a sickness itself, should unkindly and unfaithfully be dealt withal.

"But now and then it chanceth, whereas the man and the woman cannot well agree between themselves, both of them finding other, with whom they hope to live

²⁹ *Utopia*, by Sir Thomas More, Everyman's Library, 1965. Page vi.

more quietly and merrily, that they be by the full consent of them both be divorced asunder and married again to other. But that not without the authority of the council, which agreeth to no divorces before they and their wives have diligently tried and examined the matter. Yea, and then also they be loath to consent to it, because they know this to be the next way to break love between man and wife, to be in easy hope of a new marriage." ³⁰

Sir Thomas More retained the extraordinary nobility of his character throughout his life, until he was beheaded by order of King Henry VII, on July 6, 1535. This remarkable account, by his son-in-law, Sir William Roper, expresses a charm, grace, and courage that every Christian might aspire to –

"Ascending the scaffold, he seemed so weak ³¹ that he was ready to fall; whereupon he merrily said to the Lieutenant, 'I pray you Mr Lieutenant see me safe up, and for my coming down let me shift for myself.' Then desired he all the people to pray for him, and to bear witness with him that he should suffer death in, and for the faith of the Holy Catholic Church, a faithful servant both of God and the King. Which done, he kneeled down, and after his prayers ended, he turned to the executioner, and with a cheerful countenance, said, 'Pluck up thy spirits, man, and be not afraid to do thine office. My neck is very short, take heed therefore thou strike not awry for saving thine honesty. Then laying his head upon the block he had the executioner stay until he had removed aside his beard, saying that that had never committed any treason. So with much cheerfulness he received the fatal blow of the axe, which at once severed his head from his body."

(A) END WITH A CHUCKLE

The same Sir Thomas More in Utopia recommended that young people should see each other naked before marriage, and so avoid later disappointment. It was a dictum he put into practice with his own daughters, as the following anecdote shows. It illustrates too how a happy marriage depends much more upon a decision to be happy than it does upon modern concepts of romance –

"Sir William Roper came one morning, pretty early, to my lord, with a proposal to marry one of his daughters. My lord's daughters were then both together a-bed in a truckle bed in their father's chamber asleep. He carries Sir William into the chamber and takes the sheet by the corner and suddenly whips it off. They lay on their backs, and their smocks up as high as their armpits. This awakened them, and immediately they turned on their bellies. Quoth Roper, 'I have seen both sides,' and so gave a pat on the buttock to the one he made choice of, saying, 'Thou art mine.' Here was all the trouble of wooing!" ³²

The young lady's name was Margaret, and she proved to be a woman of high character, distinguished accomplishments, and deep piety. The marriage was eminently successful. It is said that she purchased the head of her martyred father less than a month after it had been exposed on London Bridge and kept it preserved in spices until her death. It was buried with her, and when her vault was opened in 1715 she was found still clasping the leaden box containing the precious relic. The poet Tennyson alludes to this in the lines –

Morn broaden'd on the borders of the dark

30 Ibid., page 100.

31 After 15 months harsh imprisonment.

32 John Aubrey (1478-1535), Brief Lives - Sir Thomas More.

Ere I saw her who clasp'd in her last trance
Her murder'd father's head.³³

As I have mentioned above, her self-appointed yet loved husband, Sir William Roper (1498-1578), of Lincoln's Inn, wrote a life of her father, which was first published in Paris in 1626.

33 From A Dream of Fair Women, in which the poet eulogises many famous women from across the span of history.
