

From the Beginning

Recovering a Biblical Perspective

of

Divorce and Remarriage

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*Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away
your wives: but from the beginning it was not so.
And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife,
except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery:
and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.*
(Matthew 19:8,9)

Introduction

Divorce and remarriage have become an inescapable feature of modern life. They are all around us in our rapidly disintegrating society so that hardly a family is untouched by them – untouched by the misery, confusion and guilt that follow.

As weddings have become all the more extravagant and costly, marriage has been cheapened. Instead of being honourable and precious, something of value to be cherished (*cf.* Heb. 13:4), it has become one more of the many disposable items in our throw-away age. The traditional marriage vow ‘Till death us do part’ is no longer taken literally but viewed simply as an ideal that couples cannot really be expected to live up to. So deeply entrenched has this cynicism become that many do not bother to marry at all but simply cohabit in a state of fornication. There is no shame any more.

The family itself is being redefined and something quite alien is being put in its place so that even two men or two women living together are now to be regarded as a ‘family’ unit. The family structure as once we knew it, originating in creation and forming the bedrock of society, hardly exists any longer. The tangled web of human relationships that now passes for a family is a travesty of the true.

Unavoidably the churches too are caught up in the decline. As they evangelize their local communities and new converts come through the doors, it is now far from certain that those converts will come from a conventional family and a stable home. It is increasingly likely that among them will be some with a history of divorce and remarriage, quite possibly more than once and bringing with them children by different fathers or different mothers.

In these complex situations a church is called to be faithful, to be ‘the pillar and ground of

the truth' (I Tim. 3:15), however difficult or costly the task might be. Where there are wrongs to be addressed it does those involved no favours at all to be told that what is past, is past.

The issue is complicated further by a number of churches and denominations that allow divorce and remarriage among their own established members. Professing believers of long standing, who are experiencing seemingly insoluble problems in their marriages, might be advised by their pastors and elders that divorce is appropriate and that remarriage is permissible, perhaps even to be encouraged, and all with Biblical warrant. Even in the churches the attitude can sometimes be that anyone can make a mistake once (or twice, or three times....?), but there are plenty more fish in the sea.

Is this the way we think? If so, then surely something has gone terribly wrong. It is as though we have forgotten that God hates divorce (Mal. 2:16). Divorce is abhorrent to our righteous God and yet, as it has become more commonplace, we no longer share His hatred. We have grown immune to its repugnance; its awfulness no longer shocks us. We now accept it as one of the unavoidable consequences of our fallen human nature, a fact of life, a problem for which remarriage is the solution... or is it?

How have we come to this?

In the four chapters that follow we will take a brief look at the history and then endeavour to present the Biblical doctrine of marriage, divorce and remarriage, addressing along the way some of the aberrant views and opinions that are commonly met with. We will also attempt to make some application to the complex situations in which believers sometimes find themselves.

I am sensitive to the fact that this is a controversial subject, touching people's lives at their most painful and vulnerable points. Among those who read this book will be some who have lived through the anguish of a broken marriage or have counselled a close relative, friend, or church member. My fervent prayer is that they will receive it in the spirit in which it is given, which most certainly is not to cause hurt, nor yet to stoke up controversy for its own sake, but out of a concern for the truth of God's Word and the 'honourable estate' of matrimony.

Love rejoices in the truth (*Cf.* I Cor. 13:6)

Erasmus' Legacy

The Early Church

In their book *Jesus and Divorce* Gordon Wenham and William Heth give us a detailed overview of seven different interpretations of Jesus' statements on divorce and remarriage. What is so striking is that no fewer than six of these are united in drawing the same conclusion, that the marriage bond is indissoluble and that remarriage after divorce amounts to adultery.

Among those six interpretations is the oldest view of all, which we might call the early church or patristic view since it had the overwhelming support of the early church fathers. Included among them are the well-known names of Irenaeus, Chrysostom, Tertullian, Ambrose, and Augustine of Hippo.

To list those [early churchmen] who hold that remarriage after divorce is contrary to the gospel teaching is to call a roll of the best-known early Christian theologians.... In all, twenty-five individual writers and two early councils forbid remarriage after divorce. (*Jesus and Divorce*; p. 37-38)

This is in contrast to just one early church teacher, an enigmatic figure from the fourth century known as Ambrosiaster, who taught that remarriage was permissible for deserted Christians and for husbands with adulterous wives – though not for wives with adulterous

husbands.

This more liberal interpretation is close to the Erasmian view, so-called because it was first taught in the early sixteenth century by the Roman Catholic humanist scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam. His *Annotations* on 1 Corinthians 7 were published in 1519. We learn, significantly, that ‘the Protestant Reformers latched on to Erasmus’s interpretation of the divorce texts and defended his exegesis from the moment they became known’ (*Jesus and Divorce*; p. 79).

Under the providence of God, the authors of the *Belgic Confession* (1561) and *Heidelberg Catechism* (1566), creedal standards of continental Reformed churches, chose not to include articles on divorce and remarriage.

It was not until the following century that Erasmus’s views were incorporated into a creedal statement. That was in 1644 when the *Westminster Confession* was compiled and what is often called the ‘Westminster’ or ‘Presbyterian’ view of divorce and remarriage was born (see *West. Conf.* Chap. XXIV, Articles V and VI).

Baptists and Congregationalists chose not to include sections on divorce and remarriage in their own confessional statements, even though they based them on the *Westminster Confession*. In his *Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith* Dr. Samuel Waldron describes the *Westminster* article as an ‘excellent statement’ and treats its omission from the *1689* as a ‘deficiency’ (*cf.* pp. 299-302).

Even so, the *Westminster Confession* has been hugely influential. Its position on divorce and remarriage has been adopted so overwhelmingly that today one can hardly find an evangelical or Reformed church that questions it.

One cannot help wondering what the Reformers, and their Puritan successors at the Westminster Assembly, would think if they were to see the modern consequences of their doctrine. I have no doubt that they would be appalled. In their day divorce was an exceptional occurrence, only becoming commonplace centuries later, whereas today divorce rates in the churches are as scandalous as those in the world. Even one divorce and remarriage in the church is a scandal. But it is a scandal that goes largely unrecognised.

The Reformers’ acceptance of Erasmus’ doctrine has been described aptly by one writer as ‘a time bomb hidden through the centuries, to explode in our time’. The same writer, a one time Bishop of Karachi, goes on,

In my 30 years as a missionary in Pakistan, I’ve been sitting on the sidelines, so to speak, and watched this bomb explode in the West. The sexual revolution, feminism

and the philosophy that says all men have a right to realize their full potential, has – along with the reformers’ acceptance of remarriage for the innocent party – led to an incredible increase in the divorce rate. (Arne Rudvin)

Robert Kingdon too, a notable Calvin scholar, is certain as to where today’s divorce rates find their source:

The modern explosion in divorce came... well into the twentieth century. It remains clear, however, that it all began in the sixteenth century. Only with the Protestant Reformation did divorce become legally possible. (*Adultery and Divorce in Calvin’s Geneva*; p. 180)

All this explains how we have arrived at our present situation, but it should also begin to suggest to us some important and searching questions.

If Erasmus, the Reformers and the Puritans were right to teach that the marriage bond can be broken by divorce, and right that remarriage is permitted by the Word of God, how is it that so very soon after the death of the New Testament writers the church started to teach the very opposite, i.e., that marriage is indissoluble and that remarriage is therefore not permissible?

Prof. Gordon Wenham puts it like this:

...if one holds that the Erasmian view is the original sense of Jesus’ teaching, it becomes a great mystery how the early church came to hold the view that re- marriage after divorce was wrong. Second-century Christians would have had both apostolic tradition and non-Christian practice endorsing the right to remarriage. What on earth could have persuaded the whole church to adopt the strict discipline of no remarriage after divorce? This was no minor adjustment to doctrine or ethics. It potentially affected the life style of every member of the church and every potential convert. It does not seem likely that it could simply be based on the ignorance of Gentiles reading the Gospels, who did not know Jewish customs that divorce entailed the right to remarry, for similar principles prevailed elsewhere in the Roman Empire: divorce allowed you to remarry. So why should second-century Christians suddenly have started reading the Gospels in a way that was contrary both to contemporary custom and the traditions that they had inherited from the apostolic age? I find this scenario historically most implausible. (Gordon Wenham, *Does the New Testament Approve Remarriage After Divorce?* p. 41)

Yet it is the Erasmian view that has held sway in Protestantism for the last five hundred years.

It is a tragic irony that while liberal, non-evangelical scholars do not even consider the Erasmian interpretation to be a viable option, our modern evangelical pastors and teachers will hardly acknowledge that there is any other worth considering (*Jesus and Divorce*; p. 13).

Upside-down Exegesis

It is sad indeed to see well known and highly respected ministers in conservative evangelical and Reformed churches persisting in teaching a doctrine that has had disastrous consequences for the institution of marriage.

A recent example can be found in the December 2005 issue of the *Free Church Witness*, published by the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing); (Maurice Roberts, *Divorce and Remarriage*; pp. 8-9). Having presented his case for what is recognisably the Erasmian position, it is significant that Mr. Roberts does not bring his article to a close with ‘So the Word of God teaches’, but with ‘So the [Westminster] Confession teaches’. Indeed it does:

In the case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce, and, after the divorce, to marry another, as if the offending party were dead.
(Chap. XXIV, Art. V)

But does the Bible teach it? That is the vital question for us. Confessions and creeds have their important place but they are not the final authority for our faith and practice.

Neither are they unalterable. When it is found that a creed, confession or article of faith is in error because it cannot stand before the light of Holy Scripture, then the churches are to correct it. Our final authority is the Word of God alone. And when we encounter passages that are hard to understand, our guiding principle must always be that ‘Scripture interprets Scripture’.

On the matter of marriage and divorce it is generally agreed that the texts causing the most difficulty are those containing the so-called exception clause: ‘except it be for fornication’. We find them in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9:

But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery.... (Matt. 5:32a)

But I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery.... (Matt. 19:9a)

That being the case, following the principle of allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture, these passages need to be explained in the light of any clearer teaching that the Lord might have given elsewhere in the gospel accounts. Another section of the *Westminster Confession* states precisely this:

when there is a question about the true and full sense of any scripture... it must be searched and known by *other places that speak more clearly*. (Chap. I, Section IX; emphasis added)

So where do we find that clearer teaching on divorce and remarriage? Without question it is in the two passages found at Mark 10:2-12 and Luke 16:18, since these are the only other words of Christ that Scripture gives us on the subject. He says there:

Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her. And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery. (Mark 10:11,12)

Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery: and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband committeth adultery. (Luke 16:18)

It is immediately obvious that these texts are lacking the exception clause. They are clear and unequivocal in their meaning, thereby setting the standard by which we are able to interpret the less clear passages of Matthew 5:32 and 19:9.

However, Mr. Roberts turns this principle of interpretation on its head and tells us that the passages in Mark and Luke 'are evidently to be understood in the light of [Matthew 5:32]' (*op. cit.*; p. 9). But, with respect to him, it is not that evident at all. And since Mr. Roberts does not give us the evidence on which he bases his conclusion, it is not possible to see how he arrives at it.

Only on the principle approved by the *Westminster Confession* itself, of the clear

passages interpreting the less clear, are the difficulties of Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 removed. Those passages must be brought to the light of Mark 10 and Luke 16, and not the other way around. Only then may we be confident of arriving at the correct interpretation.

The Exception Clause

Even standing on its own, Matthew 5:32 does not lend Mr. Roberts the support he claims.

Jesus says: 'It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery' (Matthew 5:31,32). Does this teach that remarriage is permissible after divorce?

Taking the verse apart we find that the Lord envisages two scenarios in which a man divorces his wife. In the first scenario we are not told the ground for the divorce, only that it is *not* because the wife is an adulteress. However, the text informs us that the divorce puts her into a position where she will commit adultery at some time in the future. Already two things have become clear.

The first is that the original marriage bond continues intact even after the divorce, otherwise the wife could hardly be said to go on to commit adultery. The second, and this is the main point of the text, is that the blame for the wife's future adultery is placed squarely on the husband. This is wholly consistent with the wider context of the passage, beginning at verse 27, which is Christ's exposition of the seventh commandment: 'Thou shalt not commit adultery'. The point the Lord is making in verse 32 is that the man's suing for divorce on a ground other than adultery was wrong. It was sinful. The divorce itself was in contravention of the seventh commandment.

The exception clause, 'saving for the cause of fornication', presents us with the second scenario. This time the man divorces his wife *after* she has been unfaithful to him; indeed, her unfaithfulness is the ground for his divorcing her. He cannot now be said to have caused his wife to commit adultery since she has committed it already. The purpose of the exception clause here, then, is to exonerate him of all blame. This time the divorce was permissible.

So there is nothing here that is in any way inconsistent with the statements recorded in Luke 16 and Mark 10. In fact the last part of the verse, which addresses the marriage of a man to a divorced woman, follows almost the same wording as Luke 16:18b: 'whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband committeth adultery'. Whatever the ground for divorce might

have been, remarriage constitutes adultery.

Now, Matthew 5:32 is of help to us in understanding Matthew 19:9. In this later passage the exception clause occurs once again but it is not immediately clear what it is meant to qualify. The verse reads. ‘Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery’. Does the exception clause here qualify solely the prohibition against divorce, or the prohibition against remarriage as well?

In Matthew 5:32 the exception clause can only possibly apply to putting away since remarriage does not even appear in the passage, and nor should we expect to find it there, as Prof. Wenham argues:

To introduce the thought of remarriage in v. 32a, where the central concern is to prohibit men from even divorcing their wives, is surely most unlikely. It becomes even more unlikely when we reach v. 32b where marrying any divorced woman is the climax of Jesus’ exposition of the seventh commandment’s implications. (*Does the New Testament Approve Remarriage After Divorce?* p. 36)

Therefore it would not be unreasonable to assume that the exception means the same in Matthew 19:9 as it does in Matthew 5:32, and that it qualifies the same clause, i.e., the divorce clause. This means that in a case of adultery the exception permits divorce but not remarriage.

Indeed, this is how the early church fathers understood it all those centuries ago, and their interpretation may not be dismissed lightly:

Since no modern New Testament scholar can ever hope to approach the Greek fathers’ grasp of their mother tongue and its nuances, dissenters will have to have extremely powerful arguments to show that the understanding of the Greek fathers is not the natural understanding of the texts. (Wenham, *Remarriage After Divorce: Three Views*; p. 23)

It needs to be pointed out that if the exception clause in Matthew 19:9 is interpreted as qualifying both divorce *and* remarriage, then that verse becomes the *only* text in the New Testament that can be claimed as teaching remarriage after divorce. That would be against a considerable weight of both Biblical and historical evidence to the contrary and constitute shaky ground on which to build a doctrine and practice of such momentous consequence.

Opening Pandora's Box

One modern writer who attempts to do just that is Craig Keener, an American evangelical.

Keener maintains that in Matthew 19:9, 'The exception clause is appended to divorce rather than to remarriage because it is the *validity* of the divorce that establishes the basis for acceptable remarriage. If the text allows a divorce as valid, it also allows the remarriage to be valid. A remarriage is "adulterous" by definition if – and only if – the divorce was invalid' (*Three Views*; p. 51 – original emphasis).

Thus, according to Keener, everything hinges on the validity of a divorce: if it takes place on the ground of adultery it is valid, and by virtue of that validity any subsequent remarriage is valid too.

As much as Keener and others may wish to place a degree of control over the high rates of divorce and remarriage by their talk of 'validity', their argument has the opposite effect. Once the concession is made that divorce dissolves the union so that remarriage is permitted, the lid is off the box. The institution of marriage itself begins to unravel and the stability of the family is destroyed, as modern society so vividly demonstrates.

Even when it is held, on the basis of Matthew 19:9, that adultery is the one and only ground for divorce, if it is also held that the marriage is dissolved by that divorce then it has to be understood that there are consequences for both parties. The union is broken. This allows not only the 'innocent' party to remarry 'as if the offending party were dead' (*Westminster Confession*), but also the 'guilty' one to remarry too. The marriage is broken as much for the one as it is for the other.

And yet this is contrary to the plain teaching of very text on which the remarriage of the 'innocent party only' is based, namely, Matthew 19:9: 'Whosoever shall put away his wife... and shall marry another, committeth adultery'. Thus we have a contradiction within the short space of one verse.

And as if that is not enough to discredit the very possibility of remarriage after divorce, the whole scenario rests on the illusion that the offending party is dead, which he or she most definitely is not (*cf.* I Cor. 7:39). The original marriage, therefore, is still very much intact.

But there is worse to come.

Let us suppose for a moment that adultery is the only ground for a valid divorce and a valid remarriage. The law of the land might well allow a person to divorce on a ground other than adultery, making it an invalid divorce not entitling the spouse to remarriage. But if the one who

instigated the divorce goes on to find another partner and remarries, adultery is committed. By virtue of that adulterous marriage the divorce becomes valid and the ‘innocent’ party too becomes free to remarry. This creates the perverse situation in which the ‘innocent’ party may consider it to be to their advantage for the ‘guilty’ party to marry again in order that they too might remarry.

As an aside, the not irrelevant question arises as to what the ‘innocent’ party is to do if the erstwhile spouse and new partner simply move in together without marrying? Is it to be assumed that adultery is taking place? How can it be proved?

For British scholar David Instone-Brewer, however, there are no such complications as he believes that ‘although divorce without valid grounds is wrong, it still marks the end of a marriage’ (*Divorce and Remarriage in the 1st and 21st Century* [sic], p. 25). Whatever the reason may have been for divorce, the bond is broken. Remarriage can go ahead without inhibitions.

To make matters worse still, if, as the *Westminster Confession* teaches, ‘wilful desertion as can no way be remedied by the church or civil magistrate’ is another ‘cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage’ (Chap. XXIV, Art. VI), then the remaining spouse already has the liberty to marry again. This is the case whatever the ground might have been for the original divorce, whether ‘valid’ or not, and whether the deserter marries, cohabits or remains chaste since, by its very nature, divorce is desertion.

In these circumstances it becomes hardly necessary for men to add yet more ‘valid’ grounds for divorce, such as abuse and neglect, (e.g., Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church*; pp. 69-80; Keener, *Three Views*; pp. 103-119), for the lid is now well and truly off the box and the demons of destruction are let loose upon God’s ordinance of holy matrimony.

It is difficult to see how the position of the *Confession* can be sustained while at the same time claiming a high view of marriage.

Wilful Desertion

In First Corinthians 7 the apostle Paul addresses the issue of mixed marriages. These arose in his day not because believers had disobeyedly married non-Christians but because two unbelievers had married and one of them had since been converted. These situations still arise today, especially on the mission field, and the teaching of the apostle is that the believer is not to leave his or her spouse:

If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy. (vv. 12-14)

This is still a marriage in the sight of God, and however difficult the circumstances might become the believer is not to countenance any form of separation. This is for the sake of the unbelieving spouse and of any children that might be born.

But it may be that the unbelieving partner leaves. ‘He takes action. And he leaves exactly because he hates Christ, the life of Christ, and his wife as one of Christ’s’ (Engelsma, *Better to Marry*; p. 81). What is the believer to do now?

But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace. (v. 15)

In these circumstances the believer may let the unbelieving spouse go. The believer may do this because he is not ‘under bondage’, meaning he is not enslaved or in bonds. He must not feel a sense of guilt or responsibility for the departure of the spouse, much less animosity toward her. He is to let her go. The situation should be accepted passively as the will of God, the God who has called us to peace. This is consistent with the tenor of the whole chapter, summed up in verse 20: ‘Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he is called’.

But where does this leave the marriage?

Many writers confuse the expression ‘under bondage’ in verse 15 with being ‘bound’, the term Paul uses at the end of the chapter, in verse 39. He says there: ‘The wife is *bound* by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord’. He uses the word again in Romans 7:2, ‘the woman which hath an husband is *bound* by the law to her husband so long as he liveth’.

An example of this confusion can be found in the article I mentioned earlier by Maurice Roberts. He says of verse 15, ‘The obvious meaning here is that a believer in such a position is not bound by the marriage vow which they formerly took’ (*op. cit.* p. 9).

However, that which appears obvious is not always correct, and while the Greek words underlying our English terms ‘under bondage’ and ‘bound’ certainly come from the same root, they are nevertheless quite distinct. ‘Under bondage’ has a strongly negative connotation

relating to servitude, while being 'bound' is more positive, meaning knitted or tied together. Marriage is sometimes spoken of colloquially as 'tying the knot', and that is perfectly Biblical. Husband and wife are knotted together for as long as they both shall live, but they are not in bondage to one another. Marriage is not a form of slavery, even a mixed marriage.

It is not correct, therefore, to understand verse 15 as teaching that a believer who is deserted by an unbelieving spouse 'is not *bound* in such cases'.

The confusion is not helped by some modern versions of the Bible which use the word 'bound' here (e.g., the *NIV* and *New Revised Standard Version*). The *English Standard Version*, on the other hand, is correct at this point: 'But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved'.

Dr. Instone-Brewer is content with the allusion to slavery but interprets it as though a deserted spouse has been emancipated, set free from marriage by the desertion of the unbelieving partner, free even to choose another spouse. In order to arrive at this conclusion he translates the phrase 'is not bound' as 'is *no longer* enslaved' (emphasis added), implying that the believer had previously been enslaved in the mixed marriage (*op. cit.* pp. 17-18). But that is not what Paul says.

Paul is not suggesting that the *marriage* was slavery, however difficult it may have been, but that the separated life in which the believer now finds himself might be construed as slavery. It is to pre-empt such a thought that Paul gives the assurance 'you are not enslaved'.

Enslaved, no, but still bound. The marriage is still in place. It is God who tied the knot and only God is able to untie it, which He does at death. Andrew Cornes sums up the situation well when he writes:

St. Paul is saying, then: 'You do not need slavishly to pursue your partner when he leaves you, and do everything you can to pursue your marital obligations. You may accept the divorce.' This is a far cry, however, from saying: 'You may accept that you are no longer married and are therefore free to remarry.' (*Divorce and Remarriage*; p. 252)

Finally, the point needs to be emphasized that the situation Paul is addressing in 1 Corinthians 7 is strictly limited to the abandonment of a believer by an unbeliever. We may not do as the *Westminster Confession* does, which is to extend it to cover all cases of 'wilful desertion as can no way be remedied by the church or civil magistrate' (Chap. 24; Art. 6). This is described even by Professor John Murray as a 'loophole... [that] cannot be maintained on the

basis of Scripture' (*Divorce*; p. 77). It is, however, a loophole through which some have been bold to climb, and continue to do so.

Forgiveness

While the *Westminster Confession* attempts to limit the right of remarriage to the innocent party, Jay Adams, in his book *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, quite openly teaches that there are circumstances in which even the 'guilty' party may remarry. In fact, among Christians he would prefer that we did not speak in terms of 'guilty' and 'innocent' parties at all. 'This language', he says, 'isn't biblical and must be used only with great care' (p. 94).

Certainly there are circumstances in which the margins between guilt and innocence are blurred and neither party is wholly innocent nor wholly guilty, but that is not what Adams means. He wants us to believe that there may be no guilt *at all*. If the 'guilty' party has repented, he is now forgiven and therefore no longer guilty. 'In Christ, he is now innocent' (*ibid.*) and being innocent he is free to remarry. Dr. Instone-Brewer takes this a step further: 'I have never tried to ascertain whether a divorcee is innocent or guilty' (*Divorce and Remarriage in the 1st and 21st Century*; p. 26). If all this were true, the Lord's charge of adultery would apply to so few people as to render it almost redundant.

This issue of forgiveness often crops up in discussions on divorce. The popular notion is that forgiveness enables people to put all their sins into the past and start afresh, as if nothing had happened. The slate has been wiped clean. This line of reasoning fails at several points however.

i. In the **first** place, it is not disputed that adultery may be forgiven. The woman whom the Pharisees discovered in the very act learned it from the lips of the Saviour (John 8:1-11). Paul assured the church at Corinth of it, 'And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God' (I Cor. 6:9-11). But that is not the point at issue.

Jesus teaches us in Mark 10:11,12 and Luke 16:18 that the remarried state itself constitutes continuing adultery and thereby incurs continuing guilt. For as long as the remarried divorcees live together as man and wife they are both guilty.

This too is not beyond forgiveness, but it needs to be remembered that forgiveness comes with the command to 'go, and sin no more' (John 8:11). The adultery must stop. And surely there is no stronger motive to obedience than the knowledge that forgiveness is not cheap. It comes at the cost of the Saviour's lifeblood, shed at Calvary for the remission of our sins (Heb.

9:22,26).

ii. In the **second** place, conversion does not relieve us of our responsibilities from pre-Christian days. Rather, as Andrew Cornes points out, it strengthens them:

Zacchaeus could not repudiate his obligations on the grounds that he had now become a follower of Christ's and his slate was wiped clean (*cf.* Luke 19:8); no more can the Christian repudiate his marriage because he has become a Christian and his divorce took place before his conversion. On the contrary, he now learns from Christ that his original marriage bond still exists, that any remarriage would be adultery and that he should, if possible, seek reconciliation with his wife. If this is not possible, he must remain single (I Cor. 7:11). The significant change is that he now has God's Holy Spirit to enable him to live up to Christ's teaching (Rom. 8:9-17). (*Divorce and Remarriage*; pp. 247-8)

It is a general principle of life, and a Biblical one too, that what a man sows, that shall he also reap. A new convert will discover that being a Christian does not mean he will avoid reaping the harvest he sowed before he believed, a harvest that may well consist of bitter fruit. He will now see his sin for what it really is and will seek to make amends. 'Salvation brings us to the place where we reckon with our sins. Where we have done wrong, we must make right to the extent we are able – we restore what we have stolen, we repair what we have broken, and we break off that in which we have been wrongly engaged' (John Coblenz, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage*; pp. 65-66).

iii. In the **third** place, forgiveness is the fruit of repentance, and repentance comprises sorrow for sin and a turning away from it. Dr. Instone-Brewer guarantees that a divorcee who marries a second time will feel guilty even when they were not the cause of the break-up of the first marriage. Why? Because regardless of how innocent they were during the time leading up to the divorce, they have still broken their vows. 'When you have already previously promised to keep your vows "till death us do part" it seems hypocritical to promise the same thing to another person' (*Divorce and Remarriage in the Church*; p. 106).

Indeed it *is* hypocritical and conscience cries out in judgment against it. What is the value of a vow that is made by one who has already made the same solemn promise to another, even in the presence of God and before many witnesses, and then broken it?

Instone-Brewer's advice to salve the guilty conscience is not to seek reconciliation or to stay single but to conduct a 'service of repentance for broken vows' on the day before the new

wedding ceremony. But a repentance that makes everyone feel better so that they can go through with the second wedding is not a true repentance. Another marriage with yet more of the same vows to a third party only compounds the guilt.

The only balm for a troubled conscience is the forgiveness of sin, and that is to be found through genuine repentance before God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the only Saviour. True repentance is manifested by a godly sorrow and shame, confession to God and abhorrence of the sin. It culminates in a forsaking of the sin and turning away from it. In short, true repentance is like that of the prodigal son, a wholehearted return to the Lord by one who had left Him.

In the case in question, repentance means a rejection of all thought of remarriage, and it means a heartfelt desire to mend those broken vows through reconciliation with the original spouse. Reconciliation was not permitted under the laws of Moses (Deut. 24:4) but ‘from the beginning’ that was not the case, and it is not the case now.

If circumstances do not allow any prospect of an early reconciliation, there is only one alternative. That is patiently and submissively to lead a single life before the face of God, trusting Him daily for His keeping power and grace, ‘Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you’ (I Peter 5:7).

Three Arguments used to Support the Erasmian View

The Abbreviation Argument

It is a matter of some concern to modern evangelical scholars that the exception clause found in Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9 does not appear in Mark 10:11 or in Luke 16:18.

One of the explanations they put forward is that these latter texts are simply abbreviations of much a fuller revelation given by Matthew. After all, it is undeniable that abbreviations occur in the gospel accounts. Details included in one may be absent from another and only by bringing all the accounts together may we see the full picture. Applying this principle to the passages in question, however, the result is not abbreviation but contradiction. If the plain meaning of the ‘abbreviated’ texts allows for no remarriage after divorce, it is inconceivable that the ‘fuller’ texts might teach the opposite.

Dr. David Instone-Brewer is a prominent evangelical apologist for the Erasmian view of divorce. In his pamphlet *Divorce and Remarriage in the 1st and 21st Century* he contends that first-century believers reading the ‘abbreviated’ texts of Mark and Luke would have ‘mentally added’ the missing bits as they went along, so familiar would they have been with the practice of remarriage after divorce (p. 3).

They would have done this not because they had read them in Matthew’s gospel, which by Instone-Brewer’s reckoning would not yet have been written, but because they were a part of Jewish tradition. When Matthew came to write his own gospel record he inserted the clauses because everyone assumed that they were intended to be there anyway.

In this way the Lord Jesus is represented as continuing Jewish tradition when in fact He vigorously opposed it and condemned it.

Furthermore, we must surely bring the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture into the argument. This doctrine teaches us that the Bible is the work of the Holy Spirit of God and that it must therefore be handled as a complete and united whole. This means that in addition to the ‘abbreviated’ passages of Jesus in Mark and Luke we must also take into account the equally inspired statements of the apostle Paul. We find that these are quite explicit in their rejection of remarriage while the original spouse is still alive:

For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is free from the law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man. (Romans 7:2-3)

And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband: But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife. (1 Corinthians 7:10-11)

The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord. (1 Corinthians 7:39)

One would not expect the inspired apostle to contradict his Lord, especially when Paul identifies the source of his doctrine as the Lord Himself (1 Cor. 7:10).

If Mark, Luke and Paul are inspired by the Spirit to write in such a way that they are in total agreement as to their understanding of the Lord’s teaching on divorce and remarriage, it is not possible for Matthew 19:9 to be interpreted any differently without placing an unbearable strain on the Divine inspiration of Scripture, not to mention its unity and perspicuity.

The Cultural Argument

The argument we have just considered is an example of cultural interpretation. This teaches that on its own, Scripture is not sufficient for us to arrive at the correct understanding of marriage, divorce and remarriage.

Cultural interpretation insists that we first put the sayings of Jesus and Paul into their cultural settings. We need to know contemporary Jewish thinking and practice; we need to know the customs of Greek and Roman culture; and we need to subject the inspired words of Holy Scripture to the uninspired documents of 1st century Judaism. Only then, it would appear, can we hope to understand what the New Testament writers were really saying and only then can we begin to apply it correctly.

This approach is gaining credibility in evangelical circles, particularly through the writings of Dr. David Instone-Brewer. His books *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible* and *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church*, summarized in the pamphlet *Divorce and Remarriage in the 1st and 21st Century*, promote the idea that only now, since the discovery of ancient documents has brought to light first-century divorce practices, are we in a position to know what Jesus and Paul were really talking about.

In *Divorce and Remarriage in the 1st and 21st Century* Dr. Instone-Brewer writes,

In the matter of remarriage, the Graeco-Roman and Jewish world were [*sic*] very similar to our own. Anyone who had a valid divorce had an automatic right to remarry. (p. 15)

This being the case, he then goes on to conclude that our Lord Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul were influenced by this culture and approved it: divorce brings with it the automatic right to remarriage. He says,

Remarriage was such a firmly established right, in both Jewish and Graeco-Roman law, that it would require a very definite statement in the New Testament to convince [Paul's readers] otherwise. (*ibid.* p. 21)

The assumption he is making is that no such statement can be found.

Far from absorbing the popular thinking of His time, our Lord Jesus Christ challenged and corrected it again and again, making clear that His teaching was not the doctrine of men, nor even His own, but of the Father who sent Him (John 7:16; 14:24). His teaching on marriage and divorce was no exception.

Dr. Instone-Brewer concedes that there are several aspects of marriage on which the Lord disagreed with contemporary Jewish teaching (*ibid.* pp. 10-11), but on the most fundamental question of all, whether the marriage bond is broken by divorce so as to allow remarriage, he puts Jesus in agreement with the culture of the times. Is he correct? If not, where is the 'very

definite statement' forbidding remarriage that he demands?

We must understand that Christ's doctrine of divorce was not new. It had already been revealed in Scripture, it carried the full authority of Scripture, and it could be read in Scripture by all who had the eyes to see it. First-century Pharisees, who failed to recognise His teaching, should have known better. 'Have ye not read...?' Jesus asks them. Such woeful ignorance earns them His rebuke as once again He points them back to the Old Testament Scriptures:

And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. (Matt. 19:4-6)

Dr. Instone-Brewer makes the startling claim that these verses are nothing more than a 'long digression' from the Pharisees' original question. That question was, 'Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?' (v.3). But far from digressing, the Lord is taking the Pharisees straight to the point. In effect, He is telling them that their thinking on divorce and remarriage will never be right for as long as they are wrong on marriage, and that is the issue. It was the issue then and it is the issue now.

The Lord Jesus puts first things first and takes the Pharisees back to the 'one flesh' principle of marriage. It is only when that principle is firmly established in their minds that they will be able to reach a correct understanding of divorce and remarriage. It is that same principle that we need to get clear in our minds today if we are to recover a biblical perspective on divorce and remarriage.

Andrew Cornes understands this clearly:

to begin anywhere else than with a discussion of marriage in Scripture would not only be to ignore the method by which Jesus revealed his own thinking, but to risk making exactly the same mistakes about marriage and divorce that the Jews of Jesus' own day made. (*Divorce and Remarriage*; p. 51)

He is right: 'We dare not fall into the same error' (*ibid.* p. 52). But this is exactly what Dr. Instone-Brewer does. Using erroneous Jewish traditions and interpretations of the Old Testament as his guide to interpret Scripture, instead of using Scripture itself, he simply does not

know what to do with Matthew 19:4-6. So he puts it into a kind of parenthesis, setting it to one side as though it does not occupy a logical place in the argument. How wrong he is!

Let us take a closer look at the passage. Prof. Gordon Wenham points out in his helpful article *Does the New Testament Approve Remarriage after Divorce?* that Jesus' encounters with His opponents tended to follow a regular pattern. This was the case whether He was talking with the Pharisees, the chief priests, or even the rich man later in the same chapter. The entire discourse spanning verses 3 to 12 of Matthew 19 is no exception.

1. A question.

First, the Pharisees ask the Lord whether it is lawful 'for a man to put away his wife for every cause' (v. 3). As was usual, the motive behind their question was not sincere but designed to trick Him into siding with one or other of two parties within the Jews: a liberal group who allowed divorce on all manner of grounds – 'for every cause' – or a conservative group who allowed divorce on the ground of adultery alone. Even today the debate within evangelicalism barely rises above this level.

2. The response.

Jesus sides with neither group and tells them, in effect, that they are both wrong. He attacks the foundations of His opponents' position by pointing them back to the origin of marriage: 'Have ye not read...?' (vs. 4-6). By doing this He directs the Pharisees away from the superficial matter of who is entitled to divorce, to the central question of the nature of marriage itself. Modern evangelicals too need to go back to these first principles.

3. Objections.

The Pharisees see where Jesus' teaching is taking them. They realise that His 'one flesh' doctrine leaves no room for the break-up of the marriage bond, and that His understanding of divorce must therefore be different from the one that had been held by the Jews ever since the days of Moses. So they ask Him, 'Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?' (v. 7).

4. Jesus reaffirms His teaching.

The Lord dismisses this objection by explaining that Moses acted as he did in permitting divorce – certainly not commanding it – because of the hardness of the people's hearts. Then once again He directs the Pharisees back to 'the beginning' (vv. 8-9), which is where we too need to go if

we are to establish the true doctrine of marriage.

5. The disciples interrupt.

The disciples demonstrate that they have understood the Lord's doctrine by expressing their astonishment at it, suggesting it would be better not to marry at all. Who would want to take the risk of marriage if it is unbreakable? (v. 10).

6. Jesus does not back down.

Lastly, making no concessions to either Pharisee or disciple, Jesus affirms His teaching for a third and final time and challenges the disciples to receive it in faith (vv. 11,12). The church of our day is called to do the same, but instead she rejects it in unbelief.

Thus the passage forms a complete and united discourse in which verses 4 to 6, far from being a digression, occupy a pivotal place. Dr. Instone-Brewer rejects the indissolubility of marriage. He dismisses it as 'this uncertain doctrine' and a concept that 'has very shaky scriptural support' (*Divorce and Remarriage in the 1st and 21st Century*; p. 26). But here in Matthew 19:4-6 our Lord Jesus Christ makes a definite, incontrovertible statement forbidding any attempt to break the 'one flesh' bond.

Jesus reinforces this prohibition two verses later by pointing out that while divorce of the kind that allowed remarriage was tolerated under Moses, it had never belonged to the true and original doctrine of marriage. He says, 'Moses... suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so'. We will develop this idea later on but suffice for now to say that the whole of Matthew 19:3-12 constitutes a 'very definite statement' forbidding remarriage after divorce. Dr. Instone-Brewer need look no further. That he does not see it puts him in the position of those who argued against the Lord Jesus.

It is alarming to see the inroads that the views of Dr. Instone-Brewer are making into evangelical and even Reformed circles. One reviewer, a respected author and minister's wife, describes one of his books as 'a scrupulously researched, scintillating and persuasive demolition job' on the view that marriage is indissoluble (Sharon James, www.tyndale.cam.ac.uk/Brewer/PPages/DRC/Review24.htm). It is not clear which book she is reviewing but it is most likely to be *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*.

Another evangelical, while expressing misgivings about some of Instone-Brewer's methods, finds himself 'in substantial agreement with the results in practice of Dr. Brewer's study' (Stephen Clark, *Putting Asunder* p. 205). The 'results in practice' are divorce and remarriage.

If this is what is being preached from evangelical and Reformed pulpits today, the effect will be a demolition job not on ‘a view’ of marriage but on the institution itself, not to mention unspeakably serious ramifications for family and church.

More pertinent is the sharp criticism of Prof. David Engelsma in his own review of *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*:

For the first time in 2000 years, someone – David Instone-Brewer – rightly understands the New Testament’s doctrine of marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Or so the author of this book claims....

Reflecting poorly as it does upon the Holy Spirit’s work of illuminating the church and implying that Christians have lived in ignorance of the fundamental institution of marriage until Eerdmans published *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible* in 2002, the notion that Instone-Brewer is the first rightly to understand the New Testament doctrine of marriage ought to have given Instone-Brewer pause.

Engelsma goes on to make this urgent and necessary plea:

It is high time that Reformed men and churches forthrightly address these modern attempts to Judaize the church and her members.... I refer to the attempt itself to make our interpretation of the New Testament dependent upon some scholar’s understanding of extra-biblical, Jewish documents. I have been waiting for such a response to this ongoing attempt to bring Holy Scripture into bondage to the Jews and to the scholars for some time, in vain. (*Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*; April 2007, pp. 120,122)

Today marriage is under attack as never before, not just from the secularists who formulate the nation’s laws but from the scholars who train and influence our evangelical preachers. Let us not be swayed by them nor intimidated by their extra-Biblical discoveries. Let us rather endeavour to defend and preserve the holy estate of matrimony according to God’s original design, as it is taught in His Word. And let us do it with all the skill and passion at our disposal as God gives us opportunity.

The *Hyperbole* Argument

‘There is a considerable amount of non-literal language in the Word of God’, writes A W Pink (*Interpretation of the Scriptures*; p. 67). He goes on to point out that recognizing it, interpreting it and applying it correctly calls for ‘maturity of judgment’. ‘Keen discrimination, both spiritual and mental, is required for distinguishing the literal from the non-literal in Scripture’. Where this discrimination is lacking, he says, ‘not a few serious errors have been taught as the result of regarding what was figurative as literal’ (*ibid.*). Equally, one might add, regarding what is literal as though it is figurative will also lead into serious error.

One of the forms of figurative language God uses in Scripture is known as hyperbole. According to *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (3rd. ed.) hyperbole is ‘A figure of speech consisting in exaggerated statement, used to express strong feeling or produce a strong impression, and not to be taken literally’. It then goes on to give two examples from the Scriptures: ‘cities... fenced up to heaven’ (Deut. 9:1), and ‘the world itself could not contain the books that should be written’ (John 21:25). Other examples drawn from the Lord’s own ministry might include the following:

- ◆ ‘the beam that is in thine own eye’ (Matthew 7:3)
- ◆ ‘ye devour widows’ houses’ (Matthew 23:14)
- ◆ ‘strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel’ (Matthew 23:24)
- ◆ ‘it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle...’ (Luke 18:25)

The common characteristic of all these expressions is their exaggeration, the sheer impossibility of their plain or natural meaning. Not only *may* they not be taken literally, they *cannot* be taken literally. The very thought of a beam of wood in the eye, or of a camel being swallowed or passing through a needle’s eye, is plainly absurd and intended to be so. They are simply figures of speech.

A question that is sometimes raised regarding Christ’s language in Mark 10 and Luke 16, where He condemns remarriage after divorce as ‘adultery’, is whether that also is to be treated as hyperbole. Craig Keener assumes it is. He writes: ‘The issue in question in the hyperbolic image of remarriage as adultery is whether the person remains married to his or her original spouse in God’s sight’ (*Three Views*; p. 108).

Keener assumes that the language of the Lord in Luke 16:18, where He says that a man who divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery, is the language of exaggeration. Jesus is using a ‘hyperbolic image’, a ‘rhetorical overstatement’, a form of words that is not meant to be taken literally. Where the divorce is valid, the remarriage is not *really* adultery. In fact, it is

not adultery at all.

However, it ought to be clear that the Lord's divorce statements in Luke 16 and Mark 10 simply do not fit with the definition of hyperbole, or with the examples we have given. There is nothing exaggerated about them and it is perfectly possible for them to be taken literally. Indeed, there is nothing in them to suggest that they should be understood in any other way. That being the case, they *must* be taken literally.

To say that 'adultery' is merely a 'hyperbolic image' is to accuse the Lord of speaking in riddles when in fact He is speaking very plainly. When He says that the remarriage is adulterous He really means it, without exception.

If a text like Luke 16:18 is to be understood as hyperbole, how are we to know when Jesus is *not* using hyperbole? For example, is He using hyperbole in Matthew 5 when He says that a man who looks at a woman lustfully 'hath committed adultery with her already in his heart' (v. 28)? One might even question whether 'everlasting punishment' in Matthew 25:46 really means everlasting since it too may be a rhetorical overstatement, just an exaggerated way of saying 'a very long but finite period of time'. And what of 'life eternal' in the same verse? Clearly this opens up very serious issues indeed.

The task of interpreting Scripture calls for 'an unbiased approach, an honest heart, and a spirit of fidelity', wrote Pink (*ibid.* p. 24). And that requires strict discipline. Said Luther, 'We must not make God's Word mean what *we* wish. We must not bend *it*, but allow it to *bend us*, and give it the honour of being better than we can make it' (quoted in Pink; *ibid.*). Otherwise, if a passage is too extreme for our liking, such as Luke 16:18 or Mark 10:11, we will simply dismiss it as hyperbole.

The Nature of Divorce

The early church's view of marriage is the one clearly set out by Andrew Cornes in his book *Divorce and Remarriage* and, on the other side of the Atlantic, by Professor David Engelsma in his many writings on the subject. It is a view that does allow for divorce.

Some might see this as a contradiction since one can hardly denounce divorce as forbidden while at the same time allowing an exception. Either divorce is forbidden or it is not. But the solution to the riddle is found in the Scriptures, and it lies in the kind of divorce being spoken of.

The Ground

In the **first** place, the divorce allowed by the early church view is one that may be used in only very limited circumstances, namely, sexual unfaithfulness by the spouse. The Biblical basis for this is the exception clause of Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, where the Lord permits divorce on the ground of fornication.

The word translated in these verses by the Authorized Version as 'fornication', and in other versions variously as unchastity, marital unfaithfulness, or sexual immorality, is the Greek *porneia* from which our English word pornography comes. It is derived from the verb *pernemi*, meaning to sell, thereby carrying with it the idea of whoredom and promiscuity. Hence a female prostitute is a *porne* (cf. Matt. 21:31.32; Heb. 11:31), and a male prostitute is a *pornos* (cf. I Tim. 1:10).

The word *porneia* by itself tells us nothing about the marital status of the man or woman who

is committing the sin. Since it is the term used in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 as the ground for divorce, it is clearly a sin that can be committed within marriage. That being the case it is quite natural, and legitimate, to understand it as referring to adultery.¹

This is consistent with the Old Testament, where we find the words adultery, fornication, whoredom and harlotry used interchangeably.

An Old Testament passage often appealed to by preachers and writers interpreting the New Testament exception clause, is Deuteronomy 24:1-4. There the one ground Moses gives for divorce is described as ‘some uncleanness’ or indecency, but it is not clear as to what that means. It seems to have something to do with nakedness and sexual shame. To apply it to fornication, however, and then interpret the exception clause in Matthew with that in mind, only confuses the issue. Whatever ‘some uncleanness’ refers to, it does not refer to fornication or adultery since both these sins were punishable by death (Deut. 22:13ff; Lev. 20:10).

There is no doubt when we come to the history of God’s marriage to Israel, however, that the ground for His divorce was adultery. The language used to describe Israel’s frequent idolatry is the language of adultery *and* fornication. The prophet Hosea, in obedience to the command of God, married the faithless Gomer in order that he might understand just a little of what it was like for God to have Israel as His wife: ‘Go, take unto thee a wife of whoredoms and children of whoredoms: for the land hath committed great whoredom, departing from the LORD’ (Hosea 1:2).

One need only to read the history of Israel, the northern kingdom, to discover how much she played the harlot, committing fornication and whoredom by her worship of Baal. It was on the ground of this persistent unfaithfulness, this spiritual adultery, that God ‘put her away and [gave] her a bill of divorce’ (Jer. 3:6-8).

In this wider context of the Old Testament Scriptures, Jesus’ statement of Matthew 19:9 takes on greater significance and its meaning becomes clearer.

Jesus was saying, in other words: no divorce, no remarriage; excepting, a man may put away his wife if she persists in sexual unfaithfulness. He need not continue, in other words, living in a three-way relationship. The early church writers in the second and third centuries almost universally taught this position. (John Coblentz, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage*; p. 36)

¹For the view that *porneia* in the exception clause refers exclusively to fornication during Jewish betrothal, see Appendix 1.

It is noticeable that in the exception clause mention is made only of a man divorcing his wife. In Mark 10:12 and 1 Corinthians 7:10,11 Christ and His apostle raise the possibility of a woman divorcing her husband. Paul writes: ‘And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband: But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband’. On what ground may this divorce of a wife from her husband take place?

Since Paul is simply reiterating the commands of the Lord (v. 10), it is to the Lord’s teaching elsewhere in the gospels that we must go to find the answer. And since the only ground Jesus ever gave for divorce was *porneia*, in the exception clauses of Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, we must conclude that *porneia* is the only ground on which a wife may divorce her husband.

Divorce, then, is permitted by the Word of God for no other reason than marital infidelity, i.e., adultery. It is not allowed for desertion, incompatibility, unreasonable behaviour, ‘growing apart’ or on any other ground that human ingenuity might devise.

The Effect

In the **second** place, and it is crucially important that we understand this, the divorce allowed by the early church view is a divorce that does not break the marriage bond. Remarriage is not only not permitted, technically it is not even possible; ‘remarriage is not only wrong, it is impossible at the deepest level’ (Cornes, *Divorce and Remarriage*; p. 193).

This kind of divorce is very different from the ‘bill of divorcement’ granted by Moses, which certainly did allow remarriage (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). The Jews, including the disciples, assumed that this toleration was still in place but the Lord was quick to correct them.

Firstly, in Matthew 19:6, Jesus affirms, ‘What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder’. Divorce of the kind practised under the law, allowing remarriage, is no longer permitted. There is a distinct note of authority and command here. It is as though Jesus were saying, ‘You are no longer allowed, you have no authority any more, to separate those whom God has joined together in marriage’. The Old Testament toleration is past and finished. It is *God* who brings man and wife together in marriage, just as He did Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. *He* makes one (Mal. 2:15). For man to separate them is an act of glaring defiance against His will. It is disobedience that cannot and will not go unnoticed or unpunished.

In the light of such a command from One who speaks with authority, it is hardly surprising that marriage and family life today are in such a deplorable mess. We have disobeyed our

Creator and sovereign King. We have disregarded His will. The breaking up of the family and the social consequences that follow are nothing less than we deserve.

Secondly, in Matthew 19:8, Jesus goes a step further and explains, 'Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so'. The Lord overrules the sufferance of Moses and takes their minds, and ours, beyond Deuteronomy 24 to the origin of marriage in Genesis 2. The kind of putting away that Moses allowed did not ever belong to God's original design for marriage, and it does not now.

As we saw earlier, this means that when Christ uses the terms 'divorce' or 'put away', as He does in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, it is in a different sense from that understood by the Jews of His day, including the Pharisees and the disciples. This should not surprise us since the Lord often answered His critics using the formula, 'it hath been said.... But I say unto you...' (e.g., Matt. 5:31,32; 19:7-9), and He was perfectly entitled to do so.

But this is something that many evangelical people today find hard to countenance. As they persist in holding on to the law of Deuteronomy 24, they miss the whole point of Jesus' teaching, which is that Deuteronomy 24 was *never* the Old Testament law concerning divorce. It was a deviation from it, a deviation that was tolerated for a time, until the Lord Himself brought it to a end (Engelsma, *Marriage: The Mystery of Christ and the Church*; p. 101).

The true law of marriage is as old as the institution itself and recurs throughout the Scriptures. In marriage man and wife become 'one flesh' (Gen. 2:24); they are by God 'made one' (Mal. 2:15); a man 'shall leave his father and mother, and *cleave* unto his wife; and they twain shall be *one flesh*' (Mark 10:7,8). This means that husband and wife are so stuck or glued together that they have ceased to be two and have become one organism: 'so then they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder' (Mark 10:8,9). This has been the underlying principle of marriage 'from the beginning' (Matt. 19:8).

As if to emphasize the point, Jesus does not say '*in* the beginning' but '*from* the beginning'. Throughout the whole Old Testament period and overriding all the laws of Moses, the constant reality was that the marriage bond could not be broken. And that same law of marriage persists to this day. The putting away Jesus allows in the next verse, Matthew 19:9, and indeed on every other occasion he uses the term divorce (Gk. *apolyein*), is no more than a separation from bed and board. The union remains.

This explains how Jesus can state so categorically that whoever puts away his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. Or if a woman puts away her husband and marries another, then she too commits adultery. It is hard to see how the Lord could have

spoken more plainly.

Adultery and Marriage

Some who hold to the Erasmian view of divorce argue that adultery itself destroys the marriage union: ‘Adultery breaks the very bond of marriage and gives right to the innocent person to seek to be freed entirely from all further obligation within the marriage contract’ (Roberts; *op. cit.*; p. 9). Are we really expected to believe that? Is a one-off act of adultery, gross violation of the marriage though it is, sufficient to *break* the hallowed bond of matrimony?

If so, then the first part of Matthew 5:32 is emasculated of its true force and meaning. The text speaks of a man who divorces his wife for a reason other than adultery, putting her into a position where *she* will commit adultery. The point of the text is that it is the man who is to be blamed for her adultery; he is the cause. But if by her adultery ‘the very bond’ of the marriage is broken, the man’s divorce is legitimized and, by Erasmian reckoning, he gains the liberty to marry again.

The implication is that a man does not need to commit adultery in order to be free to remarry. He can divorce his wife for some other reason and then has only to wait for her to commit the adultery. It is to his advantage for her to do so. But this is far removed from the mind of Christ since, as Prof. Wenham points out, ‘In context he is condemning every kind of infidelity, not providing excuses for remarriage’ (*Does the New Testament Approve Remarriage After Divorce?* p. 36).

In his exposition of the *Westminster Confession* Robert Shaw, a nineteenth-century Presbyterian minister, correctly states that ‘even adultery does not *ipso facto*, dissolve the bond of marriage’ (*The Reformed Faith*; p. 258). More recently Jay Adams has expressed the same judgment that adultery, ‘while placing tremendous strains on the marriage, does *not* dissolve it. Sexual relations *per se* do not *make* a marriage and do not *break* a marriage’ (*Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*; p. 6, original emphasis).

The reason for this is that there is much more to the principle of ‘one flesh’ than physical union. This is illustrated by the case in Exodus 22:16-17 of a man who seduces a young virgin. A physical relationship takes place and the law states that he must marry her, but marriage is not inevitable. It will only proceed if he has her father’s consent: ‘if he denied his consent, it must be no marriage’ (Matthew Henry). Likewise, the Samaritan woman whom the Lord met at Jacob’s well ‘had’ a man, but he was not her husband (John 4:18).

But there is yet more conclusive evidence in Scripture that adultery does not break the

marriage bond, and that is to be found in the Old Testament history of God's relationship with His people, Israel.

God's Marriage to Israel

Old Testament teaching on marriage and divorce is not exhausted by Deuteronomy 24:1-4, although that is the passage that receives most of the attention. We learn elsewhere of a marriage that God Himself entered into. He was married to His people, Israel, addressing her with the statement of promise, 'thy Maker is thine husband' (Isa. 54:5).

Old Testament history goes on to describe in vivid detail the kind of wife she was to her Husband – an unfaithful wife. And God's response to her infidelities, particularly after the division of the kingdom, gives us much helpful instruction on the issues of marriage, divorce and remarriage.

In the **first** place, in Isaiah 50:1, God asks of Judah, 'Where is the bill of your mother's divorcement, whom I have put away?' To understand this question we need to go back to the previous chapter where Zion herself had made a complaint against God: 'The LORD hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me' (49:14). This was a defamatory accusation against the Lord God who had delivered her from Egypt and established with her His everlasting covenant. He responds to the charge in terms of the deepest affection and tenderness toward His undeserving people: 'Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me' (vv. 15-16).

The question that opens the next chapter, 'Where is the bill of your mother's divorcement, whom I have put away?' belongs to this reply. It is God's challenge to His people to provide evidence for their accusation, a rhetorical call to account along the lines of 'prove it, if you can'.

Matthew Henry comments, 'It is true they were now separated from God, and had abode many days without ephod, altar, or sacrifice; but whose fault was that? They could not say that God had given their mother a bill of divorce; let them produce it if they can'. They could not produce it because none existed, and none existed because God had not put her away.

The separation that existed was wholly of Judah's own making. It was entirely her fault. She was a wife who had left her Husband for other lovers. She had gone off to commit fornication with other gods. But in spite of her shameless unfaithfulness toward God, He had not forgotten or forsaken her, and nor would He. He had initiated no divorce, and hence there was no bill. He

was still married to her. She was still His wife. And that is because adultery does not break the marriage bond, much less does it make divorce inevitable.

In the **second** place, in Jeremiah 3 we find the divided kingdom portrayed as two siblings, treacherous Judah in the south and her backsliding sister Israel in the north. God responds to Israel's spiritual adultery by doing that which His soul hates – putting her away and giving her a bill of divorce (Jer. 3:8).

What is clear from the passage is that the nature of the divorce is very different from that of Deuteronomy 24. God urges the people to return to Him, culminating in His categorical assertion 'for I am *married* unto you' (v. 14). Neither Israel's adultery nor God's divorce had dissolved the marriage, the covenant bond of love that had long been established between them, and that is because God Himself had established it.

The covenant was *His* covenant, established unilaterally and unconditionally to be an unbreakable, everlasting union. His promise to Israel when she was still in Egypt had been, 'I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God' (Ex. 6:7). Later He would say to Moses, 'I have made a covenant with thee and with Israel' (Ex. 34:27). The divorce simply meant that God could no longer live under the same roof, as it were, with a wife who had made herself a harlot. But it did not, and could not, bring an end to the covenant relationship, the marriage itself.

In Isaiah chapter 54 we learn a little more about the nature of this divorce. Israel is likened there to a woman forsaken by her husband, and we know that historically this was fulfilled in the seventy long years of the Babylonian exile, but in the grand scheme of God's eternal counsel those years were as the blink of an eye. Yes, in His wrath God hides His face from the object of His love, but it is only 'for a moment' after which, He vows, 'with great mercies will I gather thee.... with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee' (Isa. 54:6-8). Having turned away from her for a short time, in His mercy He comes to her again to redeem her and shower down upon her blessings of everlasting salvation. No sign of a broken marriage here!

In fact, God goes on to speak in the most effusive terms of His faithfulness to His wife. Never again would He pour out His wrath upon her, any more than He would cover the earth again with a flood: 'as I have sworn that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth; so have I sworn that I would not be wroth with thee, nor rebuke thee. For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the LORD that hath mercy on thee' (vv. 9,10). God's covenant is unmoved and immovable: an indissoluble, everlasting bond.

The motive that lay behind Jehovah's momentary anger and divorce of His people was utterly pure. In vexation He turns away His face from His unfaithful bride to let her go her way for a time, but behind the heat of anger is the overriding influence of love. He loves His wife, the covenant people of His choice, and so grieved is He by her adulterous ways that He separates Himself from her, if ever so briefly, in order that she might be awakened to her sin, repent and return to Him who loves her with an everlasting love.

God did not divorce Israel because He hated her, or so that He could be rid of her and her adulteries once and for all, but because He *loved* her and so that He could bring her back to Himself. He loved her with an *unconditional* love. Any suggestion that His covenant with her was broken or that He now sought another wife, another marriage, is out of the question. Nothing could be further from the mind of the Lord for He has a heart only for her whom He has loved and chosen for Himself from before the foundation of the world, and all that he does in relation to her is for her good. Such a thought as remarriage is a slanderous attack upon the faithfulness of God and turns Him into an adulterer.

In the **third** place, the opening verses of Ezekiel 16 take us back to the early days of Israel's history when she was a young marriageable woman. Looking back to their wedding day, as it were, God reminds her, 'thy time was the time of love; and I spread my skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness: yea, I sware unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the LORD God, and thou becamest mine' (v. 8).

But Israel played the harlot and much of this long chapter is taken up with a tragic list of her abominations. She was 'an imperious whorish woman... which taketh strangers instead of her husband!' (Ezek. 16:30-32). The chapter comes to a conclusion with the solemn words of her offended Husband, 'I will even deal with thee as thou hast done, which hast despised the oath in breaking the covenant' (v. 59).

But even so, the covenant was God's covenant. He had made it. He had established it with Israel unilaterally and it was not in the least conditioned on her loyalty. Therefore, despite all of Israel's adulteries by which she had violated the covenant, God declares again His undying faithfulness to her: 'Nevertheless I will remember my covenant with thee in the days of thy youth, and I will establish unto thee an everlasting covenant' (v. 60). The covenant remains unbroken and unbreakable. The marriage is secure.

In the **fourth** place, in chapter 2 of Hosea a similar picture is presented to us. God says of adulterous Israel, 'she is not my wife, neither am I her husband: let her therefore put away her

whoredoms out of her sight, and her adulteries from between her breasts' (v. 2). But once again it is evident that the separation is wholly of Israel's making for in response to God's judgments she will say, 'I will go and return to my first husband; for then was it better with me than now' (v. 7).

Israel has forsaken her Husband, but with the irresistible power of His grace He draws her back. 'I will allure her', God says, 'and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her. And I will give her vineyards....' (vv. 14,15). And He vows to receive her once again in everlasting covenant union, saying, 'in that day... I will betroth thee unto me for ever; yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in lovingkindness, and in mercies. I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness: and thou shalt know the LORD' (vv. 18-20).

Zion was an adulterer against God, habitually so, and the penalty for adultery was death (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22). According to the law, therefore, Zion deserved to die, perhaps defeated and swallowed up by her enemies, to be destroyed from off the face of the earth and forgotten for ever. But God did not deal with her according to that law. Yes, He caused the Babylonians to come and take her away into captivity, but He did not ever forsake her. He took her back, always faithful to His own word and promise and according to the abundance of His grace. This was Zion's salvation.

Christ and the Church

Jehovah's covenant relationship with Israel was never broken, neither by the nation's adultery nor by Jehovah's divorcing of her. There was no divorce of the kind allowed by Moses or the Pharisees of a later day, and certainly there was no remarriage. God did not divorce Israel in order to marry the church, as some will have it to be, for God has only ever had *one* wife and she is Israel.

Old Testament Israel finds her full realization today as the church, in Jesus Christ (*cf.* Eph. 5:22-33). It is in the church, 'the Israel of God' (Gal. 6:16), that the promises of love, fellowship and everlasting salvation find their fulfilment. It is with Christ, and in Him with all His elect people, the church, that God's covenant is everlastingly established.

This brings us to the heart of the matter.

In Ephesians 5:31 the apostle Paul takes us back to the familiar words of Genesis 2:24, 'For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh'. He then goes on to explain that the marriage bond symbolizes

nothing less than the relationship between Christ and His church: ‘This a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church’ (v. 32).

What kind of a union is this? It is a union of the greatest intimacy and oneness. In fact, so close is it that beginning at verse 22 of Ephesians 5 Paul likens it to the relationship between the head and the body. In marriage, ‘the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church’ (v. 23). This, more than anything else, explains what is meant by the ‘one flesh’ relationship. It is not the relationship of two bodies but of one, a body and its head, and together they form one complete organism.

The wife is *in* her husband, her head, even as the church is in Christ. The wife is *represented* by her husband, her head, even as the church is represented by Christ. This is the very essence of marriage, even as it is of covenant, federal theology.

This brings us to the all-important question, can they be separated? In Mark 10:9 Jesus says, ‘What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder’. Some have suggested that this means a man and his wife *can* be separated, but ideally they should not (Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the 1st and 21st Century*; p. 12; Keener, *Three Views*; p. 107). Ephesians 5, however, takes us beyond the ‘should not’ to the ‘cannot’ for if body and head are separated, they die.

The relationship between Christ and His church is that of an indissoluble bond that God has established between them without conditions. Christ loves her unconditionally. He loves her so much that even ‘while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us’ (Rom. 5:8). Still Christ loves His church and remains faithful to her despite her continuing spiritual adultery with this present evil world. Despite her unfaithfulness to Him, despite her ceaseless covenant-breaking, despite her sin, He remains her constant Husband and Friend. If Christ should cease to love His wife and separate Himself from her, she will lose her Head and Representative and she will die. Outside of Christ she has no life.

Such a bond and such a love is portrayed in the marriage of a man and his wife. As Christ loves the church and has given Himself for her, so are husbands to love their wives (Eph. 5:25). They are *commanded* to love their wives. Without conditions! And wives, in turn, are to submit to their husbands ‘as unto the Lord’ (Eph. 5:22). It is the submission of the body to the head.

In the words of the old marriage service, this love and submission are ‘For better, for worse; for richer for poorer; in sickness and in health... till death us do part’. A marriage that can be broken by divorce, adultery or any other act of man is no picture of the glorious bond of love that exists for ever between Christ and His church.

And yet the marriage of a man to his wife is still only a picture, a symbol, and like all earthly

pictures and symbols it is imperfect. Every marriage can be dissolved – and one day must be dissolved – by God at death (Rom. 7:2; I Cor. 7:39), but the heavenly reality of which that marriage speaks is perfect and everlasting. Of the marriage between Christ and His body, between Christ and the church, there shall be no end!

This helps us to understand why it is death, and *only* death, that breaks the marriage bond. Romans 7:2 and I Corinthians 7:39 are the classic texts teaching us that a marriage ends when one partner dies. Dr. David Instone-Brewer responds to these texts by pointing out that neither of them in fact states ‘that marriage *cannot* end with divorce, and neither of them indicates that death is the *only* way to end a marriage’ (*Divorce and Remarriage in the 1st and 21st Century*; p. 18 – original emphasis). Here again he follows the teaching of Erasmus (*Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*; p. 259).

In view of all that we have read of the inspired writings of Paul and his Master, the last thing we would expect the apostle to say is that a marriage can be ended by divorce. Neither should we expect him to lay any special emphasis on death as being the *only* way by which a marriage is ended. Throughout the whole of the New Testament, even in Matthew 19:9 when it is rightly understood, no other way to end a marriage is ever suggested.

Death alone breaks the bond, and that is because death alone breaks every earthly tie we know. Death alone translates the believer from the earthly picture into the glorious reality of the true marriage, which is the perfect, heavenly union of Christ with His church (Rev. 19:6-9). Separation and divorce, in contrast, only disfigure the picture, and when combined with remarriage they totally destroy it since Christ never has more than one bride, nor the church more than one Husband.

In the light of all this it is clear that we have a high calling. We are called

to reflect the covenant relationship between Jesus and His church in our marriage. Marriage is the mystery of Christ and the church. God instituted marriage as a symbol of the eternal covenant of grace between Himself in Jesus Christ and His elect church. The covenant is intimate fellowship: Christ and the church became one flesh. By the grace of God, the covenant is unbreakable. Christ is faithful to His bride. He never puts her away and marries another. This is our salvation and our comfort. We have an eternal covenant of grace with God. We belong to our faithful Saviour Jesus Christ, in life and death, in time and eternity. By the power of the love and grace of Jesus Christ, the church on her part is faithful to Him. She never forsakes Him for another. On earth she cleaves to Him and reverences Him as He is revealed in His Word. Throughout her

history, she lives in the one hope of the coming of her bridegroom, her perfect union with Him then, and the everlasting marriage. ‘Come, Lord Jesus’.

Our calling in marriage is to reflect this unbreakable covenant. (David J. Engelsma, *Marriage: The Mystery of Christ and the Church*; p. 140)

A marriage that can be broken by adultery or by divorce fails miserably as a picture of the everlasting covenant of grace established between God in Christ and His people. That is the picture that marriage is meant to portray, and that is what makes the presence of divorce and remarriage in the church, sanctioned even by her own teachers, such a very great offence to our covenant God.

Polygamy

Like divorce and remarriage, polygamy too is a violation of the marriage covenant.

Polygamy, the practice of taking additional wives or concubines, first appears in the Bible at Genesis 4:19 where it is said that Lamech, the fifth generation from Cain, ‘took unto him two wives’. Its roots, therefore, lie in the ungodly line and make its appearance in the family of Abraham, who had not only his wife Sarah but also Hagar and other concubines, all the more tragic (*cf.* Gen. 16:1ff; 25:6). It was a sign of unbelief in the word and promises of God.

Jacob, Gideon, David and Solomon too contracted polygamous relationships with wives and concubines (Gen. 29:16-30:24; Judg. 8:30,31; 2 Sam. 5:13; 1 Kings 11:3,4). While this behaviour was recognized and tolerated in Old Testament times, it was still in open defiance of God’s ‘one flesh’ principle of marriage between one man and one woman, and it brought only sorrow to those who engaged in it. From the beginning it was not so.

The Scriptures set before us in stark relief the tragic failings of those men in order that they might be a warning to us that disobedience in marriage brings forth its own fruits, even to succeeding generations as the sins of the fathers are meted out upon the children.

Specifically, polygamy was a married man taking to himself another woman or many women in addition to his wife. In contrast, a married woman who took another man was an adulteress whom the law condemned to death (Lev. 20:10). The law therefore had an inbuilt inequality in that adultery was a sin committed against husbands but never against wives. This inequality was only finally brought to an end by Jesus’ teaching on divorce. It was now clear beyond all doubt that even after a legal divorce a man who marries another woman commits adultery against his wife (Mark 10:11; Luke 16:18a).

Along with polygamy, divorce too was only available to a husband (Deut. 24:1), but here again the New Testament restores equality. Our Lord raises the possibility of something for which the law had made no provision, namely, a woman divorcing her husband: ‘And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery’ (Mark 10:12).

The apostle Paul, who would have been familiar with the pagan cultures of Rome and Greece, in which it was perfectly acceptable for wives to instigate divorce proceedings against their husbands, repeats the Lord’s command: ‘Let not the wife depart from her husband’ (I Cor. 7:10; *cf.* v. 13). There is not even the remotest suggestion here that Paul is following the normal cultural practice of his day but that, like his Master before him, he opposes it.

It is important to realise that in the matters of both polygamy and divorce, when the Lord introduces reciprocity it is not in the direction of permissiveness and the further liberalisation of marriage and the divorce laws. It is not to give the wife equal rights to her husband. It is rather a going back to the original standards of marriage established at creation. Not only the wife but now the husband too is forbidden to divorce and remarry.

The force of this teaching has serious repercussions for those in our day who teach in their books and sermons that the divorced may remarry, and then go on to practise what they teach. Unwittingly they are putting men and women into a relationship that is very close to polygamy: ‘the analogies with polygamy are inescapable’ (Cornes, *Divorce and Remarriage*; p. 403). But polygamy is a form of relationship that today does not enjoy the toleration it had even in Old Testament times. Thus an intolerable situation is created, one that is all too common not only in the world but also the church.

What is to be done about it?

‘Go, and Sin No More’

From the Beginning

It is striking that in making known the continuing standard for marriage the Lord does not hold up His hands in despair and plead, ‘these poor fallen people are no longer able to keep their promises and live in marital fidelity; husbands are not able to love their wives and wives are not able to reverence their husbands, therefore I will make allowances and give them the freedom to break their vows, even the marriage bond itself’. That is what Moses did. Evangelicals and Reformed people today do the same when they hold to the Erasmian view of marriage and divorce. They set up the ideal and then knock it down with a ‘but’.

It is disappointing to find Maurice Roberts doing precisely this in the article we referred to earlier. Keeping in mind his view that divorce breaks the marriage union itself, we read, ‘In a perfect world in which there is no sin there would be no need for divorce. But the Bible is a realistic book...’ (*op. cit.*; p. 8). We have to respond with an emphatic ‘No!’ The Lord does not do that. When He gives His commands and sets His standards it is not with any consideration to our natural inability to keep them. The very gospel itself bears testimony to the truth of that.

Rather, when Jesus speaks on marriage and divorce, He directs us back to the time *before* the Fall when marriage was first instituted at the dawn of history in a creation unmarred by sin. That in itself removes all consideration of time and culture. Just as the bond could not be broken then so it cannot be broken now, irrespective of all that took place later in Eden, irrespective of our depraved natures, and irrespective of the wretched circumstances into which sin brings us and our families. Now as ever, the bond of marriage is dissolved by God alone at

death (Rom. 7:2,3; I Cor. 7:39). The disciples were mistaken. Jesus was not teaching something new but something very old. In fact, it was something that had been true from the outset.

This is the New Testament view of marriage. It is the Biblical view of marriage. It is God's view of marriage. And that is why it was the early church's view of marriage. It was this teaching alone, applied by the Holy Spirit, that had the power to persuade the early church to promote and practise 'the strict discipline of no remarriage after divorce' (Wenham, *Does the New Testament Approve Remarriage after Divorce?* p. 41). It was not the influence of asceticism or the growth of sacramentalism, as is sometimes suggested, but the authority of Christ and His apostles that caused the church to break with centuries of Jewish and Graeco-Roman cultural practice.

Those traditions of the Jews, Greeks and Romans are with us today in abundance. As at the time of the early church, the dominant cultural and religious influences are opposed to the doctrine of marriage taught by Christ in the Scriptures. In the world the indissolubility of the marriage union is rejected. In the church too the indissolubility of the marriage union is rejected. Remarriage is both possible and permissible. And as at the time of the early church, so today, only the authority of Christ in the Scriptures is able to overcome these errors. Christ in the Scriptures affirms that which the world and many in the church reject. Our calling is to submit to His authority.

Do we feel His doctrine to be too hard for us to bear? In our troubled marriages do we resist His will? Then we should recall His own words to us: 'Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me... For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light' (Matt. 11:29-30).

It is not the commands of Christ that are heavy and burdensome but the laws and traditions of men (*cf.* Matt, 23:1-4). It is the burden of guilt, of destroyed marriages, of divided, dysfunctional families and unsettled lifestyles that are the fruits of divorce and remarriage, these are the things that are 'grievous to be borne' (Matt. 23:4). In contrast, the yoke of Jesus is easy because it is the yoke of willing submission and obedience to His will, an obedience that springs from love and thankfulness to Him for His love to the unlovely. By the power of His grace at work within, His commands are a delight to obey.

Living the Ideal

Yes, we must set forth the ideal. 'It is essential to hold before our people continually the ideal that human marriage should reflect the union between Christ and the Church' (Wenham and

Heth, *Jesus and Divorce*; p. 200). There is no 'but' here and we may not introduce one. On the contrary, 'As God remains faithful despite our frequent faithlessness, so even a divorced believer who remains single out of loyalty to Christ and the former partner can be a vivid, powerful symbol of the enduring love of God...' (*ibid.*). Having set up the ideal we must not then knock it down but go on to perform it according to the grace that is given us by our heavenly Father.

While the tolerance of divorce and remarriage in Old Testament times has been done away with, we may not think that God has made life more difficult for us today, as though grace is more oppressive than law. Nor are we to think of God as being less compassionate in the New Testament than in the Old because He no longer permits remarriage.

The reason for the Old Testament toleration of divorce and remarriage was never Divine compassion but the hardheartedness of the people. They stubbornly insisted on divorcing their wives, compelling Moses to introduce some degree of regulation (Deut. 24:1-4). This rebellious spirit continued right down to Jesus' own time, as we see from His response to the Jews as they sought to argue with Him: 'because of the hardness of *your* hearts [Moses] suffered *you* to put away *your* wives' (Matt. 19:8). But He brought the concession to an end.

Is the clamour for divorce and remarriage today an admission that our hearts too are hard and rebellious, and that we will not hear His voice or walk in His ways? What we need to learn is the power of God's wondrous grace in softening our proud hearts and enabling us to live according to the ideal that the New Testament sets before us: marriage as it has been from the beginning. Gordon Wenham and William Heth make this point well at the conclusion of their book:

Jesus did not come to lay down a new 'law' on His disciples, one too strict for them to bear. He gave them a moral standard which, by God's grace, He expected His disciples to fulfil. He said that one of the distinguishing characteristics of His disciples is that they do not remarry after divorce. Christ came to give freedom, not for divorce and remarriage, but for marriage in its creational design. Jesus' disciples have the power of the indwelling Spirit of life and no longer have hearts of stone, nor are they subject to hard-heartedness [*sic*] when it comes to fulfilling God's commands. Though man will never perform perfectly, he is able to live on a plane far above that of failure. And if one thing or another leads to the tragedy of divorce, Christ's disciple has available that grace which is needed to remain single or be reconciled. (*Jesus and Divorce*; p. 202)

What a wonderful testimony to the grace and keeping power of God is displayed in the life of a believer who has been dragged through the divorce court but makes himself, or herself, a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven's sake (Matt. 19:12). It is a grace that keeps open the possibility one day of repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation, which is the Christian way, but it is a grace that the Erasmian/Evangelical view denies.

‘And such were some of you’

Among the three thousand who were saved on the Day of Pentecost, and among all those who were daily added to the church thereafter, would undoubtedly have been some who had been divorced and were now remarried. That would not have been surprising given their religious and cultural backgrounds. But now, under the teaching of the apostles, they discover that their relationships are adulterous in the sight of the one true and living God, the Holy One.

To recap for a moment, we have found that adultery is committed by:

- ◆ A wife who commits fornication (the exception clause in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9).
- ◆ A wife who has been divorced by her husband and goes on to marry another man (Matt. 5:32a).
- ◆ The man who marries a divorced woman (Matt. 5:32b; Matt. 19:9b; Luke 16:18b).
- ◆ A man who divorces his wife and marries another woman (Matt. 19:9; Mark 10:11; Luke 16:18a).
- ◆ A woman who divorces her husband and marries another man (Mark 10:12).

God takes this adultery very seriously, for adultery is sin. The woman caught in the act was commanded by the Lord Jesus to ‘sin no more’ (John 8:11). It is made clear to the churches in Corinth and Galatia that adulterers will not inherit the kingdom of God (I Cor. 6:9,10; Gal. 5:19-21), and the Hebrew Christians too were left in no doubt that ‘adulterers God will judge’ (Heb. 13:4). As they read this, the natural response of their hearts would have been to dismiss it as highly offensive and judgmental. It was, after all, intensely personal and condemned them for something that they had long accepted as legitimate. In a fit of pique they might have rejected it as extreme and unloving. They might have thought the cost too high and the difficulties too many.

What those early believers actually did is clear from 1 Corinthians 6, where Paul declares ‘and such were some of you’ (v. 11). Notice the past tense: ‘and such *were* some of you’. In

other words, their consciences had been pricked by the Word of God. Having once been adulterers they have now ceased from their adultery by living their lives in celibacy or returning to their marriage partners.

Paul does not elaborate on the practical difficulties they would have had to overcome but simply makes the point that they had brought their adulterous relationships to an end. They may have been together for many years and there may well have been children for whom they were now responsible, but the gospel had changed them. They now knew that, whatever the circumstances, they could no longer continue living in their sinful ways. They knew that they must put their adultery behind them so that henceforth they might live as those who were washed, sanctified and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of their God.

This is not to say that the Corinthians found it easy or that the lifestyle changes happened overnight. Still Paul needed to write at length and very pointedly about the sexual misconduct among them (I Cor. 6:12-7:17), but under the operation of the Holy Spirit his letter was not to no avail. When he wrote a second time it was with joy in his soul that they had taken it to heart and ‘sorrowed to repentance’ (II Cor. 7:8-10). They had changed their minds and with Godly zeal had turned away from their old, sinful manner of living (v. 11).

How does the church situation today compare? Clearly there are similarities in that our culture too has made certain lifestyles and patterns of behaviour socially acceptable which God condemns as sinful. In fact, grossly sinful ways of life are fast becoming the norm. But God does not lower His standards. The teaching of His Word is ‘completely at odds with the spirit of the age’ (Cornes, *Divorce and Remarriage*; p. 313). This means that as churches preach the gospel and sinners are converted, new believers cluttered with cultural baggage every bit as odious as that in first-century Corinth, Galatia or Jerusalem, seek membership, and among them are remarried divorcees. What are these people to do?

The message of Paul’s letters to Corinth is that they are to forsake every style of life and behaviour that is adulterous, cleansing themselves ‘from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God’ (II Cor. 7:1). The outward walk is to correspond to the inner life and confession.

Furthermore, the apostle teaches us that under the lively preaching of the Gospel, and its powerful application by the Holy Spirit, that is precisely what will happen. Instead of dismissing the teaching as extreme and offensive, the new converts will see it as pleasing to God and according to His will, and they will submit to it. As sinners born again by the Spirit, their hearts softened, their wills eager to please the Lord their Saviour, they will repent of their sinful ways and turn away from them. Then it might be said of them as it was of the Corinthians, ‘and

such *were* some of you’, and ‘ye were made sorry after a godly manner’ (II Cor. 1:9). Just like their predecessors at Corinth, their thinking, their willing and their desiring will be changed so that they will want to live out the rest of their lives in a manner that is holy and well pleasing to their God and Saviour.

Now clearly in churches where the Erasmian view is held and preached this is not going to be the case. Where remarriage after divorce is not considered to be adulterous and not preached as being sinful, there will be no admonitions, no exhortations to repentance and no changes in lifestyle. Many new converts with a history of divorce and remarriage, if not most of them, will be baptized, received as members of the church and made welcome to sit at the table of the Lord. There they will join others who have divorced (or been divorced) since they became Christians and have been remarried by the very minister under whose preaching they now sit. In this way the church membership roll will become swollen with divorcees in adulterous marriages.

But in the sovereign purposes of God it is not unknown for Christians from churches such as these to come face to face with their sin and to repent of it. By means, perhaps, of their own personal study of the Scriptures or the influence of faithful teachers, or the reading of a helpful book, they are brought to see that their lives are not right before God. They feel let down by those who counselled them and in utter despair of heart and soul they cry out, ‘We married in good faith; our own elders told us that we could do it; what else were we to do?’ Then in sorrow and repentance before God they endeavour to do what they can to right the wrongs of ignorance committed over many years, and put their adultery into the past.

Preach the Word

All this highlights the importance of preaching, and especially the responsibility of the preacher to ‘preach the word’ (II Tim. 4:2). There is little hope of people knowing even how to begin to put right the wrongs in their lives for as long as there is error or silence in the pulpit. That is where the reformation of life must begin, and it begins with the reformation of doctrine. The faithful pastor’s responsibility is to preach the truth on marriage and divorce as much as on any other doctrine in the Bible, for it too belongs to the whole counsel of God that he is called to declare (Acts 20:27). When the truth is taught with boldness and clarity God’s minister may be assured that the Holy Spirit will do His reforming work in the hearts and lives of the elect.

In his preaching the faithful preacher will clearly identify remarriage after divorce as adulterous. Fearlessly he will lay bare before the people the seriousness of this sin in the sight

of God. He will preach the need for repentance, a true and Godly sorrow over sin that radically changes the way of life. He will exhort them to consign their adultery into the past so that they might live in the sure knowledge and peace of sins forgiven through their Lord Jesus Christ, washed, sanctified and justified.

Above all, he will preach the doctrine of God's unconditional and unbreakable covenant of grace with His people as the one true marriage for, as one minister put it to me recently, once people see the truth of this, 'they see the wrong of divorce and remarriage almost of themselves'.

We began with a reference to evangelism and the difficulties faced by churches as new believers bring with them their past history of marital break-up and remarriage. The difficulties cannot be overstated. The temptation for churches to excuse sins of the past such as these, on the ground that they have now been forgiven, must be great, but we have seen already that this approach does not do justice to the need for repentance. It does not face up to the problem of present, ongoing sin. Neither does it face up to the realities and responsibilities of life.

Faithful evangelistic preaching will not shun from making known to people the offence of the gospel. It will make known to them their sin. It will show them the offence that they give to the holy God of Heaven, warning them that 'neither fornicators, nor idolators, nor adulterers, nor effeminate... shall inherit the kingdom of God' (I Cor. 6:9; *cf.* Gal. 5:19ff).

Today this kind of message offends more than at any other time in living memory, but it is an essential part of the gospel. Neither should we be fearful of it. We know that the preaching of the gospel is not impotent: it not only offends but has the power to change. In the preaching of the gospel, the Holy Spirit comes with the almighty saving power of the grace of God and applies it to sinners. He enables them to see their sin, softens their hard, offended hearts and stubborn wills, and turns them from their sin in repentance and faith to the Lord Jesus Christ.

We have seen the evidence of this at Corinth, where some, at one time, were such people as those listed in the passage we have just quoted, but now they are changed, they are no longer fornicators and adulterers. They do not continue to live as they were living before their conversion but as inheritors of the kingdom of God (*Cf.* I Cor. 6:9-11).

Under faithful preaching, backed up with the practical help and support of a loving church, and sympathetic pastoral and diaconal care, a way will be found through the many difficulties and complexities that are bound to arise in modern families, so that all concerned might be left with a good conscience before God.

At a human level none of this will be easy. Prof. Wenham is in no doubt as to the difficulty of the task facing pastors today as they try to teach faithfully the Biblical doctrine of marriage

and divorce. He speaks of their responsibility with refreshing candour:

If pastors speak up on this subject, they will offend many in their congregations.... Nevertheless, the Old Testament prophets, as well as Jesus and Paul, were willing to speak out, despite the unpopularity it caused. And I think the modern church should do the same. (*Three Views*; p. 37)

Speak out!

But will she? Will she break free from her timidity or will she continue with the disastrous doctrine of Erasmus, the Reformers and their successors, fearful of the truth? Will pastors break free from the teaching of the *Westminster Confession* or will they continue to remarry divorcees and welcome them into the church, afraid of the offence caused if they should teach otherwise?

Yes, it will take faith, courage and deep humility to break with years of teaching the propriety of remarriage after divorce and then to teach that it is adulterous. We have had it wrong for nearly five hundred years and we see the fruit of that error today as never before, which makes it harder to put right, but put it right we must.

To conclude, we hardly need reminding that we are all sinners. We all make mistakes in life, taking wrong turns and doing wrong things, some bringing in their wake serious and lifelong consequences. Even though we confess our sins before our merciful High Priest who is ever willing to forgive us our sins, we bear the scars and carry the burdens of regret for the rest of our earthly days. The command of God in Scripture to every one of us is to bear one another's burdens and do good to all men, especially to those who are of the household of faith, and that includes those who at some time have divorced and remarried.

May God grant us the grace to do so.

'... and they two shall be one flesh.

This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church'

(Eph. 5:31-32)

Appendix 1

The Betrothal View - A Short Critique

Among some who reject the *Westminster Confession's* position on divorce and remarriage there is growing interest in the view that the exception clause of Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9 refers to the Jewish practice of betrothal. This is described in Deuteronomy 22:13-21 and elsewhere.

If, during her betrothal, a girl committed fornication, it would come to light at the consummation of the marriage, after which she would be 'put away' and handed over to the authorities for stoning to death. It is this very specific act of fornication that some believe Jesus refers to in the words 'except it be for fornication'.

Such a view is consistent with the overall context of Matthew's Gospel which, more than the other Gospel accounts, addresses Jewish issues and speaks to Jewish readers. Hence the exception clause is recorded only there. And since the clause belonged to an Old Testament judicial law that is now abolished, it no longer applies and offers no ground for divorce. In our day there is simply no equivalent to the kind of fornication that the exception clause addresses, and there has been none for the last 2000 years, therefore it has no relevance to us.

Certainly this interpretation appears to have some merit in that it is easily understood and is corroborated in part by the betrothal account of Mary and Joseph, which too is recorded only by Matthew (1:18-19). But it is when we study the exception clause in its wider context that we see the theory begin to unravel.

There are four good reasons to doubt whether the Lord is referring to betrothal at all.

In the first place, in Matthew 19 the whole thrust of the Lord's argument is to direct the Pharisees *away* from what the law had to say about marriage and back to the original mandate given at creation (vv. 4-6). To insert an exception at this point, to the effect that the Old Testament civil laws concerning betrothal were still in force, would be odd to say the least. It only introduces confusion or even contradiction.

Secondly, if the Lord is referring to the law of betrothal then it must be that law *in its entirety* that is to be applied. This law entailed not only producing the evidence of virginity and putting the girl away if it could not be produced, but also handing her over to the authorities for

stoning to death (Deut. 22:21). And if a betrothed virgin was caught in the act of fornication, then not only she but the man too was to be stoned to death (Deut. 22:23-24). The Lord makes no mention of this.

Thirdly, introducing a reference to the law of betrothal in Matthew 5:32 is not consistent with the Lord's message throughout the rest of the chapter, which is one of contrast. This is highlighted by His frequent use of expressions like, 'It hath been said... But I say unto you'. In the case of the exception clause the Betrothal View changes Jesus' message to one of continuity, as though He were now saying, 'It hath been said... And I say so too'.

We should note that in Matthew 5 the exception clause comes at the end, at the climax even, of the Lord's application of the seventh commandment (vv. 27-32). His application was far wider in its scope than the laws enforced so vigorously by the scribes and Pharisees. Suddenly to introduce one of those laws as an exception to the Lord's general rule would once again have confused the issue and blunted His message.

Fourthly, that Jesus had the betrothal laws in view is made even less likely by the statement He makes immediately following the exception clause, to the effect that a man who marries the divorced woman commits adultery. This cannot apply to a woman who was divorced for fornication under the betrothal laws because under those laws she would not have lived to marry him (Deut. 22:21).

Does the exception clause, then, have any application at all for our time and culture? The Betrothal View teaches that it does not, since it was only relevant for the Jewish people and culture of those times. This is troubling because great caution needs to be exercised before consigning any of the inspired words of the New Testament to the dustbin of 'cultural irrelevance'. We have no authority to say that any of the words spoken by Christ and belonging to the Word of God, which is for all peoples and all times, are no longer relevant. That is the domain of liberal, Christ-denying theologians.

What the Betrothal View states, in effect, is that as the exception clause applied only to the Jews of Jesus' own day, since AD70 it has applied to no-one at all. It is as though Matthew 19:9 reads like this: 'Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication [*those reading this clause in AD2007 need not concern themselves with it since it will not apply to them*], and shall marry another, committeth adultery'.

What is more, the date of Matthew's Gospel, which is usually given as just a few years before AD70, suggests that at the time it was written the relevance of the exception clause was already fast drawing to a close. All this reinforces the question, why is it there? It may as well not be there if it is not relevant. Yet the Gospel of Matthew – *all* of it – is inspired by the Holy

Spirit to be the very Word of God, as much for us today as it was for those who first read it. Therefore, if the immediate context of the exception clause, i.e. the other words of the two verses in which it is found, is relevant, we have no authority to say that the words of the exception clause itself are excepted. They are the Lord's own words, and unlike many other words and deeds of His that have not been recorded (*Cf.* John 20:30; 21:25), God has incorporated them into the canon of His Word. We dare not cut them out. We dare not say that they are obsolete, have no relevance, no application, and nothing to teach us apart from an academically interesting Jewish marriage custom that was abolished 2000 years ago.

The exception clause *is* relevant, and its relevance can be demonstrated even at that point at which its detractors claim one of their strongest arguments: the word 'fornication'.

Supporters of the Betrothal View stress that the ground for divorce stated in the exception clause is specifically fornication – defined as sexual relations by the unmarried – and that neither the English nor the underlying Greek permit us to substitute it with the word adultery. The two words have quite distinct meanings. However, it can be shown from the Scriptures that the distinction was not so clear among the Jews as it is among us.

Israel's unfaithfulness to God is described by the Old Testament prophets in terms of both fornication (e.g. Isa. 1:21) and adultery (e.g. Jer. 3:8,9; 13:27; Hos. 2:2). In that most graphic of chapters, Ezekiel 16, both terms are used. God's faithless wife is said to pour out her '**fornications** on every one that passed by' (v. 15). She 'committed **fornication** with the Egyptians' (v. 26) and 'moreover multiplied thy **fornication** in the land of Canaan unto Chaldea' (v. 29). Yet at the same time she is described as 'a wife that committeth **adultery**, which taketh strangers instead of her husband' (v. 32), for which God will judge her 'as women that break wedlock... are judged' (v. 38).

On at least one occasion the charge of fornication and adultery is made in the same verse: 'And it came to pass through the lightness of her **whoredom**, that [Israel] defiled the land, and committed **adultery** with stones and with stocks' (Jer. 3:9).

We do not take our theology from an English dictionary. In both Hebrew and Greek the words translated 'fornication' mean harlotry and whoredom. Those who hold to the Betrothal View are correct when they say that fornication and adultery are not synonymous, hence the apostle Paul too can mention both in the same verse (I Cor. 6:9; Gal. 5:19), but there is a kind of fornication that is adulterous and that is the kind that is committed by a married woman.

It is adulterous because it is committed against the one to whom she is bound in a covenant of love, the covenant of marriage. That is the kind of fornication that Israel committed against her covenant Husband, and it is the kind that is committed today, not only by married women

but married men too. That is the kind of fornication that is referred to in the exception clauses of Matthew 5:32 and 19:9.

Even the betrothal custom itself confirms this. Jewish betrothal was as close to marriage as it was possible to be without the marriage being consummated, even to the extent of the couple being called man and wife, for example Mary and Joseph (Matt. 1:18-20). It was also legally binding.

Advocates of the Betrothal View themselves admit this:

... the practice of betrothal involved a time period, usually twelve months in length, during which a couple was considered to be morally and legally married, even though they had not yet consummated their relationship. (David W. Jones, *The Betrothal View of Divorce and Remarriage*; www.sebts.edu)

Only the death of the unfaithful bride could bring the betrothal to an end allowing the husband to remarry.

This demonstrates how close a betrothed woman's unfaithfulness came to adultery. As one commentator puts it, 'for her to be unfaithful... was nothing less than adultery' (Herman Ridderbos, *Matthew*; p. 27). If, therefore, in the context of ancient Jewish betrothal practice, fornication was adultery in all but name, it is but a small step to conclude that the exception clause finds its modern application in the sin of adultery proper.

We must insist that the words of the exception clause are relevant for our day. It is the task of the believer to come to the Scriptures with the assumption that they do have an application, and then to discover what that application is by faithful interpretation of the text, comparing Scripture with Scripture. He will then find that their application is to the sin of adultery as the one and only valid ground for divorce, though never as destroying the marriage bond itself. Adultery is a sin that is not culturally bound but will remain with us throughout all ages, like the Word of God itself, until sin shall be no more. The exception clause too will remain a part of that sacred Word and be relevant for all time.

Appendix 2

A Regrettable Change of Mind

The position presented in this booklet is undeniably a ‘minority’ view today. One will struggle to find it defended in many of the books that have been published on marriage and divorce or in commentaries on the relevant Bible passages, even in the more conservative.

This factor weighed so heavily upon William Heth, co-author in 1984 with Gordon J. Wenham of the book *Jesus and Divorce*, that it contributed to his change of mind in 2002. In that year an article by him appeared in *The Southern Baptist Journal* entitled *Jesus and Divorce: How My Mind Has Changed* (pp. 4-29), explaining why he has reverted to the Erasmian position. It makes for sad reading.

Only at the end of the article, where Professor Heth leaves open the possibility that ‘my switch to the majority view could be wrong’ (p. 22), does one detect any glimmer of doubt. He may yet change his mind again, and one hopes that he will.

Standing alone on an issue is usually uncomfortable. It is also something that the believer must treat with the utmost seriousness for he might be wrong. He therefore needs to be fully persuaded by the Scriptures of truth that his position is the right one and that the Lord stands with Him. When that is the case the believer is never without help and support, as the apostle Paul found in his own experience: ‘no man stood with me, but all men forsook me... Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me’ (II Tim. 4:16-17).

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the help I have derived from the following books and articles in the preparation of this booklet.

Better to Marry, David J. Engelsma. (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1993. 105pp.) ISBN 0-916-206-49-1 *A fine explanation of Paul's teaching on marriage in 1 Corinthians 6 and 7.*

Divorce and Remarriage, Andrew Cornes. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993. 528pp.) ISBN 0-340-574-34-8 *This must be the definitive work on the early church position.*

Does the New Testament Approve Remarriage after Divorce? Gordon J. Wenham. (The Southern Baptist Journal, Spring 2002, pp. 30-45.) *Examines the divorce texts of the New Testament in the context of early church history, the New Testament itself, Matthew's gospel, and first century Judaism. A concise and helpful article.*

God and Marriage, Geoffrey W. Bromiley. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003 [reprint]. 88pp.) ISBN1-52944-290-0

Jesus and Divorce, Gordon J. Wenham & William E. Heth. (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, [2nd. ed.] 1997. 324pp.) ISBN 0-85364-768-2

Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage, John Coblenz. (Harrisonburg, VA: Christian Light Publications, 1992. 98pp.) ISBN 0-87813-544-8 *Takes the Betrothal View.*

Marriage: The Mystery of Christ and the Church, David J. Engelsma. (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, [2nd. ed.]1998. 239pp.) ISBN 0-916206-59-9 *Examines the subject from the point of view of marriage symbolizing the bond between Christ and the church, and applies it to all aspects of married life. Highly recommended.*

Remarriage After Divorce in Today's Church: Three Views, Gordon J. Wenham, William A. Heth and Craig S. Keener. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006. 161pp.) ISBN 0-310-25553-8
In the form of a debate. Prof. Wenham ably defends the early church position.

The Lord's Hatred of Divorce, David J. Engelsma. (Hudsonville, MI: Hudsonville Protestant Reformed Church, 1998. 16pp.) *A clear and passionate sermon on Malachi 2:14-16.*

Until Death Us Do Part, David J. Engelsma. (South Holland, IL: South Holland Protestant Reformed Evangelism Committee, 2005. 57pp.) No ISBN number. *Eight very relevant essays on marriage, divorce and remarriage.*