

Unbiblical Divorce and Adulterous Remarriage: A Scandal

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Introduction

With the subject of this final speech of the conference, we come to the topic and way of life that will prove that we are sincere in our confession of the importance of the Christian family.¹ Few professing Christians and few nominally Christian churches will deny the importance of the family outright. But most today show that their confession of the family's importance is mere empty religious talk by approving divorce for virtually any reason and by approving the subsequent remarriage. Those who keep track of such things inform us that the rate of divorce in the so-called evangelical churches is just as high as it is in the world of the ungodly. This rate is high—more than 50% of all marriages, that is, more than half of them.

Because divorce, with the remarriage that usually follows, is obviously the destruction of the family, those persons and those churches that approve divorce and permit it are not sincere in their profession of the importance of the Christian family. Whether the explanation is sheer falsehood or self-deceit, they lie when they claim to honour the family. In fact, they are part of the juggernaut of our day that is destroying the family.

The churches, the organization and the persons that promote and participate in this conference are sincere and serious in their conviction and confession concerning the fundamental importance of the family for the Christian church and the believing child of God. They are sincere and serious about the family as God the Creator and Jesus Christ the Saviour are sincere and serious about the family.

Therefore, we are appalled by the tolerance and even approval of divorce and remarriage, not only in the world but also in the churches. To us, it is a scandal, nothing less. By scandal, we mean not merely behaviour on the part

¹ This article is based upon the last speech at the 2018 BRF Conference.

of professing Christians that is outrageously wicked. But we have in mind behaviour over which people stumble spiritually, so that they are hardened in their unbelief and in their rejection of the church and its message. It is conduct that occasions people's damnation.

Therefore also, we condemn the scandal and, in the face of the scandalous behaviour, we confess boldly and clearly God's truth about divorce and remarriage. For this confession, we may be mocked and opposed. We will not, however, be the occasion of the damnation of any.

The Biblical Truth

Let it be clear at the outset that we determine the truth about divorce and remarriage from the Word of God, that is, Holy Scripture. All those who approve remarriage after divorce go wrong regarding the authoritative basis of their doctrine and practice. The basis of their position and practice is the thinking and practice of the ungodly world in which the church finds herself. Or the basis is what is easy and satisfying for themselves, for their children and for the members of the churches. They find themselves married to a difficult husband or wife. Or they find a woman or a man who is much more attractive to them than their original spouse. They "fall in love" with another. Or a child divorces and remarries. Or a mate forsakes them. The circumstances of life, admittedly often difficult, determine their doctrine and their practice. Suddenly, remarriage after divorce becomes appealing.

Inasmuch as it is not the Word of God that determines the church's marriage doctrine and practice, an even more basic truth of the Christian religion is at stake: the sole authority of Scripture for all doctrine and conduct. Our authority for the right doctrine of marriage is not worldly culture or what is pleasing to ourselves. But the authority is the Word of God: "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isa. 8:20).

Appeal to Scripture as the authority in the matter of divorce and remarriage was Jesus' response to the question by the Pharisees about divorce in Matthew 19. Matthew 19 is one of the most important passages in the Bible on divorce and remarriage. It is not only Jesus' teaching about divorce that is important in the passage. What was for Him the authority on the matter is

also important. The question concerned divorce. “Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?” (v. 3). Jesus’ response indicated what was for Him the authority on the matter: “Have ye not read?” (v. 4), that is, Scripture, particularly in this case Genesis 1 and 2.

When the Pharisees argued by appealing to Moses’ permission of divorce in Deuteronomy 24, Jesus did not simply dismiss that passage. Rather, He insisted on the authority of the Genesis passage. “from the beginning it [i.e., the toleration of divorce] was not so” (v. 8). He explained that Moses in Deuteronomy was not commanding divorce, as the Pharisees suggested, but was “suffering” or putting up with, divorce. Also Moses regarded divorce as an evil. The cause of the evil was the “hardness” of the “hearts” of the Israelites (v. 8). What is seldom noted by churches and individuals who appeal to Moses’ toleration of divorce in support of divorce today is that they thus identify themselves as having “hard,” that is, unbelieving, hearts.

Old Testament Scripture was the authority for Jesus in the matter of divorce and it must be for us now in the time of the New Testament as well.

The passage in the Old Testament that is our authority concerning divorce and remarriage is, first of all, the account of the will of God the Creator as made known in the institution of marriage in the beginning, on the sixth day of creation, in His creation of mankind. This was the authority for Jesus in Matthew 19. Jesus referred to, and quoted in part, Genesis 2:21-24. The passage concludes, “and they shall be one flesh.” On the basis of this Old Testament Scripture, Jesus answered the question about the lawfulness of “putting away:” “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” (Matt. 19:6). Setting aside for the moment what the doctrine of Genesis and of Jesus is, note the authority for Jesus: the will of God as revealed in the Bible, the Bible *only*. The authority for the doctrine of marriage was not for Jesus the popular teaching of Israel’s leaders. It was not the circumstances of the people. It was not the hardships that the truth about divorce and remarriage would have for some.

It was, “Have ye not read?”

What they then and we today read in Genesis 1 and 2, according to the explanation of Jesus in Matthew 19, is that there may be no divorce, in the

sense of the separation of the married couple so that they once again become “twain” or two, which would allow for marrying another. “Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” (v. 6). God has joined the two in a marvellous, mysterious union. Two individuals have become “one flesh.” “Flesh” does not only signify body, as expressed especially in sexual intimacy, but also soul, that is, mind, will and feeling. They have become a single realization of humanity. Only God may, and only God can, separate them, which He does in the death of one of them. So close, so binding, is the bond of marriage that even for God the separation of the two takes some doing: death.

There is one exception to the prohibition against divorce: “except it be for fornication” (v. 9). The sexual infidelity of one allows for (but does not require) a full, legal, permanent separation of “bed and board,” as the legal expression puts it. Even then, there may be no remarriage.

The prohibition of remarriage (for the “innocent party”) in the case of divorce on the ground of fornication is controversial with regard to the understanding of Matthew 19:9. The first part of the text might be explained as permitting the remarriage of the “innocent party.” The question is, Does the exception clause allow only for divorce or also for a subsequent remarriage. Against the explanation that applies the exception not only to the prohibition of divorce but also to the prohibition of remarriage, so that one divorced, on the ground of the fornication of his wife, is permitted to remarry, stand the following compelling, indeed conclusive, grounds.

First, there is the position in the text of the exception clause. It immediately follows the phrase, “put away his wife,” indicating that the Lord gives an exception to the prohibition against divorce and not to the prohibition of the likely subsequent remarriage.

Second, there is the truth that Jesus has just stated concerning God’s binding the two in marriage (v. 6). Man may not, and man cannot, put the two asunder whom God has so bound or joined, so as to permit remarriage to a third party. Grievous and sinfully powerful as fornication is, it is not powerful enough to rend asunder what God has joined together. Sin cannot undo what God has done.

Third, there is the clear testimony regarding the matter of remarriage after divorce on the ground of fornication in other, indeed parallel, passages of the Bible. Mark 10:11-12 is the parallel passage. Here, Jesus clearly forbids remarriage after divorce absolutely. “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.” Remarriage after divorce (for any reason whatever) is adultery. There is no exception to the forbidding of remarriage after divorce, regardless of the ground of the divorce.

Fourth, there is the conclusive evidence of Matthew 19:9 itself. The text does not consist only of its first half, which one might explain as allowing for the remarriage of the “innocent party” after the permitted divorce. But there is also a second half: “and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.” The woman in view here is the innocent party of the first part of the text. Her husband has divorced her, even though she has not committed fornication. He has subsequently married another. Her husband, therefore, is guilty of fornication or adultery. She is the “innocent party.” If the explanation of the first part of the text as allowing for the remarriage of the “innocent party” is correct, she has the right to remarry. But Jesus expressly forbids her to remarry: “whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.” Her remarriage would be an adulterous marriage.

Matthew 19:9, which is the one passage in the New Testament to which advocates of the right to remarry of the “innocent party” in a divorce appeal, itself forbids the remarriage of the “innocent party.” In Matthew 19:9, Jesus upholds the teaching of Genesis 2 and applies it in His day: one flesh, as joined by God, and, therefore, “let no man put asunder.”

Elsewhere in the New Testament where the topic is remarriage, again and again Scripture forbids remarriage while the original spouse is still alive. The teaching is perfectly clear, so clear that, if it were not that the eyes of churches and theologians were blinded by other authorities and considerations, all would agree that remarriage after divorce is adultery. I refer among other passages to Luke 16:18, Romans 7:2-3, I Corinthians 7:10-11 and 39.

This last chapter is especially clear and conclusive. Verses 10 and 11 allow for divorce: “if she depart.” This is the exception to the prohibition against divorce that Jesus allows in Matthew 19:9. But even in this instance she must

remain “unmarried.” One reason is the possibility of reconciliation to her husband: “or be reconciled to her husband” (I Cor. 7:11). It is worthy of note that, even though her husband has committed fornication against her, which allows her to “depart from her husband” (v. 10), he remains “her husband” (v. 11). Not even fornication and the divorce that follows have annulled the bond of marriage.

Verse 39 of I Corinthians 7 is also clear: “The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth.” Only “if her husband be dead” is she “at liberty to be married” to another.

In perfect keeping with the institution of marriage as recorded in Genesis 1 and 2, the New Testament doctrine of marriage is that marriage is a life-long bond. There may be no divorce, except for fornication. All remarriage after divorce, including that of the “innocent party,” is adultery. Death, and death only, severs the bond so that the surviving mate is at liberty to marry again.

This witness of the Bible may be controversial today, because of the practice of the churches, because of the adulterous lives of professing Christians and because of the compromising theology of marriage of prominent theologians, but it is not because of any lack of clarity in the Bible on this important aspect of the Christian life.

The witness becomes even more forceful when we examine the reasons for the Bible’s doctrine of marriage.

The Fundamental Reasons

First, with specific regard to the subject of our conference—the Reformed family—this doctrine of marriage undergirds, safeguards and promotes the Christian, Reformed family. Divorce and remarriage destroy the family. Nothing destroys the family like divorce and remarriage. Divorce and remarriage are the all-out, ruinous assault on the original marriage, which is the main element of the family. They tend very powerfully to destroy the children, who are always deeply affected by the divorce of their parents and the break-up of their home. There are certainly sometimes survivors. The “innocent party,” the Christian whose wife wickedly divorces him, can exert himself on behalf of the salvation of his children. I Corinthians 7:14 teaches that the children

of the marriage of a believer and an unbeliever (which the divorcing and remarrying mate shows himself or herself to be) are “holy.”

Nevertheless, the children in a divorce are deeply troubled by the divorce; their family-life, their precious family-life, is shattered. Likely, the divorce is ruinous of their spiritual and emotional welfare. Every pastor is well aware of this devastating effect of divorce upon the children. Some twenty years ago, a well-known and highly respected non-Christian sociologist and psychologist wrote a highly acclaimed book detailing the results of her study of the effects of divorce upon the children involved.² Her study showed that these children suffered seriously the detrimental effects upon themselves of the divorce of their parents long into their adulthood, some twenty or thirty or more years after the divorce occurred. The implication of the book, if it was not expressly stated, was that parents should stay together in marriage and the home for the sake of their children.

The analysis of this study by a Christian is that God instituted the human race in marriage and family. Disregard of this institution is met by divine judgment upon all involved. God wills faithfulness in marriage on behalf of family. God wills family. God is the God of family. Baal and Asherah are the gods of sexual promiscuity and, therefore, of divorce and remarriage. Molech is the god of the sacrifice of children on the altar of parents seeking their own satisfaction. But the God of the Christian faith is the God of the family. A Christian, especially a married Christian and a child in a Christian family, adores Him for this perfection.

We can penetrate still more deeply, as we discover the reasons for the biblical doctrine of the unbreakable bond of marriage. Marriage is the bright and beautiful symbol of the marriage of Christ and the church. This is the gospel in the second half of Ephesians 5. The real and ultimately important marriage is not ours, but the marriage of Jesus and His church. This marriage is the relation of love, first, of Jesus for us and, then, of us for Jesus, that is the bond of salvation that the Bible calls the “covenant.” In the Old Testament, the marriage which was the covenant took the typical form of the covenant of Jehovah with Israel (Eze. 16). In the New Testament, the reality of the

² Judith S. Wallerstein, Julia M. Lewis and Sandra Blakeslee, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce* (New York, NY: Hyperion, 2000).

marriage is the bond of love between Jesus and the elect, believing church (Eph. 5). God's covenant is salvation, and Ephesians 5:22-33 teaches that the symbol of this divine covenant is the marriage of the believing man and the believing woman. Marriage, the apostle proclaims, is a "great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church" (v. 32).

Our highest calling with our marriage, therefore, is not to please ourselves or even to please our mate, but to show forth the truth of Christ and the church, in the presence of God and before the watching world. Divorce, and then taking another husband or wife, debases the symbolism of Christ and the church as faithful to each other. Divorce and remarriage in the church by professing Christians not only testifies to the world that Christians are as unfaithful to their vows and to marriage as is the world, but, in addition, that Christ and the church are unfaithful to each other. Because Christ is God's Christ, representing God's faithfulness to His church, divorce and remarriage in the church testifies to the unfaithfulness of God in His love for His church. Divorce and remarriage, particularly in the sphere of the church by professing Christians, is blasphemy.

The glorious message of Ezekiel 16—as grand a passage on marriage in the Old Testament as Ephesians 5 is in the New Testament—is that God is faithful even to His adulterous wife, Israel/church.

The fundamental reason for the biblical doctrine and practice of marriage, then, is the nature of God in Jesus Christ. God is the God of faithfulness to His people, even unto the cross of Himself in human flesh. The idols are fickle; God is faithful. This, we may, and must, display in our marriages. How do we do this, in the adulterous, unfaithful time in which we live?

The Practical Implications

Reformed husbands and wives are to live faithfully with their spouse. They are to regard each other as the one given by God for life. The wife regards her husband as the Christ and herself as the church, symbolically. The husband views his wife as the church and himself as the Christ, symbolically. They live together, day in and day out, in the consciousness of the symbolism of Ephesians 5. So far does this go, that the husband whose wife has committed

fornication, and repents, is moved to reconciliation by the gracious behaviour of Jehovah God towards His wife in Ezekiel 16.

Husbands and wives see and take up their calling as, above all, to be faithful, not only with regard to sexual fidelity but also with regard to all aspects of marital life, for the sake of their precious Saviour, Jesus Christ. Although their own happiness in marriage is at stake, they live together rightly, not only or even mainly, for the sake of their own happiness but for the sake of pleasing Jesus Christ. This motivates them to behaviour that even their own happiness could not accomplish.

Although the sexual is not all there is to marital faithfulness, it is an extremely important aspect of the faithfulness. To married Christians comes the divine admonition, “Flee fornication” (I Cor. 6:18). “Flee” indicates both the enticing power of fornication, and the importance to marriage of the sexual fidelity of husband and wife. Some sins Christians ought to battle courageously. Fornication is one sin from which every man and woman ought to flee, as it were, cowardly. Rather than to face it down at close quarters and contend with it, it is wisdom to run away from the temptation of it. David courageously took on the giant, Goliath, in direct, face-to-face combat; Joseph, on the other hand, wisely fled the seductive and seducing wife of Potiphar. In close and compromising quarters, the strength of the temptation of fornication is too strong for even the holiest of Christians to resist. The admonition to flee fornication is a warning that by itself alone makes many movies, television programmes and books off-limits to the Christian. Lust is strong already in fallen human nature (which the Christian retains), without the nurture of it by the devil’s cultural meat and drink.

Another implication of the biblical doctrine of marriage is that the unmarried Christian youth must marry wisely, keeping in mind that marriage is for life, that it must symbolize Christ and the church, and that the one they marry should show the spiritual qualities that will make the lifelong marriage peaceful. To those who are unmarried, the exhortation is: marry “in the Lord” (I Cor. 7:39). Even then, when one marries a fellow member of the church, a young man or a young woman must avoid one who, though a professing Christian, shows characteristics that will make marriage miserable: an abusive young man or a selfish young woman.

Not to be overlooked is that in the exhortation, “marry in the Lord,” is the admonition, “marry.” Young people ought not delay marriage unduly. Doing so exposes them to the powerful temptation of fornication. Paul authoritatively admonishes that “the younger women marry.” Failing to do this, some in Paul’s day were “already turned aside after Satan” (I Tim. 5:14-15). What this turning aside after Satan consisted of can be determined from the fact that it was the consequence of their not having married. If the command is that the young women in the church marry, in part to avoid such serious temptation as to be turned after Satan, it is implied that the young men of the church have the obligation to propose marriage to the younger women.

If one is divorced, he is called of God to abide in that unhappy state. As part of His marriage doctrine in Matthew 19, Jesus speaks of “eunuchs,” specifically of those “which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake” (v. 12). The reference is not to men who have physically castrated themselves, as an early church father foolishly supposed, but to those who deliberately deprive themselves sexually, as is the case with divorced Christians who, in obedience to Christ, refuse to remarry. Grace enables a man or a woman to live without a wife or without a husband. Such Christians have still the real marriage: union with Christ. They have also the hope of the fullness of marital delight everlastingly in the new world at the coming of their Husband.

If there is to be this faithful Christian practice of marriage by the members of the church, the true church of Christ must preach the truth of marriage and discipline accordingly. This is not merely a choice that the church makes but a calling. Christ gives the church her message of marriage in Matthew, Mark, Luke, Romans, I Corinthians and other passages of Scripture. This is not a popular message in the debased, adulterous culture of the twenty-first century. It was not a popular message in the first century AD either, dominated as that century was by the impure, perverse way of life of the Roman empire.

But the message of the Bible is the truth. It protects the family. It exalts Christ. It honours the God of the family. It is an inescapable, powerful witness of Christianity and its gospel to the adulterous world. It is an important aspect of the gospel’s narrow way to heaven.