

DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE:
AN ANALYSIS OF BIBLICAL TEACHING

Jim Johnson

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In a recently published text book concerning marriage and the family we are informed that "in 1982, a record 2.5 million couples entered into the state of holy matrimony" (McCubbin, et al. 153). The authors also give some statistical data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census regarding the probability of those 2.5 million couples staying married. According to their findings, of every 100 couples married in 1983:

- * 19 will divorce before their fifth anniversary.
- * 14 more will before their tenth anniversary.
- * 7 more will before their 15th anniversary.
- * 7 more will before their 25th anniversary.
- * 3 more will before their 50th anniversary.

Sadly enough, this information reveals that only half of the marriages in the U.S. will actually fulfill the traditional vow "till death us do part"--which the text would have us believe is "simply obsolete, no longer meeting the needs of Americans late in the twentieth century" (299).

Included in this research brief is the fact that in the 20-year period from 1960 to 1980, "the number of divorced men and women in the United States more than tripled" (299). In seeking to explain the causes of such high proportions of divorce rates in the U.S. the authors suggest several reasons. One reason given is that marriage is not providing the necessary ingredients for the fulfillment of one's own personal happiness and goals in life (299). Another suggestion given is that there is no longer the need for, or a high value placed upon, the stability provided by what is questionably described

as the "normal" family--"a happily married couple, with two well-adjusted children, a dog, and a beautiful suburban home" (300). This is in part, the authors declare, due to the fact that with the increase in the number of women who work outside the home comes a greater independence of women from their husbands for financial support (300). Unfortunately, it is nevertheless true that the American model of the family has become based upon utilitarianism: ". . . a secondary relationship. . . based on services, convenience" (Enlow 8). While McCubbin and Dahl recognize that a decline in morality may also be a cause of such high divorce rates in the U.S., the authors do not give any consideration to this possibility.

Also stated is the fact that the Census data indicated that three out of four divorced women and five out of six divorced men eventually remarry (McCubbin, et al. 322). In the United States today "one out of every three marriages is a remarriage" (322). In fact, "remarried families now comprise 13 percent of all families in the United States" (323). Included in these statistics is the estimate that "one million American children under the age of 18 become stepchildren each year" (323). It is highly likely that these remarriages include children from both partners involved (323). In spite of the complexities and deep psychological hurts of everyone involved, the authors of this secular text argue that "remarriage appears to spur on or accompany significant improvements in attitude and mental health" (324).

Needless to say, the counsel of modern secular psychologists is doing little to turn the tide of divorce. In fact, while divorce is recognized as being

"second only to the distress suffered from the loss of a loved one," it is nonetheless accepted as being normal and more desirable than staying married if the relationship hinders the fulfillment of an individual's preferences and desires for self gratification (297). Remarriage, in spite of the difficulties, is also accepted and healthy and even considered by some to "enhance the lives of many children"(326).

Unquestionably, the Christian who plans to work in full time ministry in America will find himself surrounded by some very tough situations when it comes to family relationships regarding divorce and remarriage. Because the Christian community has been strongly influenced by the worldly attitude that divorce and remarriage are matters of individual choice based upon one's own personal views, the Christian minister would do well to have knowledge of what the Scriptures have to say in these matters.

Unlike the secular psychologists, who must depend upon their own fallible human wisdom in working through these issues, the Christian has an infallible source of wisdom from which to draw. Therefore, let us turn our attention to the infallible Word of God.

It cannot be denied that the law of Moses allowed divorce (Deut. 24:1-4). Initially, divorce was permitted if "some uncleanness had been found [in the wife] to break the marriage contract by a divorce" (Pentecost 179). In fact, the prophet Ezra required the Israelites who had taken foreigners as wives (which was expressly forbidden by God) to end their relationships. Those who refused to do so were excommunicated and their property was seized (Ezra

10:8, Packer et al. 436). However, the Law of God was supposed to discourage divorce rather than encourage it (Packer et al. 437). While there were some clear cut areas of "uncleanness," such as adultery (which carried the death penalty by stoning) the Israelites began using the Mosaic law as a means of securing divorces of convenience. The tradition of the Pharisees used this passage as a base for "codifying rules involving all sorts of excesses" (180). There were basically two schools of thought concerning divorce in the days of Jesus as the Rabbis interpreted Deuteronomy 24:1-4 which is indicated in the research of J. Dwight Pentecost:

The school of Shammai, adhering to the letter of the Law, held that a wife should not be divorced except for unfaithfulness; whereas the school of Hillel, with a laxity very agreeable to the general inclination, allowed a husband to put away his wife "for every cause"--if he disliked her, if he fancied another woman more, if her cookery were not to his taste. The doctrine of Hillel was the common practice in our Lord's day and it operated disastrously. 354

In fact, divorce was highly prized by the Jews, who considered it

a gift from God that He had not granted to the Gentiles (Edersheim 332-333).

Sadly, women had become "a mere chattel of

man, subject to his inhuman and cruel treatment" (Pentecost 355).

In seeking to trap Jesus in the controversy over divorce in

His day, hoping to be able to accuse Him in some way, the Pharisees came to

Jesus for an answer as to the validity of divorce (Mt. 19:3). In His wisdom

Jesus "refused to approve either of the Pharisaic schools concerning their

interpretation of law of divorce" but rather "appealed to God's original law of

marriage laid down in Genesis 2:24" (Pentecost 356). Edersheim comments:

. . . the Lord appealed straight to the highest authority--God's

institution of marriage, He, Who at the beginning. . . had made them male and female, had in the marriage-relation "joined them together," to the breaking of every other, even the nearest, relationship, to be "one flesh"--that is, to a union which was unity. Such was the fact of God's ordering. It followed, that they were one--and what God had willed to be one, man might not put asunder. 335

Of the four recorded statements on divorce made by Jesus in the Gospels, the only uncleanness that warranted divorce was the sin of adultery, or more specifically, fornication (Mt. 5:32; 19:9). It is interesting to note here that the two verses that include the allowance of divorce because of unfaithfulness are directed to the Pharisees, who believed that the Mosaic Law "sanctioned divorce on grounds other than adultery (Deut. 24:1-4)" (Packer 438). The verses in which Jesus does not mention the allowance for divorce do not contradict His teaching on the matter. On the contrary, while Jesus allowed divorce for adultery, He did not require it (438). The verses that seem to suggest that there is no cause for divorce (Lk 16:18; Mk 10:5-9) could be taken as revealing the permanence of the marriage relationship. Surely divorce is contrary to God's will because it breaks apart two people whom God wills remain united. Far better is the example given to us in Scripture of "repentance, forgiveness, and healing in an unfaithful marriage, as [Jesus] did in the case of other sin-racked relationships. Reconciliation was Jesus' way of solving marriage troubles" (Packer 439). Jesus, in fact, "repudiated the Pharisaic interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1-4, and He denied the right of divorce" (Pentecost 358). Therefore, unlike the secular psychologist who feels that divorce is acceptable, even preferred in some cases, the Christian minister should "seek to discourage divorce as a solution to marital

problems" (Manual, 230).

The apostle Paul also discouraged divorce. In 1 Corinthians 7:11 we find that even when a Christian's unsaved spouse deserts him it is better to keep the marriage together in the hope that they will be reunited. And yet, Paul says in verse 15 that the Christian is released from the bond of the relationship if such a situation exists. If divorce results, however, the innocent party is not free from the responsibility of the commitment that was made before God unless the former spouse commits adultery. Obviously when a Christian's former spouse remarries, adultery is being committed and therefore the Christian is freed from the obligation of the bonds of holy matrimony. Unfortunately, not only is the former marriage beyond reconciliation at this point but whoever has married the Christian's former spouse is committing adultery as well (Mt. 5:32).

Paul goes on to say that having an unbeliever as a marriage partner is no excuse for divorce. Even though a Christian has an unbelieving spouse the believer is to remain married as long as the spouse consents to do so (1 Cor. 7:10-15). Paul sees the possibility that the unsaved spouse could come to Christ through the testimony of the believer (1 Cor. 7:16).

We have seen from the Scriptures that divorce is allowable, but not required, for the cause of adultery. The next consideration we need to discuss is the matter of remarriage. When is it allowable for the divorced Christian to remarry? It is obvious that whenever there are Biblical grounds for divorce there are Biblical grounds for remarriage. In Romans 7:2 and 1

Corinthians 7:39 we find that death of one's spouse marks the end of the bonds of marriage. This is true not only for married couples but for divorced couples as well. If a Christian is willing to live with his or her spouse but divorce results from the spouse's unwillingness to live with the Christian, the Christian is guilty of no wrong doing. The death of the Christian's former spouse would terminate the responsibility of the Christian to remain unmarried just as it would terminate the obligation within the context of a legal matrimony. Some have suggested that death is not necessarily the only grounds for remarriage in such cases. In their interpretation of Matthew 5:31 and Mark 10:2-12 the General Counsel of the Christian and Missionary Alliance declares that the putting away of the wife (and we can assume the husband as well) in fact "dissolves the marriage and allows remarriage" (Manual 232). This "dissolving" of the marriage is interpreted as being grounds for Biblical remarriage and accepted by Jesus who while He "rejected all rationalization and excuse for divorce" nevertheless "made clear that only the innocent party whose former marriage was revoked by divorce could remarry without guilt" (232).

If a couple divorce because of adultery then the innocent party has been released from the bonds of marriage and is free to remarry. However, the Christian who is Biblically free to remarry is commanded from 2 Corinthians 6:14 to not be "bound together with unbelievers." Before remarriage is to take place it would be wise for anyone considering such a step to seek wise Biblical counsel. Consider the following

statement taken from the Manual of The Christian and Missionary Alliance:

Remarriage is never commanded; it is in some cases only permitted. Divorced persons who have scriptural grounds for remarriage should enter into such remarriage only with the greatest caution. Seldom is there a marriage failure for any cause in which one of the partners is "completely innocent." The applicant for remarriage should demonstrate an attitude of repentance for any part he may have had in the original failure. He should receive counseling from the church so as to avoid repeating destructive attitudes and action. 232

The United States is perhaps one of the hardest places for the Christian to remain true to his faith. The influence of the society to water down Biblical truth is great. But whether the believer likes it or not, the Bible does not allow for divorce simply for convenience sake. Marriage is a divinely instituted and "honorable estate" and constitutes "a solemn, binding agreement entered into before God and man (Mal. 2:14)" (229). It is in fact "an essential, sacred institution, a cornerstone of society" and should be considered the most important and permanent of all relationships one can have apart from his relationship with his Creator.

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