

RESOLUTION on DIVORCE and [RE]MARRIAGE

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INTRODUCTION

Where the church and the world meet is a place of discomfort – for both. The church shines the light of Truth into the darkness and the world recoils; the world encroaches on Kingdom property and the church cringes.

Divorce in our American culture is pervasive. And though the church has for centuries wrestled with this problem, she still today reacts uncomfortably when divorce infringes. How should the church react? Should we shun divorced persons? Deny church membership? Impose discipline? Should our reactions differ for those divorced with or without biblical grounds? Is divorce biblical? Ever permitted? Sinful? Forgivable? May divorced persons [re]marry? Is divorce an obstacle to the church's clear commission to *"go into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature"* (Mark 16:15)?

We believe that Scripture is sufficient to answer any matter, yet acknowledge that this area is a complex one where passions run high and opinions are diverse. From our own Baptist history there is no consensus; even the *1689 London Baptist Confession* and *1900 Fulton Primitive Baptist Confession* are entirely silent on the matter. We further acknowledge that having no head but Christ, our church is responsible for maintaining Christian order according to our own understanding of Scripture. As an illumination of our position, then, we publish this statement representing our best collective efforts at rightly dividing the Word of Truth.

ON MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

By His perfect design, marriage reflects God's nature and character. As we are created in His image, our marriages should dramatically portray the relationship of this covenant-keeping God for His people, demonstrating His unfailing love, unending faithfulness, and constant, abundant provision. For those who are married – and most especially, for married believers – the success (or failure) of the marriage covenant preaches the truth (or a lie) about the gospel and bears public witness of Christ (or denies Him). Marriage is a wonderful institution; we know this both from the Word and from experience. We strongly affirm its value, design and beauty, for it testifies of our lovely Bridegroom.

Yet man is sinful and the world, a fallen place. No marriage ever fully or adequately portrays the Creator's design. And sometimes, sadly, marriages – covenant agreements between sinners – break.

Relative to marriage, the Bible says little about divorce. But one thing is manifestly clear: God hates divorce.¹ And because He hates it, so do we. We hate the pain divorce causes. We hate the brokenness and family destruction it wreaks. We hate the shame, humiliation, sense of loss and feelings of failure. We hate the resultant anger and bitterness. We hate the tarnished Christian witness it causes. We hate the industry and culture that make divorce so common and inexpensive, and marriage, so cheap. We hate divorce because it robs God of glory that otherwise would redound to Him because marriage by design reflects the beauty of

¹ Malachi 2:16.

His holiness. We must never revel in any divorce, for God designed that marriage should be a lifelong relationship portraying Him. God *hates* divorce, and so must we.

Yet amazingly, we read in His Word that God – the very One who gave marriage, the One who epitomizes faithfulness and fidelity, the One who suffered long in His relationship with a backsliding, idolatrous people, the One who Himself hates divorce – divorced Israel because of her wanton unfaithfulness.²

MARITAL OBLIGATIONS

No discussion of divorce in its biblical context would be complete without first a review of biblical obligations in the marriage covenant.

Not surprisingly, the earliest biblical mention of marriage requirements coincides with the creation of the institution. Here Moses pens a verse still quoted in most wedding ceremonies today: “*Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh*” (Genesis 2:24). Three clear obligations are found in this single sentence: man is to form and become a provider for a unique family unit (*leave his father and mother*), to be faithful (*cleave*) to his wife, and together with her to become one in intimacy (*be one flesh*).

The Law says of a husband that his wife’s “*food, her raiment, and her duty of marriage, shall be not diminish*” (Exodus 21:10). Moses gives these stipulations in the specific context of slavery and polygamy, but we accept their broader application since they in essence restate the Genesis requirements: a man must provide necessary sustenance, clothing and loving faithfulness for his wife.

The expressive language Ezekiel uses to describe God’s having fulfilled His marital obligations to Israel (16:8-14) is remarkably similar:

⁸Now when I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, behold, thy time was the time of love; and I spread my skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness: yea, I swore unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the Lord GOD, and thou becamest mine. ⁹Then washed I thee with water; yea, I thoroughly washed away thy blood from thee, and I anointed thee with oil. ¹⁰I clothed thee also with brodered work, and shod thee with badgers’ skin, and I girded thee about with fine linen, and I covered thee with silk. ¹¹I decked thee also with ornaments, and I put bracelets upon thy hands, and a chain on thy neck. ¹²And I put a jewel on thy forehead, and earrings in thine ears, and a beautiful crown upon thine head. ¹³Thus wast thou decked with gold and silver; and thy raiment was of fine linen, and silk, and brodered work; thou didst eat fine flour, and honey, and oil: and thou wast exceeding beautiful, and thou didst prosper into a kingdom. ¹⁴And thy renown went forth among the heathen for thy beauty: for it was perfect through my comeliness, which I had put upon thee, saith the Lord GOD.

Though this language is far more poetic and intimate than the Genesis and Exodus accounts, the message is unchanged: God faithfully nourishes, cherishes, and provides for His Bride. And this patterns for us our marital relationships, for we are created in His image.

² Jeremiah 3:6-11. To suggest that God’s divorcing Israel establishes a precedent or serves as a blanket endorsement for automatic divorce because of adultery would be an error. Though other passages are clear in permitting divorce in such cases, the emphasis here is not quick divorce, but rather longsuffering and forgiveness (Israel was not a one-time offender). Have we the *right* to seek a divorce because of a spouse’s adulterous practices? Yes, a covenant stipulation (faithfulness) has been broken. So we may, just as eagerly as God, put away a spouse – after our exercise of the same degree of forgiveness and longsuffering as He.

The Apostle Paul has much to say about marital responsibilities. Perhaps his most familiar treatise on the subject is Ephesians 5, where he instructs believers to submit “*one to another in the fear of God*” (v 21). He calls specifically on husbands and wives to recognize the needs of and defer to the other. To wives, he says to

22...submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord.... 24Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing.

And to husbands, he writes,

25...love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it.... 28So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. 29For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church.... 33Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself....

Paul’s enjoinder of this mutual submission encompasses much,³ but his instructions might well be encapsulated in language similar to the Genesis and Exodus renderings: *husbands and wives should nourish, cherish and serve one another in love and complementary subjection.*

In the seventh chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul addresses an issue where celibacy had been accorded by some in the church a superior status to marriage. He took occasion in his response to offer commentary on the *duty of marriage* obligation given in Exodus 21: “*Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence,*” he writes in v 3, “*and likewise also the wife unto the husband.*” And in v 5 he continues, “*Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer....*” Because he understood *duty of marriage* as a basic marital obligation and privilege, Paul here underscores the Exodus 21 injunction: *don’t withhold conjugal affections from one another.*

³ Paul paints marriage as illustrative of the relationship between Christ and His Bride. God designed a structure for marriage (v 23) that reflects this important relationship: “*the husband is head of the wife, even as Christ is head of the church.*” The way marriage partners interact is ultimately a statement of theology, for marriage by design models who God is, who His Bride is, and what God is doing with her in the world.

Paul calls wives to be subject to their husbands out of reverence for Christ: to submit “*as unto the Lord.*” When the wife submits, she fills her husband’s innate need for respect. Subjecting to another requires humility and restraint, for our human pride yearns to be first and greatest. It requires maturity, character, and faith in the wisdom of the One who requires it. As the church is subject to Christ, so is the wife to her husband.

Submission to anyone is difficult, but the wife can more easily and eagerly submit when her husband’s will is conformed to Christ’s. Accordingly, Paul requires husbands to love their wives “*as Christ also loved the church and gave himself for it.*” Jesus relinquished His divine place and power in heaven to become a man and to devote Himself wholly to – even die for – His Bride. The husband must give up as driving motivations his own aspirations, desires and pleasures. He must give up *himself*, and embrace his wife as his treasure (secondary to God, of course). A husband is one with his wife, and should treat her as his own body. He must attend to her, touch her gently and carefully. He must consider her at all times and seek for her healing when she is sick or wounded. And in loving his wife as commanded, a husband meets her intrinsic need for emotional fulfillment.

Christ does not love the church because she is lovable or lovely, but rather to make her loveable and lovely. His love is not determined by what the church deserves, but by what He is – by His nature and His character, by His purpose for establishing the relationship between His only Son and His redeemed. Christ loves the church in order to make her holy. And the husband’s Christ-like love sanctifies his wife, fostering their growth together in godliness.

No husband is Christ. But a husband can be in Christ and can have Christ in him. And he is enjoined to love his wife “*as Christ also loved the church and gave himself for it.*”

In Romans 7:1-6, Paul uses marriage (and especially the termination of the contract by the death of one spouse) to powerfully illustrate our death to the Law and union with Christ. He draws from marriage a fact that his readers would clearly grasp (v 1) – that the marriage contract is a lifelong agreement (v 2): “*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.*” Paul repeats this covenant requirement in 1 Corinthians 7:39, where he writes, “*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.*”

It is in 1 Timothy 5:8 that Paul offers what is perhaps his most poignant commentary on familial obligations: “*But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.*” Though this teaching is couched specifically within the context of special provision for widows, we also know that Paul accepted and taught the marital obligations found in the Torah. Since he understood that a husband’s primary domestic obligation was to his wife (even before his widowed mother), we suggest that Paul here tacitly reaffirms the marital obligation to *provide*.

It is a marvelous grace that He who gave marriage has providentially preserved these biblical covenantal requirements through history, even down to our own traditional American marriage vows – “to love, honor and cherish until death.” We accept these clearly defined stipulations as binding contractual obligations enjoined on all who unite in marriage.

BIBLICAL DIVORCE

Marriage is a legal covenant where a man and a woman promise to honor certain contractual obligations. As for any legal contract, failure to keep covenant stipulations is considered breach; remedy for breach is the option to terminate the contract. In the context of marriage, contract termination is called *divorce*.

The concept of divorce is biblical: the Bible recognizes and regulates it. That the Bible refers to divorce is acknowledgement that marital relationships did not mystically escape man’s fallen condition. Marriage involves parties plagued by sin; it is thus subject to weakness and brokenness. In fact, it is only within the context of a fallen world that a discussion of broken marriage is necessary.

We saw earlier that Moses in Exodus 21:10 names three specific marital obligations for a husband: to provide his wife’s “*food, her raiment, and her duty of marriage.*” He continues in v 11 that if a husband deliberately fails to keep these covenantal stipulations – “*if he do not these three unto her*” – the injured wife has sufficient grounds to “*go out free without money.*” Because her husband has breached the marriage covenant, his wife is released (freed) from the legal bond. And as the injured party, Moses says, she is under no obligation to repay her dowry.

This passage deals with remedy for failure to honor any covenantal stipulation. Other passages describe specific violations. In Deuteronomy 24:1, for instance, Moses introduces the giving of a *bill of divorcement* (which we today would describe as *filing for divorce*):

When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house.

Moses here specifically names the wife’s *uncleanness* as the covenantal violation justifying a husband’s *sending out* his wife.

It was precisely on this point of law that the Pharisees sought to trap Jesus in Matthew 19 when they “*came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?*”⁴ The wording of their question reveals an important historical context: the widespread popularity in the Jewish culture of divorce for “any cause whatsoever.”⁵ Divorce had become so common, and the law, so trivialized, that bills of divorce were being sought and granted with little regard for legal marital obligations.

With which Pharisaic school of thought would Jesus side? Would He agree with Rabbi Hillel and sanction this newer *divorce on demand*, or with Shammai, who taught the stricter, traditional interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1? As was often the case, Jesus sided with neither, answering instead in a way to be true only to Himself: He quoted the Genesis account of the giving of marriage, then added, “*What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder*” (v 6). His response reminded the Pharisees that marriage was from the beginning an institution whose permanence was designed to symbolize the relationship between God and His people. To focus on divorce, He says, is to miss the point entirely, for to break (or *sunder*) a marriage compromises the portrayal of this magnificent design.

But they pushed the point further in v 7: “*Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?*” Verses 8 and 9 record His response:

⁸... Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so. ⁹And 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.

Jesus corrects the Pharisees’ assertion that Moses gave a command. Moses *allowed* (or *suffered*) divorce, He says. And the reason is “*because of the hardness of your hearts*” – your unwillingness to consider the spirit of the Law as greater than the letter, your unwillingness to demonstrate mercy, unwillingness to consider others better than yourselves, unwillingness to be subject to, nourish and cherish one another. Then in His *fornication exception* clause, Jesus rehearses Moses’ *uncleaness* provision. He does not say here, as some have suggested, that *only* fornication justifies divorce. But as He is responding to the Pharisees’ specific historical reference (Deuteronomy 24:1), Jesus is in effect saying that Moses *in this passage* gives fornication as a biblical ground for divorce.⁶

⁴ This event is also recorded in Mark 10:2-12 and Luke 16:14-18.

⁵ Josephus, Flavius. *The Works of Josephus* (Translated by William Whiston, A.M.) Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1987. *The Antiquities of the Jews, Book 4, Chapter 8, §23 (253)*, p120. The Pharisees were intimately familiar with the two contemporary, competing rabbinic schools of thought concerning Moses’ use of *uncleaness* in Deuteronomy 24:1. The School of Shammai taught that a man could divorce his wife for “a matter of indecency;” the School of Hillel, on the other hand, understood the verse to allow divorce for “any cause whatsoever.” Neither school taught that biblical justification for divorce was limited to this single cause; both understood Exodus 21:10-11 to allow divorce for a stubborn, unrepentant refusal to provide food, clothing, and/or conjugal privileges.

⁶ To base an interpretation of any passage of Scripture solely on a cursory reading will often lead to the inescapable conclusion that passages contradict – a notion we flatly and strongly reject. Our study is no different in this regard. For instance, to maintain strict linguistic rigor puts Matthew 19:9 (marriage following divorce *except for fornication* is adultery) directly at odds with Luke 16:18 (marriage following divorce without exception is adultery) and with 1 Corinthians 7:15 (a believer is not under bondage if an unbelieving spouse departs). We must not lift such passages from their contexts to establish or strengthen any particular viewpoint; we must instead consider them holistically.

How, then, might we rationalize the apparent conflicts in the synoptic references to Deuteronomy 24? Why is the *fornication exception* sometimes included, and other times omitted? There are probably two reasons. First, the gospels are eyewitness accounts, where each author brings to bear his own personality, experience and perspective. Mark, for instance, is almost universally more abbreviated than Matthew. Second, the writers all bring differing assumptions about

The Apostle Paul clearly understood that fornication was not the only biblical ground for divorce, for he writes (1 Corinthians 7:15) specifically in the context of unequally-yoked marriages (where one spouse is a believer but the other is not) that “*if the unbelieving depart, let him depart.*” Paul says that if an unbelieving spouse is committed to a marriage, then the couple should by all means honor their vows, “*for the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband*” (v 14). But if the unbelieving spouse makes war with the believer over the marriage, Paul advises to let him depart peacefully, for the believer’s Christ-like response in the face of this difficulty could be the vehicle God uses to “*save thy husband... or thy wife*” (v 16). Paul explicitly states (v 15) that the believing spouse is free to marry: “*A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases....*”⁷

Paul later magnifies his understanding of *unbeliever* when, to his young protégé Timothy, he writes that “*if any provide not for his own... he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel*” (1 Timothy 5:8). Paul here unequivocally equates failure to provide with unbelief. Thus, one who claims to be a believer yet neglects (fails to provide for) his spouse, Paul would name an *unbeliever*, and would doubtless advise to “*let him depart.*” In Paul’s understanding, spousal neglect characterizes unbelief.

So what is biblical divorce? Technically, we’ve seen only two New Testament justifications for divorce explicitly named: fornication and desertion (or neglect). But we think that to acknowledge only specifically named justifications wrongly shifts the focus from the biblical emphasis of what marriage should be, to law-keeping with keen, technical, Pharisaical precision.

Since Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 offers commentary without disclaimer on Exodus 21, he evidently endorses divorce as Moses’ legal remedy for failure to honor the covenantal obligations enjoined on married persons. We agree: the stubborn, deliberate, unrepentant failure to keep any biblically-defined marital covenant stipulation constitutes breach of contract and gives the injured party the right – though not the requirement –

what their readers would understand. Clearly, both Mark and Luke assume that their readers are intimately familiar with the Law’s specific provisions and would already accept Moses’ exception for *uncleaness*.

⁷ There are two notes of contextual interest regarding Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. First, the church was situated in the midst of a Greco-Roman society where *Walk Out* divorce had become common. This was similar to the popular *Any Cause Whatsoever* divorce in Jewish culture, but without the requirement of a legal document. If a spouse decided that he wanted out of a marriage, he could simply walk out – this was considered a valid Roman divorce. Even some of Paul’s language is suggestive of his acknowledging this cultural phenomenon (consider, especially, his repetitive use of *depart*). At the surface, one might consider this particularly loose socially, but in reality it was a progressive step forward for women’s rights. In most Eastern cultures, a wife was considered forever bound to her husband (even if he abandoned her to marry another), for he could legally return at any time – even years later – and reclaim her.

Second, the brethren at Corinth had written Paul about the subject of celibacy, evidently because they believed it superior to marriage. Paul’s entire seventh chapter is specifically dedicated to this issue. Consistent with the Master’s teaching in Matthew 19:11-12, Paul concedes that celibacy is good, but only for those to whom it is given. He comments briefly (from Exodus 21) on conjugal privileges as obligatory, then offers marriage-related instruction to five specific groups based on marital status: first, the *unmarried and widows* (vv 8 and 9); then the *married* – first the equally yoked (vv 10 and 11), then the *rest* (vv 12-16); and finally, the never-before-married *virgins* – first the unattached (vv 25-35), then the betrothed (vv 36-38). Though Paul never addresses *divorced* persons as an explicit category, they likely fall within the first (*unmarried and widows*), which might instead be dubbed the *previously-married unmarried*. This position is strengthened by Paul’s separately and explicitly addressing the *never-before-married* in vv 25-38. In his use of *unmarried*, Paul probably assumed that since divorce (regardless of the reason) terminates the marriage contract, his readers would have understood that those who are divorced are simply unmarried [again]. So *unmarried* in vv 8 and 9 probably refers *specifically* to divorced persons. And since Paul is addressing the church at Corinth, we also take it that these divorced persons were members of the body.

to end a marriage. It is also clear that but for the failure to honor covenantal obligations, the breaking of a marriage is considered sinful.⁸

PAUL'S PLEA FOR MARITAL PERSEVERANCE

For Christian married couples who are separated or are considering divorce, Paul exhorts longsuffering and perseverance (1 Corinthians 7:10-11):

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

Paul here appeals for lifelong permanence in marriage and for dedicated effort toward reconciliation. Marriage always requires effort, but it is especially critical that no effort is spared to preserve Christian marriages. Married believers should always be mindful of what their relationship portrays and the gravity of their marriage vows. In the formation of a marriage covenant, solemn promises to “love, honor and cherish until death” are exchanged. Breaking of vows is a serious issue of morality, character and integrity, particularly for believers, who are called to stand by their word.⁹ Especially for Christian couples, marriage must be accorded esteem far above the rights of individuals.

If a couple does separate, Paul says, each should remain single so long as there is *any* hope for reconciliation. To the Romans Paul writes that “*If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men*” (12:18). As much as is humanly possible, estranged Christian spouses should strive for relational reconciliation. They should acknowledge, seek forgiveness for, and prayerfully repent of all relational failures, naming them as specifically as possible. And they should extend complete forgiveness to their spouse.

David writes in Psalm 51:17 that “*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.*” To wade through marital difficulty with deep grief, humility and forgiveness is a very different thing than to proudly strut through it with bitterness, anger and self-justification. The former postures keep open the door for potential reconciliation; the latter will almost certainly close the door for relational healing, form deep scars, and compromise Christian witness.

God is manifestly on display in Christian marriages; His reputation and the credibility of Christian witness are at stake. So for any who find themselves in difficult marital straits, we with Paul urge “*your patient continuance in well doing*” (Romans 2:7), knowing that “*if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it*” (Romans 8:25).¹⁰

DIVORCE AND THE CHURCH

It should be no surprise that the church has struggled with divorce, or that we find no clear, unambiguous tradition or historical consensus. When we consider the complexities of marital relationships, the potential for strife when sinful beings unite, the desire of the church to protect high standards of moral conduct, the conviction that we should treat erring members with grace, and the delight of the Evil One to incite trouble, we should naturally expect some degree of difficulty and misunderstanding.

⁸ We hereafter refer to *sinful divorce* as a shorthand equivalent of *divorce without biblical grounds*.

⁹ Ecclesiastes 5:4-7; Matthew 5:33-37.

¹⁰ For additional encouragement, see also Romans 5:3-4, 12:9-14; 2 Thessalonians 1:2-4; Hebrews 10:35-36; James 1:3-4, 5:10-11; 1 Peter 2:19-20; 2 Peter 1:5-8.

Divorce is a real phenomenon with real consequences. Though the word itself connotes finality, divorce is in reality a process that begins with a failing marital relationship and continues long after the legal event. Divorce radically alters the family landscape; it creates tense conflicts and divided loyalties; it forces economic realignment; it causes the loss of children's security, identity and protection. For those who are touched by this cancer – even peripherally – the impact is long-lasting and cumulative.

These are harsh realities. How can the church deal lovingly and redemptively with the issue, and with the injured and affected? John's Gospel affords us remarkable insights into God's attitude toward those who have sinned in adultery and divorce.

The woman "*taken in adultery, in the very act*" (John 8:1-11) faced a harsh reality of her own: she was literally a stone's throw from death. The Law condemned her;¹¹ there was no question of her guilt, and there was no escaping her imminent demise. The scribes and Pharisees brought her before Jesus to lay a trap for Him, and mockingly asked His judgment. Pressed for an answer, He wisely spoke words that both avoided the snare (condemning neither the Law nor the guilty) and condemned the accusers (v 7): "*He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.*" One by one the accusers dropped their stones and walked away, "*convicted by their own conscience*" (v 9). There was of course one present yet qualified to cast a stone, but in a generous display of mercy, He did not: "*Neither do I condemn thee,*" Jesus told her (v 11); "*go, and sin no more.*"

Jesus' dialogue with the woman at the well (John 4) is another magnanimous display. Jesus purposed to have an encounter with this woman precisely to spotlight His mercy against the backdrop of her sinful past (and present). This Samaritan woman was a social outcast; she had had five husbands,¹² and was currently living with a man who was not her husband. She was ashamed to be seen in public because of her reputation; she doubtless felt the stares and heard the whispers when others saw her. So rather than filling her pots at the usual gathering times, she came at noon in the heat of the day to avoid the public humiliation. Yet Jesus treated her with loving compassion, and immediately she became a great witness for Him – she spoke of Him to the "*men of the city,*" and "*many... of that city believed on him*" because of her testimony. And to be certain His disciples had not missed the message, Jesus revealed His intent in vv 31-38 – to demonstrate that no sinner was so vile as to be considered unworthy of the harvest.

Jesus never condones sin; He never excuses it. In fact, He calls believers to a higher standard even than the Law.¹³ The church is a showcase for the glory of a God whose holiness is perfect in every aspect. Can a God whose own character defines justice dispense mercy? Can a God whose judgments are unsearchable make room for grace? Yes! These encounters poignantly demonstrate the great love and forgiveness the Master has for lawbreakers. God perfectly upholds the Law and perfectly forgives sinners, all the while perfectly maintaining His integrity; His perfect holiness is no obstacle for His infinite mercy. He demands righteousness and obedience, yet freely dispenses mercy and grace; He hates wickedness, yet loves the unlovely.

¹¹ Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:21-22.

¹² Though the text technically does not say that she was *divorced* five times, we believe this is the only reasonable conclusion. To have been widowed five times would have carried no shame for her, and would certainly have undermined Jesus' obvious intent to demonstrate mercy to the undeserving. Jesus purposed to meet *this* woman because she was an obvious example of one guilty – *really* guilty – under the law.

¹³ Matthew 5:20-48, from the Sermon on the Mount.

A Balanced, Biblical Response

It is precisely this balance that the church must seek to mirror: to love biblical truth and to love mercy. These principles must coexist in God's church without compromise, for it is here that *"Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other"* (Psalm 85:10). The most loving response that the church can offer is to reflect Christ's own: to preach truth about marriage and divorce, all the while coming alongside the injured, loving them, binding their wounds, offering support, and fostering a spirit of repentance. To respond only with judgment or only with compassion is not a balanced, biblical response.

The church's response should spotlight both truth and mercy. On the one side, the church should affirm, uphold and strengthen the institution; on the other, she must minister to the wounded. One side is proactive; the other, reactive.

First, the church should faithfully preach the truth about marriage and divorce: that marriage dramatically portrays the loving, nurturing relationship of a faithful, covenant-keeping Bridegroom, and that divorce compromises this portrayal and must never be characterized as good. The church should glory in the Christ that marriage represents, should underscore the gravity of marriage vows, and should uphold the value of an untarnished Christian witness. Regular preaching should highlight God's opposition to divorce and Jesus' teaching of marriage as a lifelong commitment, but the ministry of the Word should extend beyond pulpit teaching. The church should draw from her various gifts to provide biblical counseling for engaged couples, and ongoing marriage education and biblical counseling for married couples and their families. Frequent in-home fellowship should model the virtues of Christian marriage to singles and other married couples. Members should eagerly avail themselves of all such opportunities to the glory of Christ for the strengthening of marriage.

On the other hand, the church must realize and react to the ugly realities of divorce. She must embrace Jesus' teaching that *"They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick"* (Mark 2:17a). The church must be a redemptive agent of Christ to minister to her members in all their needs, including divorce. Those affected by divorce often feel unsupported, misunderstood, ashamed and rejected. The church should respond with support, understanding, compassion and acceptance. She should come alongside the wounded to cleanse the hurt, protect from infection and facilitate healing. The church should for the wounded be the practical expression of Jesus' healing touch, lending an understanding ear, a compassionate shoulder and practical helps. She should be a *balm in Gilead*.¹⁴

An Unbalanced, Unbiblical Response

Regardless how uncomfortable or ill-equipped to forge an appropriate, loving response, the church must never pretend that there is no crisis, and must never respond in awkward, stilted silence. Consider the shameful state befalling Israel when she idly sat by as the Chaldeans ravaged the land:

¹⁵We looked for peace, but no good came; and for a time of health, and behold trouble! ...¹⁹Behold the voice of the cry of the daughter of my people...: Is not the LORD in Zion? is not her king in her? Why have they provoked me to

¹⁴ Faithful churches also demonstrate love in occasional reproofs, admonitions, and other acts of discipline, which we affirm as biblical (Matthew 18:15-20; John 20:19-23; 1 Corinthians 5; 2 Corinthians 6:5-11; Galatians 6:1-5). For tender-spirited congregations, any needful exercise of church discipline is lamentable, dispensed with regret, and aimed toward fostering a spirit of repentance and regaining the erring member.

anger...? ²¹For the hurt of the daughter of my people am I hurt... astonishment hath taken hold on me. ²²Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there? why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?

These words from Jeremiah 8 should be a grave warning. Is the church sitting idly by as divorce ravages the Kingdom? Do we await mystical healing for those affected by divorce? Are we crying “*Peace, peace; when there is no peace*” (8:11)? The church must awaken to the issue of divorce, deal redemptively with it (and its offshoots), and be the practical expression of the “*balm in Gilead*.”

When she *has* acknowledged divorce, the church’s response has seldom been redemptive. Too often our well-intentioned attempts to be loyal to biblical understandings have led to condemnation and rejection. The church has no doubt re-opened wounds by demonstrating reactions of embarrassment and disapproval. She has become an investigative agency to assign guilt in the breaking of marriage.¹⁵ She has harshly administered discipline, considering divorce and adultery as especially black sins.¹⁶ She has forbidden marriage to those sinfully divorced.¹⁷ She has required the breaking of marriage to facilitate reconciliation between former spouses.¹⁸ She has forced spouses into abusive, dangerous situations.¹⁹ And

¹⁵ This has seen predictable evolution. Years ago, the church’s position on divorce (simply stated as *disallowed except for adultery*) was relatively easy to administer. Once adultery was legally established, the church could recognize the guilt assessment without having to become sullied in the details. But as American social mores shifted and adultery became decriminalized, no-fault divorce gained prominence. Churches who felt the need to determine guilt, then, were forced into the distasteful position of probing marital failures. Many congregations naturally felt uncomfortable in assuming this investigative role, so the emphasis shifted to deferring any discipline until one of the parties [re]married: the spouse who first married became the guilty party (though this may not have been the case morally).

¹⁶ Though the church does have the right to determine whether certain sins carry more public reproach than others, she must never judge that sinful divorce is more egregious than any other, or that it is unforgivable. But for “*blasphemy against the Holy Ghost*” (Matthew 12:31), sin should be considered sin.

¹⁷ It is not uncommon for a church to advise a divorced member that to [re]marry is incompatible with continued church membership. This stance comes from a misunderstanding of Paul’s words to the church at Corinth, where he says, “*Let not the wife depart from her husband: But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried...*” (1 Corinthians 7:10b-11a). These words are mistaken as Paul’s command for permanent celibacy after divorce.

But Paul most certainly did not believe in required celibacy; in fact, his entire seventh chapter was a response to this specific error. Some at Corinth were teaching that celibacy was superior to marriage (v 1). Paul conceded in his response that celibacy is good (as it facilitates single-minded devotion to God), but only for those who have the gift.

Evidently, this mistaken notion is one where Satan finds an easy foothold, for Paul had to address the same issue a second time. Paul instructs Timothy (whom he had sent to Ephesus to combat false teaching) on the nature of Christian ministry in the face of opposition and heresy (1 Timothy 4):

¹Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; ²Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; ³Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth.

Paul minces no words, calling the church’s “*Forbidding to marry*” a “*doctrine of devils*,” and suggesting that those who give ear to it are “*departing from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits*,” and “*speaking lies in hypocrisy*.”

Paul’s clear, strong words should alone be convincing, but logic also cries against forced celibacy. God’s Word teaches us that it is *not* good that man should be alone (Genesis 2:18), that *not* all men have the gift of celibacy (Matthew 19:11-12; 1 Corinthians 7:2), and that it is *better to marry* than to burn (1 Corinthians 7:9). For the church to forbid marriage contradicts all three teachings, in effect presuming that it *is* good that man should be alone, that all men *do* have the gift of celibacy, and that it is *better to burn* than to marry.

So while she may counsel, advise or plead with individuals not to enter into a particular marriage (or a particular *type* of marriage, as in 2 Corinthians 6:14), and while she may find it necessary to discipline a member who hard-heartedly refuses biblical counsel, the church has no biblical foundation to forbid marriage.

¹⁸ Practically speaking, there is no undoing of a marriage which follows a sinful divorce. To divorce a second spouse in order to return to a first, destroys a second marriage and violates the clear biblical injunction against this practice (Moses calls this “*abomination before the LORD*” in Deuteronomy 24:4). What the church should expect in this situation is

she has pre-screened potential members, advising them that because of their marital history, they are ineligible for church membership.²⁰

We decry these responses as unbalanced, unbiblical and inappropriate under any guise. The church must hate divorce, because God hates it and she should reflect every aspect of His perfections. But a harsh, disdainful response based on tradition above Scripture has no room in the church of Christ; she must never teach for doctrines the commandments of men.²¹

State of Adultery: A Common Misunderstanding²²

It is fairly commonly held in the broader context of our church community that sinfully divorced persons who marry²³ are living in a *state of adultery*. This tradition derives logically from three specific postulates:

1. God is Himself party to the marriage contract.
2. Sinful divorce does not end marriage.
3. The Bible narrowly construes adultery as acts of extramarital sex.

If God partners with a man and a woman in marriage, it follows logically that their union cannot be ended but for biblically-permissible reasons; that is, “in God’s eyes” and through His sanction, no marriage can end except by death or biblical divorce. And if following a sinful divorce (where the couple is presumed still to be married) there is ongoing intimate relationship in a new “marriage” (understood not to be a valid marriage), the only reasonable conclusion is that the parties involved are perpetually committing adulterous acts, or are *living in a state of adultery*.

If any of these presuppositions is false, though, the *state of adultery* position must be considered suspect.

The passage generally used to support the position that God partners with couples in marriage, is Matthew 19:6b: “*What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.*” The thinking is generally two-pronged. First, “*God hath joined together*” is read as “*God hath joined together with*” a couple or “*God hath joined together in*” a marriage. To append a preposition to the original rendering substantially alters the meaning. To say that God *joins together* a man and a woman is akin to saying that an artist joins together tiles to create a mosaic; the artist is neither joined together *with* the tiles, nor is *in* the mosaic.

Second, “*let not man put asunder*” is often misread as “*man cannot put asunder.*” But these words are a command, not a statement of finality or fact. Marriage reflects something God prizes; Jesus therefore commands us not to break them. Juxtapose this command with any of the Ten Commandments. For instance, does “*Thou shalt not kill*” mean that man cannot kill? No, we know that man can murder, for we read of it every day. Does having the clear injunction against murder mean that murdered persons are any less dead? Of course not.

genuine repentance for a spouse’s part in the sundering of marriage, and wholehearted commitment to honoring God in the new marriage.

¹⁹ We consider abuse and endangerment as manifest violations of Paul’s clear marital injunctions to love as Christ loved, to nourish and to cherish (Ephesians 5:21-33).

²⁰ The Bible indicates that belief evidenced by a changed heart is the qualification for baptism (Luke 3:12-15; Acts 2:38; 8:12; 8:36-37, 18:8; 19:4-5; Galatians 3:27). Jesus teaches His disciples (John 4) that no repentant sinner should be considered ineligible for harvest. No penitent’s past should be at issue; only the manifestation of the Spirit of Christ.

²¹ Isaiah 29:13; Matthew 15:7-9; Mark 7:6-8; Titus 1:14.

²² This position merits discussion because the church’s tradition (right or wrong) influences her response to divorce. It is easy to imagine how this *specific* position could be largely responsible for the erosion of the church’s biblical response to divorce.

²³ According to Jesus, to marry following a sinful divorce is *adultery* (Matthew 5:32, 19:9; Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18).

And that we are commanded not to break marriage similarly cannot be taken as a statement that divorce does not occur, or that the pain left in its wake is imagined.

If God joins with a couple in a marriage, then there is a threefold union. Yet right in the context of His giving the “*let not man put asunder*” command, Jesus clearly indicates that this is not the case. The fuller context (vv 4-6) reads:

⁴And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, ⁵And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? ⁶Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.

Jesus of course is quoting from Genesis 2, where it is overtly obvious that there are two parties in a marriage. The word *twain* used in vv 5 and 6 is archaic English for *two*: the *two*, He says – not the three – shall be one.

The second premise in the *state of adultery* construct is that sinful divorce does not end marriage. But by His own testimony, Jesus recognizes the reality of divorce and acknowledges that divorce does end marriage, even when the divorce is sinful. Consider again the Master’s words in Matthew 19:9: “*Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery....*” Jesus’ use of the phrase “*and shall marry another*” presupposes that the prior marriage (from which the husband has “*put away his wife*”) has ended; were this not the case, Jesus could not have spoken of the second marriage as *marriage* (it would have been adultery only).²⁴

Marriage is a contract between two people. Divorce is a severing (or sundering) of that contract – it ends a marriage. The covenant bond between married people is broken in divorce; regardless whether a marriage is broken sinfully, it is nonetheless ended.²⁵

Finally, those who take the *state of adultery* position generally hold that it is acts of sex which characterize the adultery Jesus condemns in Matthew 19 (et al.). While it is certainly true that *adultery* describes extramarital sexual intimacy, this is evidently not the case in the context of Jesus’ remarks: “*Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery....*” What Jesus characterizes as *adultery* here is unrelated to an act of sex; it is instead simply marriage following a sinful divorce. That is, it is in the act of marrying, not in the ensuing conjugal relations between a husband and wife that adultery occurs in this context.

Paul alludes to the same understanding when he comments as an aside in Romans 7:3 that if a woman marries another while her husband is alive,²⁶ then “*she shall be called an adulteress.*” That is, the sin she has committed (marrying while she has a living husband) has a label: *adultery*.

In practical terms, we see this no differently than the branding as *sinner* one who commits sin. One who murders, for instance, is forever branded *murderer*, though to murder does not put one into a *state* of murder.

²⁴ Comparable language is found in Matthew 5:32, Matthew 19:9, Mark 10:11-12 and Luke 16:18.

²⁵ Interestingly, the Bible never refers to marriage following divorce – even sinful divorce – as anything other than *marriage*. We never see *remarriage*, for instance, which might have been taken to suggest that those who marry following divorce are to be accorded second-class status. Marriage is marriage, regardless whether it follows divorce: vows are exchanged, a covenant is formed, and an opportunity to testify of Christ’s unfailing love is established.

²⁶ There is some question as to whether the woman in Paul’s hypothetical illustration is divorced or a polygamist, or even whether her marrying is actually marriage (the passage has also been translated *lives with another while married*), but these matter little in light of his larger point.

Similarly, one who lies is called a *liar*; one who steals, a *thief*; one who commits adultery (whether once or repeatedly, whether in extramarital sex or in marrying a sinfully divorced person), an *adulterer* (or *adulteress*).

As we have seen, the *state of adultery* position rests firmly on three presuppositions and is the only logical conclusion one can reach given that the premises are true. But as we have also seen, all three are false. Therefore, though it is fairly commonly held in our tradition, we can find neither biblical nor logical support for a *state of adultery* position and must conclude that it is theologically untenable.

CONCLUSIONS

Divorce and [re]marriage will always be difficult issues – especially for the persons involved, but also for the community of believers. The protracted Primitive Baptist journey to this point has certainly had its difficulties and pain. The issue reminds us that our duty to apply the Word in all its fullness to our lives and relationships will never be fully realized in time. Yet the Holy Spirit is faithful to continually reveal to us more of Christ, to continually mold us to His image, and to continually lead us toward a maturity of understanding of God’s truth and grace.

1. Marriage is designed to reflect the beauty of God’s unending, faithful love for His people. Any sundering of marriage compromises this design and tarnishes our Christian witness.
2. The marriage covenant is a contract between two persons (a man and a woman), obligating each to “love, honor and cherish” the other until death.
3. Deliberate failure to honor biblical marital covenantal obligations provides sufficient grounds for (but does not require) divorce.
4. Divorce but for failure to honor marital obligations is sinful.
5. Every married couple should strive for lifelong permanence in their marital relationship. Believers in particular should persevere through difficulties and, if separated or considering divorce, should passionately pursue reconciliation.
6. Regardless whether sinful, divorce terminates the marriage contract.
7. The church’s loving response to divorce should be two-pronged, imitating God’s own love of truth and mercy; she should preach the truth about marriage (because marriage preaches the truth about God), all the while tenderly ministering to the wounded.
8. In the administering of discipline (which is entirely within the purview of the local church), sinful divorce and adultery should be considered no different than other sins. Excepting blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, all sin is covered by the blood of the Lamb and can be forgiven by the church.
9. While she may lend it considerable credence, the church must not elevate tradition above Scripture.