

**What The Church
Has Forgotten
About**

DIVORCE

By

Allon Maxwell

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INTRODUCTION

As recently as a generation ago, the church was still largely faithful to the teaching of its risen Lord on the subject of divorce. Of course, history records that there always have been ministers and churches willing to sell their souls for the influential few who could guarantee some coveted privilege or protection. However, in most circles, divorce and remarriage was regarded as a scandal, not to be tolerated amongst the faithful.

Today the situation has changed alarmingly. If one minister counsels against divorce, or refuses to remarry the divorced, it is a simple matter to shop around for another who will condone it. Sadly, it seems that the latter class now comprises the majority.

This study has been undertaken with much prayer and soul searching by one who has found it necessary to humble himself before God, in repentance for past wrong counsel given to those involved in divorce and remarriage.

It contains some hard sayings, especially for those whose ignorance (or wilfulness) has already led them into sin. For the church at large, it is unlikely to be popular. It presents a facet of sacrificial obedience which will be understood only by those who know the real meaning of taking up a cross to follow Jesus.

For those who do agree with the conclusions of this study, there is a challenge to confess Jesus before men, in this, as much as in all other aspects of the new life which results from following him.

Those who need to hear the truth can only hear it from those who know the truth and love them enough to tell them.

The goal is their salvation.

Chapter 1

THE MARRIAGE COVENANT

Marriage is God's creation not man's. No study of what the Bible teaches about divorce can reach a right conclusion unless we first understand God's view of marriage.

In the Garden of Eden, Eve was God's special gift to Adam, to provide companionship and help. They were joined in a dependant relationship in which their union was to be so complete that, in God's sight, they were no longer two, but one.

In answer to questions about divorce, Jesus restated his Father's purpose for marriage, and used that simple creation story to reject any human authority to separate a union joined by God.

"What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder." (Matt. 19:6)

The Christian marriage covenant is based on promises which express the purpose for which marriage was given:

- Unconditional love is the first promise. The two partners commit themselves to each other, to live together with respect and care in all possible situations, whether in prosperity or poverty, sickness or health, good times or bad.
- It is a covenant which promises that each partner will be faithful in a relationship which excludes all others.
- It binds the partners irrevocably to each other for life. There is no room for a change of heart. Only the death of one party can end the obligation of the other.
- It is a covenant witnessed and sealed by God.

Neither party's commitment to the marriage can be changed by the behaviour of the other. If one party sins against the other, the covenant provides a lifelong open door for repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation.

A further obligation is the sacrificial giving of each to the other in all situations. The love envisaged by the covenant and the extent of the sacrifice required is as great as Christ's love and sacrificial giving for his church. (Eph 5:25-28)

For those of us who are married, God says that our relationship with Him, and our place in eternity, depend on our continued faithfulness to our promises to our marriage partner, even when that is at the cost of our own comfort.

*"Who shall dwell on thy holy hill?
He who swears to his own hurt
and does not change."
(Psalm 15:1-4)*

Bible teaching about divorce has its roots firmly in the unchangeable obligations of the marriage covenant.

Chapter 2

GOD'S ATTITUDE TO DIVORCE

God's attitude to divorce is simply and plainly stated in Malachi 2:16:-

"I hate divorce" says the LORD, the God of Israel.

For the church, whose professed desire is to do the will of God, that ought to settle the question, once and for all. Sadly, that is no longer the case. The church today is tolerant and even supportive of divorce and remarriage, and wilfully goes its own way, just as the people of Israel were doing in Malachi's day. We need to hear again the prophet's call to repentance, and take to heart his warning of the consequences of failure to obey.

To those who have sinned in this way, Malachi says:-

- Relationship with God is broken. God will not respond to the pleading of those who are acting in unfaithfulness to their marriage covenant. Prayers, even when accompanied by tears, are useless while unfaithfulness continues. (Mal 2:13-16)
- In refusing to accept their offerings, God is acting as a faithful witness to the marriage covenant with the wife of their youth. It is his way of expressing his displeasure with what they have done. (Mal 2:13)
- Only through that union to which God is witness can children be born in the will of God. (Mal 2: 15) (It follows that children who are the fruit of a union made in breach of that first covenant are conceived in disobedience to the will of God.)
- The church which condones and supports those involved in this and other sins (even to the extent of saying that it is not a sin) wears God. (Mal 2:17)
- Those who swear falsely (which includes those who break their marriage covenant) are in danger of the same judgement as sorcerers, adulterers and oppressors. (Mal 3:5)
- *"The LORD does not change."* (Mal 3:6)

God held back judgement from Israel, only to make an urgent call to repentance for those still able to hear. That same call to repentance is as clearly spoken to us today, as it was to Israel when Malachi prophesied. For those who do respond, the same promise still thrills the heart which seeks after God:-

"They shall be mine, says the Lord of Hosts, my special possession on the day when I act, and I will spare them, as a man spares his son who serves him." (Mal 3:17)

Chapter 3

THE MARTYRDOM OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

John was imprisoned by Herod for saying that Herod's marriage to a divorced woman was not lawful. His martyrdom was directly the result of the hatred aroused in Herodias by his fearless condemnation of her adulterous union with Herod.

Was John wrong after all? Perhaps most have not thought the problem through to this point. However, it is true that, by attitude and action, those who condone divorce and remarriage are saying that John should have tolerated Herod's sin, instead of condemning it.

In our generation, the Herods are accepted into the fellowship of the church, and it is John, and others like him, who are accused of doing wrong when they speak out against "marriages" which Jesus called adulterous.

They are regarded as troublemakers. They are accused of being judgemental, intolerant, unforgiving, unloving and lacking in compassion. If that does not silence them, then they are either overpowered by democratic vote, or else avoided.

However, those who understand know that compassion cannot remain silent about a sin which is a part of the broad way leading to eternal separation from God. When the church strengthens the hand of adulterers instead of naming the sin for what it really is, there is again a desperate need for a voice crying in the wilderness to turn the hearts of the people back to their God.

Chapter 4

WHAT JESUS SAID

The teaching of Jesus is simply:-

"What God has joined together, man must not put asunder." (Matt. 19:6, Mark 10:9)

"Fornication" alone can provide a cause for divorce.

Any other divorce is merely a man-made dissolution of what God has joined together, and is forbidden by Jesus.

For those who do divorce and remarry, in forbidden circumstances, the meaning of what Jesus says cannot be mistaken.

- (a) A man who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery.
(Matt. 19:9, Mark 10:11, Luke 16:18)
- (b) A woman who divorces her husband and marries another commits adultery.
(Mark 10:12)
- (c) A man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.
(Matt. 5:32, Luke 16:18)
- (d) A man who divorces his wife is held responsible for her adultery, if she marries another. (Matt. 5:32)

The meaning of "fornication" has been the subject of controversy throughout the history of the church. Its meaning is discussed elsewhere in this book.

However, it is important that we do not allow that particular controversy to cloud our eyes to the vital issue that, on ALL OTHER GROUNDS, Jesus forbids divorce.

- It is clear that Jesus does not condone divorce for such things as desertion, cruelty, incompatibility, drunkenness, mental illness, mutual consent, etc. It is also clear that Jesus regards remarriage of either partner in any of those circumstances as adultery.

In answer to his disciple's questions about marriage, and speaking in the immediate context of his teaching about divorce, Jesus is quite clear that there will be situations in which obedience to the kingdom of heaven will require some men to choose celibacy. (Matt 19:10-12) Clearly, one application of this difficult teaching refers to those who must choose to forsake a relationship which the king defines as adultery.

This teaching by Jesus is far-reaching in its implications.

Jesus left no loopholes for those already divorced and remarried. Anyone hearing his teaching, who had already gone down that road, was left under conviction of adultery.

That is no different to any other sin committed in ignorance.

Light brings responsibility and demands change. The man who is living in adultery is no different to the bank robber or the drunkard or the homosexual. All are called to repentance and the changes in lifestyle that flow on from genuine repentance and new birth and surrender to the Lordship of Jesus.

If the Gospel really is Good News, then for a divorced person to accept God's calling to celibacy, and forsake a relationship which Jesus calls adulterous, must be far better than to continue in it.

It may not be easy to receive that, but real faith in Jesus will make it possible to do whatever is necessary to put things right with God.

Chapter 5

WHAT PAUL SAID

There are some who claim that Paul adds desertion by an unbelieving partner to the teaching of Jesus as a valid ground for the "innocent" Christian partner to remarry.

In actual fact, to understand Paul this way nullifies the teaching of Jesus. After all, it could always be said that the "guilty" party was obviously an unbeliever! This would effectively reinstate all the grounds for divorce which Jesus so carefully excluded.

Dare we suggest that those who read Paul to contradict Jesus, or to find a loophole, are in fact guilty of the same hardness of heart which Jesus attributed to the Pharisees?

For Jesus there is no respect of persons. Both the "guilty" and the "innocent" parties incur the charge of adultery if they remarry.

The truth is that what Paul wrote is completely in harmony with the teaching of Jesus. (How could it be otherwise?)

ABOUT WOMEN, Paul says:-

- (a) A wife must not separate from her husband. (1 Cor. 7:10)
- (b) She is bound to him for life. (1 Cor. 7:39, Rom. 7:2)
- (c) If she lives with another man while her first husband is alive, she is an adulteress. (Rom. 7:3)
- (d) Only her husband's death sets her free to remarry. (1 Cor. 7:39, Rom. 7:3)
- (e) If her unbelieving husband wishes to separate she is not under bondage to live with him. She may accept his decision to separate. (1 Cor. 7:15)

BUT

- (f) If she does separate she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. (1 Cor. 7:11)

For Jesus said

- if she marries another she commits adultery (Mark 10:12)
- and the man who marries her commits adultery. (Matt. 5:32)

ABOUT MEN, Paul says:-

- (a) A husband must not divorce his wife. (1 Cor. 7:11)
- (b) If his unbelieving wife wishes to separate he is not under bondage to live with her. He may permit her to go. (1 Cor. 7:15)

BUT

He must not divorce her (v. 11). This leaves the door open for reconciliation (v. 1-12) and agrees with the teaching of Jesus.

For Jesus said □

- If he does divorce her and marry another he commits adultery (Luke 16:18) and if she remarries after he divorces her, he is responsible for her adultery. (Matt. 5:32).

Thus it is clear that Paul is not adding to what Jesus said, but reinforcing it.

"What God has joined together, let not man put asunder."

THE SOURCE OF THE MISUNDERSTANDING

In 1 Cor. 7:25-28, Paul speaks to the *unmarried*, including those who have been loosed from a marriage, saying that it would not be a sin for them to marry.

Because the Greek word translated "loosed" could sometimes be applied to divorce, it is claimed that Paul is giving blanket approval for the divorced to remarry!

However, this would make Paul contradict not only Jesus, but himself also! It cannot be true that Paul is giving permission for remarriage in the very same chapter which forbids it. Nor can it be true that Paul condones what Jesus calls adulterous.

To be consistent with the teaching of the remainder of the chapter, and with what Jesus says, the permission given here for marriage or remarriage can only apply to :-

- (a) a single person never previously married.
- (b) one whose partner is dead.
- (c) one divorced for the cause of fornication.

Marriage in any other situation, where one or both partners has a former marriage partner still living, is adultery.

PAUL'S INFLUENCE IN LUKE'S GOSPEL

Matthew's gospel is the only one to record the exception which allows "fornication" as a cause of divorce. Neither Mark nor Luke mention it at all.

Luke's omission is especially significant in understanding the teaching of Paul, for Luke records the Gospel as he must have heard Paul preach it many times.

According to Luke, both men and women who divorce and remarry are committing the sin of adultery. There are no exceptions, no innocent parties. A valid marriage simply may not be undone.

As we shall see in chapter 8, the exception included in Matthew's Gospel involves an abnormal situation which could render a marriage invalid. Apparently neither Luke nor Paul saw any need to include this exception since it did not change, in any way, the basic message that Jesus did not countenance the separation of a marriage which was joined by God.

Matthew's reason for including the exception is discussed in chapter 11.

Chapter 6

THE HEBREW WORD FOR FORNICATION

The word which has been translated as "fornication" in the New Testament is the Greek word "*porneia*". However, it is important to remember that Jesus did NOT use Greek when he spoke to his disciples about this subject.

The Greek word used is a translation from the Hebrew words which would have been used by Jesus. These are:-

"*taznuth*" (noun) - fornication or whoredom.

"*zannah*" (verb) - to commit fornication or whoredom.

In the primary meaning, these words refer to:-

- (a) the sin of a prostitute and the man who consorts with her;
- (b) the behaviour of an unmarried woman who "plays the harlot" by engaging in premarital sex.

The word is quite distinct from the Hebrew word for "adultery" (which is "*naaph*").

The distinction between the two words is shown clearly in Hosea 4:14 where both are used together:-

- daughters (unmarried) "play the harlot".
- brides "commit adultery".

The word for "fornication" is also used in a secondary sense to describe:-

- (a) the sin of idolatry (which often included sacred prostitution);
- (b) the political alliances made by Israel with other nations from whom they sought protection against enemies instead of relying on their God for protection.

There are a few references where both "fornication" and "adultery" are used in this secondary way to liken Israel to a wife who has left her husband to become a harlot.

e.g. Jeremiah 3:1,2, &8
Ezekiel 16:15,32.

However, this does NOT mean that the words are interchangeable. Rather, it means that in these cases BOTH sins have been committed. Israel is not simply an adulteress who has been unfaithful with another man. She is also a prostitute who has wilfully played the harlot with many lovers. Worse still, she is a harlot of the most wanton sort, for she has actually taken God's gifts to her and used them to hire the favours of her lovers.

When "fornication" and "adultery" are linked in this secondary sense by the prophets, they cannot be used as a ground for rejecting one wife to take another. Rather these cases actually reinforce the permanency of the marriage covenant. The theme of the prophets is repentance and reconciliation and God's faithfulness to his covenant which makes that possible "*until death do us part*".

Since we must expect that Jesus' teaching on divorce will be in complete harmony with

the character of his Father, as revealed in the O.T., we conclude that when Jesus allows "fornication" as a ground for divorce, he does NOT include the secondary use of the word. Where a marriage has been joined by God, the covenant must be kept at any cost. Even in the face of adultery, reconciliation is the goal, not divorce.

This then leads to the further conclusion that the only way in which "fornication" can be understood as a cause of divorce, refers to the primary meaning of the word. When used in this way, as we shall see in chapter 8, "fornication" is a sin which can invalidate a marriage in God's sight.

Chapter 7

THE GREEK WORD FOR FORNICATION

Although Greek is not the language spoken by Jesus to his disciples, it is nevertheless the language in which God has preserved the teaching of his Son. It will therefore be helpful to see just how the Holy Spirit uses the word "fornication" in the New Testament.

THE GREEK WORDS

The Greek words used for "fornication" and "adultery" mean virtually the same as the Hebrew equivalents already discussed in chapter 6.

"Fornication" is the Greek word "*porneia*".

It means primarily "prostitution", "whoredom".

It is said to be used occasionally in Classical Greek writings as a rather general word encompassing all sorts of sexual sin, including adultery. However, in the New Testament it does not appear to be used in this way at all. In fact, it is regularly used alongside "adultery" in a way which shows that there is a very clear distinction between the two. (Liddell and Scott Greek Lexicon supports this view.) In a secondary sense "*porneia*" is used in the same way as its Hebrew equivalent to describe the spiritual harlotry of the apostate church of the book of Revelation.

"Adultery" is the Greek word "*moicheia*".

It means the same as our English word "adultery".

THE CLEAR DISTINCTION

The two words ***are not the same***. They are intended to convey different meanings. This difference in meaning is clearly shown in such passages as:-

- (a) Spoken by Jesus - Matt. 5:32, Matt. 15:19, Matt. 19:9, Mark 7:21.
- (b) In Paul's writings - 1 Cor. 6:9, Heb. 13:4.

It is clear from the way in which Jesus and Paul use these words that "fornication" does ***not*** include "adultery".

The Greek word "*porneia*" is the nearest equivalent to the Hebrew word which must have been used by Jesus, and it must be understood in that light.

When used by Jesus, in the context of divorce, it applies to a situation where the nature of the sin means that the union has not been joined by God. Even if a looser use of the word might sometimes include "adultery" In other Greek literature, it could not do so here, because to dissolve a union on the ground of adultery would be to separate what God had already joined.

Thus "fornication" as a ground for divorce can only carry the ***narrow*** meaning of "playing the harlot by engaging in premarital sex".

Only when it is understood in this way can a divorce on this ground meet the requirement of separating a union ***not*** joined by God.

This is discussed further in the next chapter.

Chapter 8

NOT JOINED BY GOD

The simple understanding of the teaching of Jesus about divorce lies, not so much in the meaning of Hebrew or Greek words, but in the clear statement :-

"What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder". (Matt. 19:6)

Once God has joined a marriage, there is no possible ground for its separation by men. It follows that the **only** union which can be broken is one which **has not been joined by God!**

It is significant that Matthew's Gospel is the only one to record the "exception clauses".

It is significant also that Matthew is the only New Testament book to contain an EXAMPLE of a proposed divorce. That is of course, the agonising situation in which Joseph was about to divorce Mary for premarital unchastity.

It is the circumstances surrounding this incident, which give us the clue which explains the meaning of "fornication" as a just cause for divorce.

"Fornication" as suspected by Joseph, creates a situation where a marriage is not joined by God, and so provides a basis for men to undo it. This provision has its foundation in the Old Testament.

There were cases in the Law of Moses where fornication could render a marriage illegal, and thus invalid.

For example, a priest was commanded to marry only a virgin. (Lev. 21:7). In such a case, the marriage would **have** to be undone, to comply with the law. If it was forbidden by God's law, God could never be said to have joined it.

Other men who discovered, after the marriage, that the girl they had married was not a virgin, could also take action. There were two ways in which this could be done.

The first required the girl to be stoned to death. (Deut 22:13-21)

The second, more merciful choice, was to divorce her and send her away. (Deut 24:1) It was this option which had been chosen by Joseph in his dilemma over Mary, the Mother of Jesus.

There was another provision in the law which required a man, who had seduced a girl, to marry her. A girl who had been a party to fornication was not free to marry another man while this obligation remained. (Exodus 22:16)

However, the law also provided for a Jewish father to exercise his right of refusal. Alternatively the first man might die before the wedding, or perhaps the man might already be married. Any of these circumstances would cancel the obligation and the girl would then be free to take another husband, if one could be found.

In such a case honesty would require that the new husband be told in advance that the girl was not a virgin, both to be honest with him and to reassure him that although there had been a divorce, there was no legal barrier to the wedding.

In a 20th century setting, where custom leaves the right of refusal to marry with the girl who has sinned, rather than with her father, it is still true that marriage to another man should not be entered into without proper confession of the situation. Failure to confess, before marriage, that this sin has taken place, amounts to deception, which means that the marriage cannot be truly said to be joined by God.

To say otherwise would make God a party to the lie.

It is for this reason then that Jesus allows for the possibility that a man may need to reconsider his commitment to the marriage. When he becomes aware of the deception, he must decide whether he ought to continue or not.

The fornication and deception, especially if accompanied by an unrepentant and defiant attitude on the part of the girl, would cause most men to decide that they would not have contracted the marriage at all if they had been aware of the situation beforehand.

On the other hand, Jesus does not say that a divorce is mandatory, even for this cause. In a Christian setting, there could certainly be circumstances where genuine repentance on the part of the woman, together with forgiveness on the part of the man, would result in reconciliation and a renewal of commitment to the marriage.

In such a case, ground for divorce would no longer exist. The marriage would now be contracted in truth and honest intention by both parties, and would certainly be joined by God.

Of course, it is obvious that in cases where fornication was known before marriage there would be no cause for divorce for this reason, at any time.

TIMING

By its very nature, this is an issue which ought to be discovered and resolved in the very early days of a marriage.

In most cases, it would become apparent on the wedding night, whether or not the *physical tokens* of virginity were present. That was the issue in Deuteronomy 22:13-21.

(However caution is needed here. There can sometimes be reasons why these physical tokens would not be found in a girl who *was* truly a virgin).

It would be rare, and in most cases, almost impossible for this to be a valid cause for divorce after those first few days of a marriage, (especially if there is repentance and forgiveness, when the truth becomes known).

Chapter 9

WHAT DID MOSES REALLY SAY?

THE QUESTION ABOUT DIVORCE

For Jesus, the basic understanding of what marriage is, comes from the story of that first marriage in Eden, when God made Eve for Adam and joined them, permanently, and irrevocably, so that in God's sight they were regarded as no longer two, but one. (Gen. 2:18-24 & Matt. 19:4-5)

So when Jesus was asked whether there were any grounds on which a man might divorce his wife, he gave an answer which amounted to an ***absolute prohibition*** against man-made separation of a God-ordained union.

"What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder." (Matt. 19:6)

This led to a question. If Jesus said divorce was not possible AT ALL, what did Moses mean by commanding that a divorced wife be given a certificate of divorce? (Matt. 19:7)

Jesus' answer (in verses 8-9) contains five points:-

- (1) Divorce was never God's intention.
- (2) Moses did not command divorce, but permitted it.
- (3) It was hardness of heart that caused the Israelites to take licence from what Moses said, instead of listening to God's original intention.
- (4) In any case, they had misunderstood Moses completely. For Jesus, the "indecency" (RSV) mentioned by Moses as the cause of divorce was limited to "fornication" alone. It did not extend to any of the other causes commonly accepted by them.
- (5) Remarriage after divorce for any of those other causes is adultery.

THE LAW OF MOSES

Moses actually said very little about divorce. It is all contained in just a couple of verses in Deuteronomy. The Jews had turned those few words into a complex set of rules by which the hard-hearted managed to ignore what God really wanted and go their own way instead.

The verse in question says:-

"When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favour in his eyes, because he finds some indecency in her, and he writes her a bill of divorce and puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house" (Deut. 24:1 RSV)

There was considerable disagreement amongst the Jews about what was meant by "some indecency". Some argued that it might mean anything at all which displeased a husband. Others were more narrow, limiting it to "adultery. In Jesus' day, the prominent rabbis and their followers were divided between those two views. Jesus, as it became clear, agreed with neither.

The words translated "some indecency" are the Hebrew words "*dabar ervah*" --

literally "a word of nakedness". In other places (especially Lev. 18) this word is almost entirely used in the context of various forms of sexual sin.

It is important to our understanding of this, to note that Jesus substituted "fornication" for "nakedness" when interpreting what Moses said about the grounds for divorce.

Instead of accepting that Moses meant *all* forms of sexual sin, Jesus *narrowed* the meaning to "fornication". By doing this he was saying that this was the only possible understanding of "nakedness" consistent with his Father's definition of marriage.

Jesus is not contradicting Moses! Rather, he is defining what Moses really meant by "nakedness" in the context of divorce, when seen through God's eyes.

Only a couple of chapters earlier, in Deut. 22:13-21, there is the description of such a situation. The woman who has been found guilty of premarital unchastity, is supposed to be stoned to death.

On the other hand, a just and merciful man might take the course proposed by Joseph with Mary a quiet, private divorce, consistent with what Moses taught in Deut. 24.

Hard-hearted people, intent on justifying a new marriage, insisted on taking licence from what Moses said, for divorce on other grounds. The same hardness of heart has invaded the church of our day.

But for Jesus, that has never been God's intention, from the beginning.

Only the hard-hearted could fail to see that.

CAN A PERSON SO DIVORCED MARRY AGAIN?

Moses certainly gave permission for the woman to marry again. The law provides for the woman to find another husband and remain with him in a life-long union.

The only prohibition is that, once married, she may never return to the first husband, after any subsequent divorce on the same grounds, or even after her second husband's death.

The man permitted by Moses to divorce the woman on the ground of fornication was never really joined to her in God's sight, and would also be free to find a partner with whom he could be so joined.

Since Jesus also permits divorce on this ground, it must be excluded from all the other cases in which remarriage is adultery. Remarriage in this case is therefore permissible for Christians.

Chapter 10

OLD TESTAMENT EXAMPLES OF DIVORCE

Since God hates divorce, it is not surprising that there are remarkably few examples of divorce in his book. In the Old Testament there are in fact only a handful of references.

CASE 1 -- A PARABLE OF THE CHURCH

A parable which uses the imagery of divorce is contained in Jeremiah's writings. The word is used by Jeremiah, in a *spiritual sense*, to describe the separation imposed on Israel for continued wilful idolatry and disobedience, described as "fornication" and "adultery".

Some have seized on this to justify divorce and then remarriage on these grounds.

However, a careful reading of these passages will show quite clearly that the theme of the prophet is not freedom to remarry, but reconciliation and unchanging faithfulness to a covenant which cannot be broken while the parties live.

It is quite clear that God considers himself bound by a covenant in which nothing short of final judgement and death can ever close the door for reconciliation. God continues to plead for his estranged wife to return to him. When she does, all the blessings and privileges of a favoured wife will be restored.

Although Jeremiah uses the word "divorce" (Jer 3:8) when using the parable of an estranged wife to describe God's dealings with Israel, other prophets who use the same parable either do not mention "divorce" at all (Ezekiel 16) or else specifically exclude it. (Isaiah 50:1 and Isaiah 54:5-8).

The clear message of Isaiah is that, in spite of Israel's many sins and the separation which then exists, *God still continues to regard himself as husband to his faithless wife*.

Even though he has been angry for a brief moment, everlasting compassion will prevail to restore the relationship between them. God's faithfulness to his marriage covenant guarantees forgiveness and reconciliation when Israel returns to him.

If God so uses the parable of the marriage covenant in this way to describe his relationship with his people, how much more is it necessary that in the realm of human marriage the same attitude should prevail towards the sacred covenant between a husband and wife.

Once a marriage has been joined by God, not even "adultery" or "prostitution" can provide an excuse for a man to walk away from his obligation to his wife in order to marry another.

"Until death do us part" is a promise which commits a man to love his wife and to seek for reconciliation with a long suffering compassion as great as that shown by God towards his church.

CASE 2 -- A FORBIDDEN MARRIAGE

In the historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah, we find the sad story of Jews who had married foreign wives, contrary to the Law of Moses, whilst living in exile.

Since these marriages were illegal they could not be recognised as joined by God and it was necessary to dissolve them. Even though some of these unions had produced children, that did not alter the primary requirement of a return to obedience to God's law.

There is another facet to this story in the book of the prophet Malachi. (Malachi was a prophet whose ministry took place at about the time of this incident).

Malachi was constrained to speak out forcefully against those Jews who had taken foreign wives. Some of them had cruelly divorced their first wives to marry these idolatrous foreigners. (Mal. 2:10-16)

In God's view of the matter, these marriages with foreigners were invalid on two counts. It was bad enough that the Jews had married foreigners, but it was also unacceptable to God that these men had been faithless to their first wives. The marriages were adulterous.

On both counts, these marriages needed to be undone.

The value of this record, for our purpose, is to show that a second "marriage" which is not recognised by God ought to be undone. The faithfulness of those Jews who discovered their mistake and then took the costly steps necessary to put things right with God is a compelling example of the obedience which puts God first and wife and children second. (Luke 14:26-33)

This sacrificial obedience is, Jesus says, an essential element of being a true disciple.

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple."
(Luke 14:26)

Chapter 11

DIVORCE AND THE MESSIAH'S MOTHER

There is, in fact, only one case in the New Testament where a divorce was contemplated. However, there was a happy ending. The couple were reconciled and the divorce did not take place.

The story, of course, is that of Joseph and Mary. Joseph's belief that Mary's child was conceived as the result of fornication led to his mistaken decision to divorce her.

This decision by Joseph was a quite "legally" proper one, in the light of the Law of Moses. A girl who had been seduced was obliged to marry the man who had seduced her unless her father refused. (Ex. 22:16-17)

Thus Joseph was not legally entitled to take Mary as his wife, if it was in fact true that she ought to marry another. It was only after God made it clear to Joseph that there was no other man that Joseph became free to continue with the marriage.

As well as being the only Gospel to record "fornication" as the sole cause for divorce, Matthew is also the only one to mention that Joseph was about to divorce Mary for that reason.

Matthew's inclusion of "fornication" as the single exception to the general rule that all other divorce is forbidden allows us to understand that Joseph was reacting exactly as might be expected of a righteous and just man, obedient to the Law of Moses. Joseph was also in harmony with the mind of God in the matter, as it was later taught by Jesus.

Jesus was not giving any approval at all for divorce of those already validly joined by God. Rather he was talking about the separation of an improper union which God had not joined.

The real meaning of "fornication" as the only possible ground for divorce was something which had touched the life of those closest to Jesus, very deeply. Years later, the supposed scandal of his birth by fornication was thrown up to him by the Pharisees, as an excuse to reject him. (John 8:41)

For us, the story not only adds to our understanding of the subject of divorce, but it is also a proof of Joseph's belief in the Virgin Birth. If Joseph had not believed the dream in which God revealed that to him, he would have gone ahead with the divorce. "Fornication", if it had really existed, would have prevented the union of Joseph and Mary being valid in God's sight because of the prior claim of another man. Instead, Joseph believed God and continued with the marriage.

Chapter 12

A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN

In the 20th century, we probably need some reference to the apparent "sexist" language used in the discussion of the meaning of fornication.

Both the Old and New Testaments carefully restrict the permission for divorce to the case of a husband divorcing his wife. Neither Moses nor Jesus allow a woman to divorce her husband on any ground at all.

It is not within the scope of this book to attempt to explain why this is so. Although a few of the reasons might be obvious, this present writer does not feel qualified to tackle the subject at this time. The plain Biblical principle is simply recognised and acknowledged, in trust that the Divine author of the book has good reasons for it.

Some might find that hard to understand or accept in this "liberated" generation. However, it is what the Bible says. We need to take it on trust that God means what He says, and intends it only for the highest good of his creation.

Chapter 13

A QUESTION FOR SHEPHERDS

If God holds a husband who divorces his wife responsible for her adultery if she remarries how will he regard the pastor who conducts the marriage service and gives his "blessing" to an adulterous marriage?

The Scriptures contain a solemn warning for those who become a cause of stumbling to God's children. (Matt. 18:6 & Luke 17:1-2)

Chapter 14

DIVORCED PEOPLE IN THE CHURCH

In a world where divorce now affects at least one marriage in five, no church can long remain distant from the problem. The Good News about Jesus must inevitably attract some of those whose divorce has left them with emotional hurts and a poverty of spirit, to which only Jesus can minister.

The church must learn to cope with these people. They are not social "untouchables". They are real people, with the same deep need for the healing touch of Jesus on their lives as any of the rest of us. Some of them have been so deeply hurt that the fear of further rejection makes it almost impossible to accept even the love of Jesus.

Those who must deal with them will need that rare mixture of compassion and courage which can be gentle and sensitive to the emotions of the wounded and yet, at the same time remain uncompromising that the only real answers for the future begin with conviction of sin, faith in the Cross, life-changing repentance, and **total** surrender to the Lordship of Jesus.

It is not within the scope of this study to consider in detail the many special problems of the divorced. It is certainly recognised that those problems exist. We may not be insensitive to the needs of the wounded heart for emotional healing from destructive feelings such as guilt, worthlessness, loneliness, despair, fear and bitterness. Nor may we ignore the many areas in which a one-parent family will need financial help or time-consuming practical support from a caring church fellowship.

However, whilst acknowledging the reality of those needs, we must never forget that the church's role of support must also extend to encouragement in facing and accepting that, so far as marriage is concerned, there are only two options for their future life :-

(1) to remain single,

OR

(2) to be reconciled with their spouse. (1 Cor. 7:11)

For many reasons, some valid, some not, reconciliation may not always be possible, at least for the present. Sometimes it is never possible. In either case, remaining single is not only possible for the Christian, but essential, for Jesus says remarriage to another would be adultery. Only the death of the first partner can change that.

Where a potential marriage breakdown, or even a divorce situation, arises between two church members, it sometimes happens that one partner wishes to be reconciled and the other does not. In such a case, any refusal to be reconciled is itself a sin which the church will have to deal with, if persisted in. In extreme cases, the church's last resort is withdrawal of fellowship. (Matt. 18:15-18 & 1 Cor. 5:9-13)

Perhaps, when all else has failed, this might bring the one concerned to an awareness of their need to forgive, as a basis of receiving their own forgiveness (Matt. 6:14 & 18:35)

For additional comment on the subject of disfellowship, see the section in Chapter 15 headed "*Withdrawal Of Fellowship*".

Chapter 15

DEALING WITH A FORBIDDEN MARRIAGE

This is a problem which will never be easy to deal with. A couple who make the shattering discovery that Jesus views their marriage as adulterous are faced with an almost impossible choice.

The church which recognises the problem and wants to deal with it faithfully, must be prepared to shed tears with those involved. It is not just a question of telling a couple that they must separate, and then walking away. There will be a continuing responsibility to assist, perhaps for a lifetime, with the practical consequences.

However, if it is faced honestly that remarriage is adultery, and adultery is one of the many sins which are specifically mentioned as a barrier to entry to the kingdom of God, then the need becomes obvious. If we love Jesus at all; if we love those involved at all; it must be dealt with for their sake, and ours.

For those who find it hard to accept that separation must be the answer, it will be helpful to remember that this is a situation which involves one of the most fundamental issues of real discipleship.

Jesus did say that there would be some who are called to celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 19:10-12)

Amongst this group are those who find they must choose between Jesus and a marriage which he calls adulterous, in order to settle the issue of discipleship one way or the other.

It is a hard saying. Few can receive it.

Of course, it is a decision which is not confined to those living in adultery. Even for those who are rightly married, it is one of the vital issues which must be resolved by all who want to follow Jesus.

Jesus said that unless we are prepared to give up *all* that we have, we cannot be disciples. (Luke 14:33)

This cost can include:-

Father, mother, **WIFE**, children, brothers, sisters, even life itself.

(Luke 14:26 & 18:29-30)

Even when a marriage is valid in God's sight, situations can arise where a decision to put Jesus first means the loss of all that men hold most precious.

A man who is not prepared to carry his own cross (sacrifice himself) to follow Jesus:-

- cannot be a disciple. (Luke 14:27)

- is not worthy of him. (Matt. 10:38)

SOME EASIER CASES

We tend to lose sight of the fact that an adulterous marriage is not the only relationship which would need to be separated at the cost of much emotional suffering. Some of these are:

- an unmarried couple living together with no intention of marriage;
- a de facto relationship with one or both partners still married to someone else (possibly with children as a result of the union);
- a bigamous marriage (also possibly with children);
- a homosexual relationship.

In all of these "easier" cases, God's view of the matter is clear and the answer is clear.

Separation will be a part of repentance and obedience to Jesus.

In the case of "**adultery by remarriage**", God's view of the situation is no different to those other cases described above. Men may regard the marriage as legal, but it is forbidden by God. If it is adultery, then repentance will mean separation.

The Gospel does offer forgiveness of sin. The sin of divorce can be forgiven. Adultery can also be forgiven. However, forgiveness does not grant a licence for a deliberate choice to continue in sin.

The choice to separate will never be easy, but real love for Jesus can rise to victory, even in something as hard as this. Under the Lordship of Jesus, grace and power are given in sufficient measure to meet any trial, triumphantly.

WITHDRAWAL OF FELLOWSHIP

This is another question which cannot be avoided. Of course, the church's goal in dealing with problems must ALWAYS be recovery of the sinner and restoration of fellowship.

However, this is not always possible. When every other avenue of prayerful counsel, encouragement and persuasion have been exhausted and the sinner remains wilfully in adultery, the Church has only one final option.

That option is to resort to the withdrawal of fellowship. (1 Cor. 5:9-13).

However, it must be clear that even when it does become necessary, disfellowship is not meant to be an irreversible action. Nor can it be understood as a judgement or penalty, in the legal sense. It is meant to be done in sorrowful hope that this drastic step will give the sinner cause to appreciate just how seriously God views the situation. It is meant to be a compelling reminder of that eternal separation from God which will result on the day of judgement.

Perhaps, by this action, when all else has failed, a brother or sister can be brought to conviction and repentance and then renewal of fellowship with Jesus and his church.

Let us also be clear that the church which condones adultery, by accepting adulterers into fellowship instead of dealing with it as sin, disobeys God and denies Jesus before men.

A WARNING

No man, no group of elders, no church, has the right to give this counsel unless they also have counted for themselves the ultimate personal cost of following Jesus.

The man who has taken up his cross knows that he might one day be separated from his own wife and children by persecution, imprisonment, exile, or even martyrdom. For some, a decision to become a Christian can mean rejection by a wife and children. The disciple has **already** settled the question of what he must do should the occasion arise.

He is a disciple himself and when he calls others to a costly entry to discipleship, he is not asking for anything which he is not prepared to give himself.

Only the man who has faced the emotional reality of the possibility of this sacrifice for himself, can begin to have the compassion needed to understand the sacrifice required by Jesus from those involved in a marriage which God does not recognise.

Appendix

QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK

WHY IS REMARRIAGE SUCH A PROBLEM?

Adultery, together with a long list of other sins, is specifically mentioned as a barrier to entry to the kingdom of God. (1 Cor. 6:9-10 & Gal. 5:19-20 & Heb. 13:4)

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE WITH SUCH A MARRIAGE?

Like all other sins, adultery can be forgiven, for those who place their trust in Jesus. However, forgiveness is conditional on repentance, and repentance is nothing less than forsaking the sin completely.

The adultery of a forbidden marriage requires exactly the same measure of repentance as any other adultery (or drunkenness, idolatry, covetousness, jealousy, anger, envy, hatred, theft, etc.).

Dare we ask less of those adulterers who are legally married than we would of a single man living in a de facto relationship with a married woman?

ARE THESE MARRIAGES ILLEGAL?

No. That is the tragedy of it. By the laws of Australia, England, America, etc., such marriages are legal.

However, in this case, what is legal in Australia is forbidden to the children of God.

CAN A DIVORCED PERSON HAVE A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD?

Of course!! But not while their attitude to their former marriage partner is one of unfaithfulness to their sacred covenant with that person. In such a situation God rejects all approaches and offerings.

This is plainly stated in Malachi 2:13-16 -- "*I hate divorce*", says God.

ISN'T THIS APPROACH LACKING IN COMPASSION AND LOVE?

Is it really a lack of love to want to save someone from a sin which leads to eternal damnation?

IF WE DID SEPARATE, THE WAY IS NOT OPEN TO GO BACK TO MY FORMER PARTNER. SO WOULD ANYTHING REALLY BE ACHIEVED?

The following things would definitely be achieved:-

- repentance from a sin which would shut you out of God's kingdom;
- obedience to Jesus;
- a step of faithfulness to your marriage vow;
- an open door, if your former partner did, one day, change his or her mind;
- a costly entry to discipleship;
- a relationship with God which you cannot otherwise have.

BUT I ALREADY DO HAVE A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD!

Whatever you think that relationship is, it cannot save you if you wilfully persist in the sin of adultery.

If you say you know Jesus and yet continue to disobey him, the Apostle John says you are a LIAR and that the truth is not in you. (1 John 2:3-6)

WHAT IF MY DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE TOOK PLACE BEFORE I HEARD ABOUT JESUS? ISN'T THE PAST DEAD IF I BECOME A CHRISTIAN?

If you robbed a bank before becoming a Christian, could you keep the money? If you failed to give it back, you would still be an unrepentant thief, and lack of repentance would mean you were unforgiven.

Are you any less a thief if you insist on maintaining a *stolen* relationship with a person who, in God's sight, belongs to another partner?

BUT PAUL SAYS EVERYONE SHOULD REMAIN IN THE STATE IN WHICH HE WAS CALLED. SURELY THIS MAKES PROVISION FOR A REMARRIAGE AFTER DIVORCE?

In the particular passage to which you refer, the subject is "circumcision" and "slavery", *not* "adultery". (1 Cor. 7:17-19) (What does matter is obedience - see verse 19).

Would you really think, for instance, that Paul would allow two partners in a homosexual "marriage" to continue in the state in which *they* were called?

Could any other sinner genuinely repent of his sin whilst remaining in the state of continuing in it?

WHERE IS "GRACE" IN ALL THIS?

"Grace" is extended to those who *repent*. Paul expressly rejects the possibility of "continuing in sin that grace may abound". Rom. 6:1,15. Grace does have privileges. It also has responsibilities!

CAN'T I GET MARRIED AND THEN REPENT? CAN'T I REPENT AND STAY MARRIED?

If you think that is repentance, you do not yet understand the meaning of the word. God calls you to put off your old sinful way of life, and put on the new nature "*in true righteousness and holiness*". (Eph. 4:20-24 & Col. 3:5-10)

HOW LONG DO I HAVE TO WAIT TO GIVE MY FORMER MARRIAGE PARTNER TIME TO REPENT?

Your marriage covenant says "*until death do us part*". Anything short of death is unfaithfulness to a sacred promise made before God.

BUT I HAVE TRIED EVERYTHING AND THERE IS NO HOPE OF RECONCILIATION. SURELY I HAVE FULFILLED MY OBLIGATION AND CAN NOW SEEK MY OWN HAPPINESS?

You are taking too short a view. All you can see is that you have not achieved reconciliation **yet!**

Your marriage covenant commits you to leave the door of reconciliation open until one of you dies.

Any other "happiness" you seek will involve you in the sin of adultery.

PERHAPS WE WERE NOT REALLY MARRIED AFTER ALL

That is the "Catholic cop-out"!! They try to get around the problem with an "annulment" instead of a "divorce", by finding obscure grounds for saying the marriage was never really valid.

However, merely changing the word cannot change the reality of the situation.

If you were free to marry; If you made a covenant with each other to be married; If you entered into a "one flesh" relationship; Even if you did those things as an unbeliever, never having heard of God; You do have a marriage which meets the Bible definition of "*joined together by God*".

I SINNED IN IGNORANCE - SURELY THAT MAKES IT ALRIGHT?

No. A sin committed in ignorance still requires repentance when it becomes known. (Lev. 4:27-31)

The same principle applies to repentance for those who come to Jesus:-

"The times of ignorance God overlooked, but NOW He commands all men everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30)

YOU SET TOO HIGH A STANDARD -- SURELY GOD DOES NOT REALLY EXPECT US TO REACH IT?

"Whoever knows what is right to do, and fails to do it, for him it is sin". (James 4:17)

"It is not too hard for you". (1 John 5:1-5)

"God will not let you be tempted beyond your strength". (1 Cor. 10:13) God not only expects obedience, but also promises power to do what He asks!

WHAT IS MY RESPONSIBILITY TO THOSE WHO COMMIT THIS SIN?

You have a watchman's responsibility. If you fail to warn the sinner, you will be held accountable by God for the sinner's death! (Ezekiel 3:16-21 & 33:1-9)

THIS WOULD SPLIT OUR CHURCH. WOULDN'T IT BE BETTER TO REMAIN QUIET FOR THE SAKE OF PEACE?

Your church needs to face up to this.

"A little leaven leavens the whole lump". (1 Cor. 5:6)

If it is ignored, it will affect you all in some way.

Jesus also said:-

"Everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven". (Matt. 10:32-33)

Your own relationship with God, and the success of your prayer life are at stake!

THE CHURCH WOULD THROW ME OUT IF I PUSH THIS!

John the Baptist got his head cut off for this!

If you are a disciple, you have already counted the cost of that and taken up your own cross.

If you really are a disciple, you will lay your own safety on the line, for the sake of those who are otherwise lost. (Matt. 10:38-39)

Perhaps you are not yet a disciple?

SHOULD A CHURCH EXCLUDE REMARRIED DIVORCEES FROM FELLOWSHIP? PERHAPS WE SHOULD SIMPLY LEAVE THEM TO GOD?

If all else fails, Paul's last resort is to *"drive out the wicked person from among you"* (1 Cor. 5:13)

He was referring to people such as those in verse 11 and, in particular, the man who was living with his father's wife. (verse 1).

It worked! In 2 Cor. 2:5-8, Paul reversed the instruction. The man had responded to this last attempt to save him. That, after all, is the goal, even in the extremity of disfellowship.

BEFORE GOING AHEAD WITH OUR MARRIAGE WE SOUGHT DIVINE GUIDANCE. WE EVEN LAID DOWN A FLEECE.

Your "guidance" has deceived you! You have made yourself the victim of a "lying wonder". (2 Thess. 2:9 & Matt. 24:21 & Deut. 13:1-4)

Even a fleece as miraculous as Gideon's cannot invalidate the word of God.

Consider Is it right to lay down a fleece seeking guidance that says you will rob a bank if you find the door open? Laying down a fleece about remarriage after divorce is really in the same category. God's word is clearly against both.

Also, in cases like this, people often lay down "fleeces" heavily weighted in favour of the answer they want. They are often even willing to misinterpret the results, if the odds come out the wrong way.

WE STILL PRAY AND GET ANSWERS. SURELY THAT INDICATES GOD'S APPROVAL OF OUR SITUATION?

If you interpret any answer to prayer as approval for continuing in sin, you are deceiving yourself. You have turned your "answered prayers" into another "lying wonder".

Even truth, mishandled and misinterpreted, can be made to tell a lie.

(Incidentally, people who pray to long dead "saints", and even Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists, etc., talk about "answered prayer". Does this mean they are approved by God?)

WE PRAYED AND ASKED GOD TO BLESS US WITH CHILDREN, AND HE DID.

For most people there is nothing miraculous in that. It happens whether you pray or not!

In this case, if you had really obeyed Jesus, your children would never have been born.

Please do not misunderstand. That is not a judgement against the children themselves nor does it deny their need to be loved. It is simply a realistic assessment of circumstances over which they had no control.

IF WE DO SEPARATE, WHAT ABOUT OUR CHILDREN?

This is a very emotional question. It will not be easy for the children.

However, if we do believe Jesus, the fruits of repentance on the part of the parents must be better for the children than for their parents to continue living in sin.

In any case, this is not really any different to the problems faced by a single man and a married woman living in a de facto relationship which has produced children. The need for separation is easier to see in this case, but it will be no easier for the children in one than the other.

BUT MY NEW HUSBAND/WIFE HAS PROVIDED A STABLE, FAMILY SETTING FOR MY CHILDREN. WOULDN'T IT BE A GREATER SIN TO BREAK UP THIS SECOND MARRIAGE THAN TO CONTINUE?

Is it ever right to do evil that good may come? (Rom. 5:8)

Actually, the question is suggesting that repentance is a sin!

To break up an adulterous relationship cannot possibly be a sin, no matter how unpleasant some of the consequences appear to be. The real sin is the adultery which has led to the problems associated with the need to separate.

BUT THE MINISTER WHO MARRIED US GAVE US GOD'S BLESSING ON THE MARRIAGE

Unless he repents of what he has done, that minister faces judgement for his part in this.

He has caused you to stumble.

"It would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea". (Matt. 18:6)

But now that you know you have been deceived, it is not yet too late for you to put things right before God *by undoing the mistake.*

BUT MOST OTHER CHURCHES NOW ALLOW REMARRIAGE AFTER DIVORCE

This one does not! We prefer to obey Jesus. We know we are not alone. There are other churches and ministers who are still faithful to Jesus in this.

And we are certain that *Jesus* would still say: - "*It was not so from the beginning*". (Matt. 19:8)

WHO IS GOING TO PICK UP THE PIECES?

Individuals and churches who give this sort of advice have a total responsibility for care and support to those whose repentance leads to this costly decision.

I DON'T FEEL I AM DOING WRONG BY CONTINUING IN THIS NEW MARRIAGE. DOESN'T THAT MAKE IT ALRIGHT? SURELY I WOULD FEEL WRONG IF IT REALLY WAS WRONG?

Which is more likely to be right?

What you "feel"?

OR

What God says in plain words?

Eve made that mistake in the Garden of Eden.

She decided God was wrong and here we all are, still trying to cope with the results of that!

CONCLUSION

"If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in His love". (John 15:10)

"He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me"

(John 14:21)

"If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (John 14:23)

"He who does not love me, does not keep my words; and the word which you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me". (John 14:24)