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How Biblical is Your View on Divorce and Remarriage?

Bruce and Kathleen Nicholls

The traditional Protestant stance is that in certain circumstances Christians may divorce their partners and that divorced persons are free to remarry. A *Christianity Today* Gallup poll (*Christianity Today*, June 6, 1980, p.27) estimated that 40% of evangelical clergy in U.S.A. accept remarriage after divorce in cases of desertion or adultery, while 27% accept remarriage after divorce regardless of the reasons, if reconciliation to the former spouse is not possible. One recent survey of divorced rates by profession found ministers with the third highest rate behind only medical doctors and policemen (*Leadership*, Fall 1981, p. 119). The same issue of *Leadership* reports on a recorded forum with five evangelical pastors who had personally experienced the trauma of divorce. All but one had remarried and all were continuing in their churches or in other churches. At least one had gone out and started a new church.

We can admire the openness of these men in the interview in their willingness to share their personal tragedies in print. Those of us who are fulfilled in marriage would be quick to add that our marriages are what they are by the grace of God. All of these pastors condemn divorce and all had been crushed emotionally by their devastating experience. All were deeply grateful for the supporting pastoral care of their elders and fellow ministers. They continued in the ministry because of a strong sense of God's call and enabling. One stated "the divorce enabled me to preach God's grace and forgiveness more realistically"; another said, "divorce increased my sensitivity to people". In no sense did they condone divorce but rather they testified to forgiveness, healing and the recovery of their ministries. The editors of *Leadership* asked a number of well-known Christian leaders in America to comment on this forum. All expressed their concern about this growing tragedy inside the Church and made many perceptive and helpful comments on the report of the five ministers.

Our concern in this issue of *ERT* is to ask the question, "How biblical is our attitude to divorce and remarriage? Does our attitude to the authority of Scripture reflect that we have accommodated it to the changing values of our culture?" There is the subtle danger that we assume what Scripture says and then proceed to interpret Scripture accordingly. This enables us to justify our feelings and actions and yet intellectually declare our belief in the authority and inerrancy of Scripture. Nowhere is this clearer than in the widely held assumption p. 116 that those who divorce on biblical grounds are free to remarry. Our strong sense of compassion for those who have fallen and suffer becomes the assumed basis for accepting the view that divorce includes freedom to remarry. Is this line of reasoning any different from that of those liberals who argue for universalism in salvation on the grounds that God is absolute love? Edmund Clowney of Westminster Theological Seminary, expressed his concern in his reply to the forum when he said, "It is most

discouraging to hear ministers discuss their experiences with divorce without even raising the question as to whether or not their divorce was on biblical grounds. These men speak sincerely of their experiences of love and acceptance from church sessions and people, but no one spoke of the faithful exercise of church discipline towards them or their former spouses.” Richard Halverson, chaplain, United States Senate, responded “one of my concerns is that evangelicalism today is much more badly infected with secularism and worldliness than it realizes. One of the readings I’m getting is in the area of marital difficulties. Too often you have the feeling, as you talk to those afflicted, that they don’t really see the seriousness of getting a divorce ... It’s wonderful to show the compassion of Christ working, but we also need to say explicitly, ‘Look, this is what the Word of God teaches about divorce’ ” (p.29).

Yes, it is true divorced persons feel rejected, bruised, guilty and apprehensive. They need love, reassurance, acceptance and a group structure in which to rebuild their lives as they grow as Christians. But participation in the Body of Christ and the calling to the role of leadership in the Church is costly. Discipline whether on ethical or doctrinal grounds is fundamental to the nature and function of the Church. It is this discipline which is increasingly absent in many evangelical churches. But while ethical behaviour is not the ground of salvation, a Gospel without a clear biblical ethic is no Gospel at all. As Klaus Bockmuehl has shown in another article in this issue of *ERT*, the spirit of modern antinomianism has penetrated the church, destroyed its inner discipline and threatened its very existence. We suffer the subtle danger of being selective in our ethical concerns. Evangelicals have much to say on the evils of abortion and euthanasia but little on the sin of divorce and remarriage.

Divorce, or perhaps more strictly separation, may be permitted, Jesus said, on the grounds of *porneia* which we interpret to mean illicit sexual relations. According to Paul in his first letter to the Corinthian church an irreconcilable desertion is, in extreme situations, a ground for separation. There is the subtle danger of oversimplifying these grounds of adultery and desertion. Those who feel sinned [p. 117](#) against are never entirely innocent. The boundary between innocence and guilt is rarely clear cut.

What about remarriage? Gordon Wenham in the following article “May Divorced Christians Remarry?” argues on exegetical grounds that Jesus prohibited all remarriage following divorce or separation. You may not accept all his arguments but his exposition of Jesus’ statement found in all the synoptics that remarriage constitutes adultery cannot be ignored. He convincingly demonstrates that during the first five centuries all Church Fathers except one, opposed remarriage after divorce. How many Christians, whether clergy or laity would divorce if they believed that remarriage came under the Lord’s judgment of adultery? The escalating breakdown of marriages and easy remarriage among Christians in the West suggests the urgency of the need to re-examine our basis for divorce and remarriage and to accept afresh the judgment of Scripture. Perhaps the greater issue today is not the defining of the extent of the authority of Scripture but developing a sound biblical hermeneutic and then obedience to the demands of the Word of God.

For those of us working with churches in the Third World where divorce and remarriage are rarely issues, the winds of North America and Europe are blowing strong. The only way churches can prepare themselves against the spirit of antinomianism and the rejection of the commandments of God is by commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and by obedience to Scripture as the Word of God. The teaching ministry of the Church needs to be re-emphasized and what better place to begin than with Christian marriage and the family.