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# Once Married Always Married?— A Biblical Review and Synthesis

MICHAEL R. WARD

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THERE IS MORE understanding nowadays of why some marriages break down, and less censure. But sympathy alone must not be allowed to justify divorce and remarriage, if these are clearly contrary to God's word. Some things are undisputed, to start with. Marriage was a creation ordinance, and God's design for human society in family units within this framework applies to all men. Our Lord affirmed and re-established this in the Gospels, and St. Paul followed him, stating the law of lifelong marriage as the norm (in Rom. 7: 2 and 1 Cor. 7: 39). So this must be the Biblical standard for all Christian discussion on this difficult subject.

Two main views have been based on this. First, the traditional one which holds marriage to be permanent and indissoluble, in the strict and proper sense that no act or authority on earth can dissolve 'what God has joined'. Thus, even though in sad circumstances people may separate, they can never marry again while they both live, since divorce does not exist in God's sight and remarriage is simply adultery. This view is the logical basis of the Church of England's official regulations, forbidding a new marriage in church; though it evades the further implications of this after the initial stage. . . .

The other view would qualify this by allowing that the bond may be broken, but only in the two cases which Scripture specifically states, in the 'exceptions' of Matthew 5: 32, 19: 9 and 1 Corinthians 7: 15; these alone being regarded as cutting at its very existence. However, the exact meaning of these texts is much disputed among scholars (as discussed in books and commentaries, together with other questions in the accounts), and they form a dubious basis for a complete answer either way on their own. What, moreover, should be done about other situations now recognised by English law which clearly need to be dealt with?

Unless it is very plain that the State has gone against God's laws, it is precarious doctrine for the church to insist on a double standard,

calling a good many persons still married (under either view above) whom Parliament and Law pronounce to be no longer so. In any case, before the matter is settled, fuller account must be taken of what the Bible says about marriage in the first place, and also of the actual divorce situation there addressed.

### *The Biblical Doctrine of Marriage*

FIRST of all stands Genesis 2: 18-24, which must be taken as a whole (as often it is not). This presents God's own primary word on marriage, that it was to be for man's 'good', through the joining of the sexes, for earthly human comfort in a helping and compatible partnership of sex and total life. The passage portrays recognition of their complementary nature, followed by their cleaving together as a new family in the mutual embrace of love which is deeply implicit. We may believe that all this underlies our Lord's quotation of verse 24; and in the New Testament's fullest treatment, Ephesians 5: 21-33, including the same quotation, love (the Greek *agapē*) is explicit and central. Using marriage as an analogy of the union between Christ and the church, Paul three times urges the husband to love his wife, even loving and cherishing her as his own flesh, in a love which is freely given and received, the very heart of the union on each plane. This passage does not teach that marriage is as unbreakable as the bond between Christ and his church, as some have taught, but rather that this is what marriage ought to be like, its true character and quality.

Apart from the places which stress the wife's submission and service to her husband, there are other brief passages stating the importance of sharing both physical and spiritual union (1 Cor. 7: 3-5; 2 Cor. 6: 14-15); and the Bible does not say much more directly upon this great subject. Yet the total Biblical picture of marriage is clear enough: of a love-bond entered into with lifelong intention, leading to the joining and sharing of two lives in a comprehensive union. The issue we are faced with is this: Where these positive Scriptures are unfulfilled, and the vows 'to love and to cherish till death' are broken; where the essential foundations fail and communication dries up at every level beyond remedy, for whatever causes, which way does God then point, or does the Bible indisputably assert the marriage bond even through all this?

Turning to our Lord's words (Matt. 5 and 19, Mark 10, Luke 16: 18) on 'putting away', 'putting asunder' and 'marrying another', the background and immediate context are vital. Scribal interpretations of Deuteronomy 24: 1 differed, and one school of thought allowed the practice of putting away a wife to become very broad and lax, almost for any cause the man wanted, however trivial. So it was that Pharisees came to Jesus 'tempting him' and asking, literally (in Matthew's

account, 19: 3), 'if it is lawful to put away his wife for every cause?' The word used throughout these passages is a word commonly used elsewhere (e.g. Matt. 14: 15, 22; 15: 23) for sending away or dismissing people; and this throws light on the current practice. All the man had to do, in Jewish law, was to give his wife a 'certificate of divorce' or 'note of dismissal' (NEB) and send her away; and that was that. It was essentially an arbitrary and onesided act on the man's part, ending his own marriage, for just or unjust reasons. While it seems that women had some power to bring this about (and certainly so in Roman law), in the normal situation they would be cast off, without redress or rights, in an unequal society, and might thereby be forced into a life of sin themselves (as Matthew 5: 32 implies).

Thus it was easy to dismiss and put asunder, thrusting aside one's lawful partner and maybe marrying someone else preferred: in effect a quick way of legalising adultery. Like the prophet in Malachi 2: 10-16, Christ denounced the practice, exposing this abuse of Moses' concession as the cruel social injustice it had become. Referring to Genesis he turned them back to the fundamental objective of marriage and away from 'party politics' or mere human calculations which would use and discard people at whim or pleasure and devalue the whole institution. To the disciples' further enquiry, he branded it as nothing but adultery for all the parties involved in such contrivance (and incidentally placed the woman on an equal footing in principle with the man, in Mark 10: 12).

Further light comes from the series of illustrations in the Sermon on the Mount, of such things as murder, adultery and retaliation. By the pure standards of the Kingdom these are always wrong, but the special wrong lay not only in the heart of men but also in the way they took the law into their own hands against their brother in such matters. Yet in all these cases it has usually been recognised that a Christian society may make laws to deal with such failures of relationship, working out questions of the least of evils, relative good and distributive justice as constructively as possible amid the moral complexities of human life. In doing this, governments and law courts may under God sanction certain cases of killing, divorcing or punishment and regulate them accordingly.

So both Moses and St. Paul are seen laying down guidelines for a workable marriage discipline among the people of God in the circumstances of their day. 1 Corinthians 7, where Paul takes up what they had written, is notably difficult in several major respects, but it is plain that he felt himself to be dealing with some crisis period leading maybe to the expected end. In addition, he had to steer the church in their mixed society between competing tendencies to sexual licence, ascetic celibacy, and a desire among some converts to leave their unbelieving partners. In this complex situation, while endorsing marriage, he states his preference for Christians to remain single

wherever possible (compared with the normal state of Genesis 2: 18), to keep free from worldly cares leading to divided devotion, and in general to remain in their present state of life whatever it might be, without trying to change it. In such a context Paul could quite simply apply the Lord's word against any act of separation, divorce or re-marriage. Yet it may be noted that in the only place where Scripture envisages the unnatural state of a separated wife, it classes her with others in the chapter as 'unmarried' (verse 11).

It seems in accord with the tenor of the whole chapter to interpret it in the light of its own special and immediate concerns, though having relevance for the church at all times. Neither the church itself nor Scripture elsewhere normally teaches precisely as in verses 2, 9, 29b (*cf.* also 14: 34-37 on another subject). Paul was not called to go further into marital problems which perplex us so much, but at least we see him working out the questions before him, even qualifying Christ's teaching, and in verse 15 resting his decision not on a principle of indissolubility but rather on that of God's overriding purposes of 'peace' in marriage. It remains to ask whether Paul's directions in this chapter are meant to be literally the 'last word' on the subject, a ready reference point settling all future questions in advance; or whether they give precedent for recognising new situations and seeking new solutions as time goes on.

### *Conclusions to be Drawn*

The Bible does not set out to be a case-book of rules for all circumstances or to give direct answers to everything. The New Testament's statements on divorce arose in answer to questions from their current situation. As human and social conditions change over the centuries, the questions also may partly change, and the Lord places upon the church the task of trying to balance what ought to be with what is, and to find answers from the deepest truths of the word of God. Our church is at a time of reappraisal in this issue between its traditional teaching and its need to express the gospel of hope to people who have failed (—and between what are called the ontological and relationship aspects of marriage). In the deeply divided debate over this, a synthesis to meet pastoral cases more fully is desired by many who feel the present 'discipline' to be unsatisfactory. But the primary issue to be resolved is the theological one, whether or not a marriage can under any terms be validly ended and a new one begun. The relevant Scriptures together may lead to the following broad conclusions:

(a) Our Lord reasserted God's overall design as the true basis for marriage, individually and socially: essentially a being or becoming 'one flesh' in a lifelong union. This, he was saying, is what God made marriage to be, for mankind's blessing. Yet in this he was not

'legislating', as it is sometimes put. He did not comment on particular marriages nor rule out the possibility that some may fail to fulfil this design; nor did he assert the principle of 'permanence' above that of 'partnership'. Even though 'from the beginning it was not so', yet in the sinfulness and frailty of human nature, ever since marriage was instituted 'in the time of man's innocency' before the Fall, breakdowns of relationship do occur in this as in all fields. It is nonetheless always a fall from the divine standard.

(b) Thus the institution of marriage is as weak as human nature, even with grace, and Christians share with others the risks of this. The 'givenness' of the marriage union—'what God has joined'—is like other gifts or purposes of God, which even the church cannot always 'receive' or fulfil as it should. Its own witness to the world is ambiguous in many ways. Ought it to expect every couple to attain, in the closest and most exacting relationship of all, a success which it so often fails to exemplify in its own corporate life? Meanwhile the Saviour's own attitude to the fallen, his ministry of binding up the broken-hearted, are involved in all this.

(c) With the divine word that 'they are no longer two but one flesh', as with the Bible's prophetic and sacramental language generally, it may bear a proleptic or anticipatory meaning, being fulfilled not by the initial act or utterance only but by its outworking in life. This word clearly states that the aim of marriage must always be to 'become what it is' and to achieve its true nature in lifelong holy partnership. But absolute (as opposed to ideal) indissolubility is not the only possible interpretation of Christ's words; it is an inference and assumption of their meaning rather than their necessary dogmatic conclusion in 'proof text' fashion. To insist, as this interpretation must, that even a lifelong separation is still a lifelong marriage, seems a reductio ad absurdum of any Biblical teaching or meaningful witness to marriage.

(d) However morally 'innocent' many may be, every marriage breakdown has some 'hardness of heart' about it, normally on both sides as they may admit. Valid psychological causes of inability or immaturity may be shown for it, but it still comes within this category, in which indeed all humanity shares. Christ commented on this fact without either approving or withdrawing the idea that the law might allow some concession for it as Moses had done. But he did not expressly deny a place to just and ameliorative laws to help human weakness in this sphere. Where a marriage has so failed and fallen apart that the two are no longer even living together, they have in effect 'become two' again, and God has manifestly failed to join them, for whatever fault, sin or incapacity within themselves. When such a state has been reached (at the end of some painful process of realisation), it has nothing of the biblical meaning or content of marriage. A love-bond which has become a loveless bondage or merely legal tie hardly has a Christian basis at all. When or whether this state has been

reached may be a matter of degree and of their own personal judgment in each case; but beyond a point, an empty facade can hardly prove the 'sanctity' of marriage or achieve the 'good' for which God at first appointed it. It is neither being 'permissive' nor siding with the 'any cause' school of Christ's day to conclude that, 'as the body apart from the spirit is dead', so the life of such a union has dissolved or died prematurely.

(e) There is a difference in principle between 'divorce' in terms of someone dismissing, putting away their partner by their own arbitrary act, and 'dissolution' where a competent court on due evidence judges and declares a marriage to be at an end. Among people going through the courts will be both those who have inflicted hurt, sundering by callous, selfish and irresponsible action . . . ; and those, not necessarily blameless, who have yet tried to find a way responsibly through some tragic situation. God knows, and Christ's word judges; and if to the former he still says 'adultery' (with or without formal remarriage), to the latter there is no word of Scripture which plainly says the same. The church has Christ's commission in making moral if not legal distinctions, binding and loosing, declaring sin forgiven where there is penitence (and possibly even loosing from broken vows?). This would seem to give proper ground for pastoral discretion towards those who desire its ministry, without opening the door to 'indiscriminate remarriage', since nobody can demand to repeat such vows in church as their obvious and undeniable right.

(f) While the first call must always be to make marriages good, and a second marriage must literally be a 'second best' in their lives, yet the Bible shows God working even where human error has frustrated his direct and perfect will, bringing good out of evil and blessing by other routes (as the cross supremely demonstrates). In the end, the Bible leaves it open for society and the church to review such matters from time to time and make reasonable rules. The state may permit the dissolution of a marriage (such as where it is judged to have 'broken down irretrievably' as the law now defines it), providing the most humane way out from such a tragedy for the parties and any children (so different from the social iniquities of the system to which Jesus spoke). The church may recognise, and in some suitable way seal, a new marriage duly entered upon, where Christian attitudes are apparent. Even in this, church and state are still pointing to the design of God for the true fulfilment of marriage which they seek to uphold as the soundest foundation for society.

### *Final Summary*

OUR church has approached the matter as in essence one of how best to deal with a continuing state of adultery (without too plainly saying

so); maintaining its strict doctrine rigidly at the start, yet charitably relaxing it as soon as it decently may after the registry office ceremony. It may then permit strictly private prayers (or even services of 'blessing'), but trying to avoid anything which would make it another wedding or marriage. Soon the two are tacitly accepted as man and wife. Is all this the best course either way, in logic, compassion or truth? The Marriage Commission's report of 1971, while reflecting the inescapable element of Christian dilemma, for church and individuals, unanimously recommended a radical change of premise, upon which a new union could be accepted as a true marriage, with more positive Christian hope and help for rebuilding lives.

Whether by its specific proposals or not, the general claim of the report, and here, on theological and biblical grounds, is that the *essence* of marriage cannot be detached entirely from the *relationship*, nor from some measure of fulfilment of its *purpose*; thus within the nature of marriage it is possible for it to fail and die and be ended. On these grounds, therefore, the church can witness to two vital Christian principles at once: both *affirming* the highest standard of marriage, and *admitting* that people may fail in this as in other ways, and that in the Gospel they may make a new start under God and with his blessing.

### *Post Script*

OUR Lord (whose words have hitherto been widely taken as decisive for the traditional case), spoke here on two levels, as so often: both with a statement of the true nature of marriage for all times, and also with a comment on wrongful ways of treating marriage and people, as brought before him in the 'divorce' situation then practised. His judgment is equally applicable to similar treatment at all times. But Christ's Word does not speak of the situation where a marriage is brought to an end within a just and proper legislative and judicial framework. This is a 'missing link' on which the traditional or absolute case has been based.

Allied with this conclusion there also appears some pointer or precedent within Scripture for a carefully applied principle of empirical progress in such a field. To say this is not to make God's absolute ethic merely relative where failure occurs. If it seems to involve dangers of weakening marriage, stressing a proleptic rather than an ontological view, or concerning itself overmuch with 'making things easy for those who have failed to live up to their marriage vows' and in the process 'letting down those who are trying to live up to them', all this does not ipso facto constitute a sufficient argument for the Church to revert to its hard and fast categories.

While tensions are inevitable in any field of change, these con-

siderations are the proper sphere of moral theology and of pastoral ministry, to work out new applications of principles, ensuring a due balance between such factors both theological and practical, and supporting people in whatever their matrimonial circumstances. The foregoing review is submitted as being fully consistent with the total Biblical teaching, and with the human and social needs with which it leaves the Christian community responsible to deal in any age.