

**Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Reflections on
Divorce, Remarriage, and the Seminary Professor:
A Modest Proposal**

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Over the past eighteen years, I have served three different churches as senior pastor and seven churches as interim pastor. On any given Sunday, I knew that a significant number of those in attendance at worship would be persons who had personally experienced a divorce. Those individuals present on any given Sunday at church whose lives have been touched by divorce through close friends or immediate family members would drastically inflate that percentage. Once a pariah of our society, divorce is now commonplace both within our culture and the church.

In fact, the distinction of the presence and practice of divorce within and without the church is all but completely gone. A recent study conducted by the Barna Research Group uncovered the fact that born-again Christians were just as likely to divorce as non-Christians. The study discovered that the divorce rate among adults designating themselves both as born-again and non-born again is the same; one-in three marriages end in divorce. The study also revealed that more than ninety percent of born-again adults who participated in the study experienced a divorce *after* they had accepted Christ. George Barna notes that “it is unfortunate that so many people, regardless of their faith, experience a divorce, but especially upsetting to

find that the faith commitment of so many born-again individuals has not enabled them to strengthen and save their marriages.”¹

Furthermore, divorce is as likely to occur today among the clergy as it is among the laity. What once was taboo is now a matter of minor ecclesiastic discomfort. More and more ordained ministers are divorced. The phenomenon of clergy divorce is also spilling over into the seminary context among seminary professors. As the church struggles with the issue of divorced clergy, the seminary grapples with the problem of divorced professors.

My task will be a biblical/theological analysis of the topic of divorce/remarriage and to develop the implications of this issue for seminary professors. I will first undertake a biblical examination of pertinent texts. This investigation will then be followed by the theological significance of the insights drawn from the passages. I will then attempt to apply the conclusions and observations to the seminary context.

Biblical Teaching

The first step in addressing the issue of divorce/remarriage and the seminary professor is to examine what the Bible has to say on the subject.² This exercise could be quite extensive;

¹“The Baptist Scene: Cohabitation and Divorce,” *Baptist Message*, 30 August 2001, 2.

²Numerous scholarly investigations that explore and debate what the Bible teaches on divorce and remarriage exist within the evangelical world. Although many are quality works, three are worthy of special mention. The treatise considered the seminal work in this area is John Murray, *Divorce* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1961). William H. Heth, “Divorce, But No Remarriage,” *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*, ed. H. Wayne House (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 199), 94-99, labels Murray’s position as the “Erasmian” view. I disagree with Heth’s use of this label; I believe it is his attempt to disparage the position by linking it with the Catholic humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam. I will argue later that this position is the biblical view. Heth suggests that Murray’s position is the most commonly held position within Protestantism in general and evangelicalism in particular. The work, *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*, presents the arguments in a debate/response format. The positions presented are representative of the major perspectives on the divorce/remarriage topic. The four views are: J. Carl Laney, “No Divorce and No Remarriage;” William H. Heth, “Divorce, But No Remarriage;” Thomas Edgar, “Divorce and Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion;” and Larry Richards, “Divorce and Remarriage Under a Variety of Circumstances.” The Heth and Edgar essays exemplify what I believe are the major positions within evangelicalism. Another work of noteworthy mention on the subject is Gordon J. Wenham and William E. Heth, *Jesus and Divorce*, updated edition (Carlisle, CA: Paternoster Press,

numerous passages exist in the Bible that address this topic. Three texts, however, are considered most definitive on this subject and will serve the primary texts for my investigation. These passages are Deuteronomy 24:1-4, Matthew 19:3-9, and 1 Corinthians 7:10ff.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4

The most important text relating to divorce and remarriage in the Old Testament is Deuteronomy 24:1-4. This Mosaic provision was not intended to be a divine endorsement of divorce. It was rather a concession to human sinfulness and “hardness of heart” (Matt. 19:8). The intention was to regulate and mitigate existing practices.³ The meaning of the term “something indecent” (*ervath dabar*) is the subject of much debate. By Jesus’ day, rabbinic opinion had divided into two interpretative traditions. The conservative school of Shammai took the expression to refer to immodest behavior or sexual impurity, while the more liberal tradition of Hillel believed the phrase meant anything displeasing to the husband, including something as trivial as spoiling his food.⁴ The more permissive interpretation appears to be the prevailing understanding of the first century, and this perspective provides the background for Matthew 19.

The expression *ervath dabar* probably was not restricted just to adultery in its meaning. The Pentateuch prescribed the death penalty rather than divorce for adultery (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22); it is unclear whether the death penalty for divorce was regularly administered. The indecency would also need to be more than just the suspicion of adultery. Others have suggested

1997). Although I disagree with their overall thesis, Wenham and Heth provide compelling arguments and scholarly research and history on this topic.

³Wenham, “Gospel Definitions of Adultery and Women’s Rights,” *Expository Times* 95 (1984): 330.

⁴Abel Isaksson, *Marriage and Ministry in the New Temple* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1965), 44.

the term might refer to some physical deficiency, such as the inability to bear children. This interpretation, however, lacks support from other Old Testament texts.⁵

What, then, did Moses have in mind when he wrote these verses? The indecency must surely be shocking: ancient Israel took marriage seriously. Abel Isakkson argues that the term refers to a wife voluntarily or involuntarily exposing herself. In Ezekiel 23:18, it is said that a man's soul turns away from the wife who exposes her nakedness. The indecency probably was any lewd, immoral behavior including but not restricted to adultery. Any kind of deviant sexual behavior short of intercourse may have been in view. This interpretation of *ervath dabar* fits in well with the overall Old Testament outlook on human sexuality and personal modesty.⁶

The husband who found something indecent in his wife was not required to divorce her (cc. Matt. 1:18-19). Theoretically, the husband could continue in the marriage. Furthermore, after he divorced her, she could remain unmarried and eventually remarry her first husband if he would have her back. An example of this is found in the book of Hosea. Despite her harlotry, Hosea's wife was allowed to return to him; God ordered him to take her back (Hosea 3).

Upon the wife's second marriage, the door would be closed to future remarriage. For her to return to her first husband after her second marriage would be "to bring an abomination upon the land." The passage also served as a warning not to divorce too quickly. Upon the wife's remarriage, the first husband could never remarry her.

The nature of the abomination is difficult to ascertain. One possible understanding is to interpret the woman's second marriage as adulterous. In this interpretation, since she was divorced for something indecent, she is the party of guilt. Her remarriage compounds her

⁵Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1976), 305.

⁶Isakkson, 26, 45.

culpability from her first act of indecency. In this sense, to remarry the first husband causes him to enter into her adulterous situation and thus bring abomination upon himself and the land.⁷

Matthew 19:3-12

Scholars have debated the meaning of Matthew 19:3-12. The point of contention centers upon verse nine, known as the “exception clause.” Some scholars suggest that, because the exception clause is omitted in Mark 10:11 and Luke 16:18, the phrase is an addition to the text. In other words, one line of argument states that Jesus never actually uttered the exception statement. Rather, Matthew or a later editor added this statement because of the Jewish audience to which the document was addressed.⁸ This line of interpretation, however, tends to disregard the Bible as the inerrant word of God. The inerrancy of Scripture leads me to reject such a view. I contend that Jesus did in fact state the “exception clause” to the Pharisees in their disputation. Matthew has faithfully recorded what Jesus taught.

Two issues surround the meaning of the passage. The first of these is the actual meaning of the word *porneia*. Some Roman Catholic scholars, such as Joseph A. Fitzmyer, have suggested that *porneia* means incest.⁹ Thus, divorce would be acceptable in the case of incestuous marriages and/or relationships. Other scholars believe the term refers to premarital sexual unfaithfulness.¹⁰ Thus, if a man discovers that his bride is not a virgin, a divorce is

⁷John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993), 314-15.

⁸Robert H. Stein, “Is It Lawful for a Man to Divorce His Wife?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 22 (June 1979): 116-120. Stein apparently is trying to explain the omission of the exception clause in Mark and Luke. Thus, part of his rationale is harmonization. He concludes that Jesus never actually spoke the exception statement; Matthew (or someone else) added the clause.

⁹Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Matthean Divorce Texts and Some Palestinian Evidence,” *Theological Studies* 37 (1976): 208-11.

¹⁰Mark Geldard, “Jesus’ Teaching on Divorce,” *Churchman* 92 (1978): 134-43; Isaksson, 135.

permissible on the grounds of adultery during the betrothal period. Some contend that *porneia* means adultery.¹¹ A divorce would therefore be permissible on the grounds that the wife is an unrepentant and unrestrained adulterer.

Porneia is a broad concept, and several uses of it are found in the New Testament. The term included adultery, but it could also mean incest, intercourse with prostitutes, premarital sex, homosexual practices, and bestiality.¹² *Porneia* covered a wide gamut of sexual sins, and thus “should not be restricted unless the entire context requires it.”¹³ Matthew was well aware of the word for adultery (*moicheia*), using both *moicheia* and *porneia* in the same context (Matt. 15:19). This suggests that the issue under consideration was broader in scope than adultery.

How then should we understand the meaning of *porneia* in Matthew 19:9? Because of the lack of contextual clues that point to a precise meaning, Matthew probably used *porneia* as a general term referring to all forms of deviant sexual behavior. Incest, adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, etc. all resulted in the break of the marriage relationship and thus precipitate an occasion that could ultimately end in divorce.

The second consideration is to determine what this passage intends to teach about divorce and remarriage. The discussion is framed by the Pharisee’s question in verse three, a reference to Deuteronomy 24. Whatever Jesus meant in Matthew 19, his reply should harmonize with Moses’ teaching in Deuteronomy.

¹¹Donald A. Shaner, *A Christian View of Divorce* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), 107; Thomas V. Fleming, “Christ and Divorce,” *Theological Studies* 54 (1963): 109.

¹²Friedrich Hauck and Siegfried Schulz, “porne, pornos, porneia, porneuo, ekporneuo,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 6, eds. Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Freidrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1968). For examples, see Mark 7:21; John 8:41; Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25; Rom. 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:1; 6:13, 18; 7:2; 2 Cor. 12:21; Gal. 5:19; Eph. 5:3; Col. 3:5; 1 Thess. 4:3; Rev. 2:21; 9:21; 14:8; 17:2, 4; 18:3, 9.

¹³D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, Expositor’s Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub., 1984), 414.

The question of the Pharisees, “is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all,” placed the issue into the context of the Hillel/Shammai debate on the meaning of Deuteronomy 24:1. The question was an attempt to trap Jesus in a “no-win” situation. If he sided with more restrictive Shammai school on divorce, then the followers of the school of Hillel would declare that Jesus was demanding a stricter understanding than what was the practice of the day, thus alienating the followers of Hillel. If Jesus sided with the Hillel school, then the Shammaites could contend that he was rejecting the stricter understanding and siding with the libertarians of the day. By siding with one rabbinic school against the other, Jesus would be cast in a poor light in the arena of public opinion.¹⁴

Instead of falling into the trap of the Pharisees, Jesus rejected both categories of the debate. He rejected the notion that the Old Testament sanctions escape from marriage. In response to their question, Jesus invokes the creation ordinances and God’s original design for marriage. After citing God’s ideal intent for marriage, Jesus declares that marriage should not be severed (v. 6).

Not to be deterred, the Pharisees again pressed the issue. If Jesus was right about divorce, then why, according to the Pharisees, did Moses command a certificate of divorce to be given to divorce one’s wife? At first glance, it appears that Jesus is contradicting Moses. Moreover, Jesus appears to have made Moses (Gen. 2—no divorce) contradict Moses (Deut. 24:1-4—granting a bill of divorce). The Pharisees state that Moses commanded such a thing to occur. In their eyes, Jesus is contradicting Moses.¹⁵

¹⁴George R. Ewald, *Jesus and Divorce* (Scotsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991), 70.

¹⁵Feinberg and Feinberg, 324.

This apparent contradiction can be answered in two ways. First, Jesus corrects this perception by noting that Moses “permitted” divorce. That is, Jesus draws a significant distinction between “command” and “permission;” permission is not a command. In speaking of permission, Jesus avoided contradicting Moses and making Moses contradict himself. In other words, God “ordained” and Jesus “commanded” that marriage be permanent. Moses “permitted” divorce because the hearts of his people were hard. Thus, however one understands verse nine, we may say that while divorce is permitted, it is not commanded.¹⁶

Second, Scripture contains several instances where a universal command is given, then certain qualifications or refinements on the command follow. For example, the command “thou shalt not kill” (better rendered “murder”) is universal in scope and applicable to all. Yet, certain exceptions for the taking of human life do exist, such as capital punishment, self-defense, or just wars. These do not violate the scope or the intent of the command. They are legitimate qualifications that do not lessen the “punch” of the command. The command stands even in the face of certain, qualified, God-inspired exceptions.

The same thing is true here in Matthew 19. Jesus is careful and intentional in reasserting the importance of the permanence of marriage. “What God has joined together, let no one separate.” There can also be God-given exceptions to this universal premise. Marriage is permanent, yet divorce is permitted within certain parameters. The permanence of marriage is thus preserved (God’s ideal), and Christ’s “exception” is maintained. When viewed this way, the apparent contradiction is resolved, thereby preserving the integrity of God’s ideal standard, the Mosaic permission, and Christ’s “exception.”

Of note here is the point that, although the Bible permits divorce, it neither demands nor requires it. The husband or wife whose mate has committed *porneia* may forgive the sinning

¹⁶Ibid., 324-25.

partner upon their repentance. If the guilty spouse repents, then the other partner is biblically required to forgive them (Luke 17:3ff.). Upon such occasions, we would desire that relational reconciliation would be achieved and hopefully, by the merciful grace of God, the eventual reconciliation of the marriage.¹⁷

Does verse nine then permit remarriage without committing adultery? In other words, it is one thing to say that someone can divorce for instances of *porneia*. It is another thing to say that remarriage following such a divorce is also permitted. The intricacies and complexities of these issues are debated elsewhere in more detail.¹⁸ Suffice it to say, I contend that a divorce that occurs on grounds of *porneia* likewise provides for remarriage without committing adultery. In God's eyes, *porneia* breaks the marital bonds. The one who divorces on this basis may constitute a new marriage bond without committing adultery against the first marriage. In this passage, Jesus does not say whether the person who has already committed *porneia* is free to remarry. I would suggest that, since the person has already engaged in deviant sexual activity, adultery against the innocent spouse has already occurred. If the guilty party should remarry, then his/her state as an adulterer is further compounded.¹⁹ The "innocent" partner is free to remarry without fear of committing adultery.

¹⁷Jay Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub., 1980), 56.

¹⁸Carson, 410-420, provides a careful overview of the exegetical issues and their implications.

¹⁹Carroll D. Osburn, "The Present Indicative in Matthew 19:9," *Restoration Quarterly* 24 (1981): 193-203, stipulates that, in Matt. 19:9, identifies *moichatai* is as a "gnomic" present indicative or a "present of general truth." Continuity of action is therefore not necessarily under consideration. This understanding of *moichatai* suggests that while divorce and remarriage apart from biblical permissions constitute an adulterous act, they do not necessarily constitute a continuing state of adultery.

1 Corinthians 7:10ff.

Paul's teachings on divorce and marriage are found in 1 Corinthians 7. In speaking of divorce in relation to Christian couples, the apostle refers to the teachings of Jesus (vv. 10, 11). The meaning of the verb translated "separate" (*chorizo*) is an issue of debate. Does it mean divorce, or does it connote a legal separation as used in our modern sense? Although the term can mean "to separate" as in removal from a place, it can also be used as a technical term for divorce. The Greek papyri use the word and its cognates in such a sense.²⁰ Furthermore, in Matthew 19:6, the expression "let not man separate" (*chorizeto*) stands in contrast to "what God has joined together," expressions that clearly have marriage and divorce in mind. Within the immediate context of 1 Corinthians, the term is linked to *aphiemi*, which also means divorce. Of further consideration is the fact that in the Gentile world, a wife had the legal right to initiate divorce proceedings.²¹ All these factors make it highly likely that Paul is in fact referring to issues of divorce in these verses.

Paul addresses the issue of mixed marriages (vv. 12-16). Even if a couple is religiously incompatible (one a believer, one an unbeliever), the believing spouse should neither initiate nor seek a divorce. If the unbelieving partner insists upon divorce, the believer may consent to this; in such cases, the believer is not bound (v. 15). In Romans 7:2-3, Paul uses similar "binding" and "releasing" language regarding the marriage relationship. In the Romans passage, "not bound" is equivalent to "release." The one who is "released" is free to remarry (v. 3). The implication of this for the 1 Corinthians discussion is that the one who is "not bound" in 1 Corinthians 7:15 is also free to remarry. Granted, Paul is speaking in Romans 7:2-3 of physical

²⁰Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "The Divorced Woman in 1 Cor. 7:10-11," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100 (1981): 601.

²¹C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 162.

death as that which results in the release of the spouse. But, it could be argued that the unbelieving spouse's desire to abandon the marriage produces a similar result (i.e., the death of the marital bond).²² In the case of desertion by an unbelieving spouse, the Christian spouse may acquiesce to the divorce. The believing spouse may then remarry without fear of committing adultery.

Another question that arises from this passage is, what constitutes desertion or abandonment? For the mixed marriage to be viable, both the believing and the unbelieving spouse must consent to stay in the marriage. The verb "willing" (*suneudokei*) used here by the apostle means "agree with, approve of, consent to, or sympathize with."²³ Certain behaviors may preclude such a "willing." For example, persistent physical abuse and/or threat to human life would assuredly violate the marriage covenant. Although much debated, some construe such a condition as a *de facto* desertion of the marriage covenant. The text could possibly allow for such a condition to be interpreted as a form of desertion. If a physically abusive or threatening spouse shows no willingness to change their destructive behavior, they have abandoned the marriage and have broken the bonds of matrimony.

Even in such cases, however, the goal should not be divorce. Rather, the church should make all attempts to assist the couple to reconcile. Appropriate legal action, when physical abuse is present, may be a remedy for the protection of the abused spouse. A safe environment and time apart could allow for appropriate intervention, counseling, and reconciliation. Since the

²²John Jefferson Davis, *Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1985), 101-02.

²³Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 4th ed., trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 796.

overall teaching of 1 Corinthians 7:10-16 is to discourage divorce, desertions that result in divorce should be taken in the narrowest and most literal sense possible.

Implications

In light of the brief biblical overview, I would now like to make several observations about remarriage and divorce. These observations synthesize the arguments presented from the exegetical/theological overview of Deuteronomy 24, Matthew 19, and 1 Corinthians 7. The implications that I develop in this section will draw from what the Bible both explicitly and implicitly teaches on marriage and divorce.

First, divorce is not God's ideal intention for creation. In fact, He hates divorce (Mal. 3:16). Genesis 2 makes it clear that God's intention is for one man and one woman to remain married throughout their lifetime. This ideal standard is not Christian in its orientation; it is not a standard developed within the New Testament. Rather, the one-man-one-woman-for-a-lifetime standard was what God desired for all those who bear His image. Thus, the standard is a creation ordinance, true for all persons in all contexts in all times. It is God's perfect will for a man and a woman to remain married throughout their lifetime.

Second, many arguments are offered on the notion that marriage is an indissoluble union. For example, the Roman Catholic Church teaches that marriage, because of its sacramental nature, is indissoluble and thus can never be broken.²⁴ Some argue that marriage is a covenant and not a contract. Contracts can be broken; covenants cannot be broken. Marriage is therefore indissoluble.²⁵ Others contend that the teaching of the Bible regarding the nature of the marital bond is that marriage is indissoluble. The language of Genesis 2:24 (leaving, cleaving, one flesh

²⁴Fleming, "Christ and Divorce," 119.

²⁵Wenham, "May Divorced Christians Remarry?" *Churchman* 95 (1981): 153.

language) is cited as evidence in support of this position.²⁶ Another suggestion is that the physical act of sex itself permanently joins the couple together. To engage in sex with a multitude of partners is to join oneself with another in the most intimate of human unions, thus forming a polygamous relationship.²⁷

Despite these and other arguments, I believe the Bible teaches that, under certain circumstances, marriage is dissoluble.²⁸ For example, death breaks the marriage bond. The Bible teaches that, upon the death of a spouse, the surviving partner is free to remarry (Luke 20:27-40; 1 Cor. 7:10-11). If the preceding arguments are true, then a remarriage upon the death of a spouse would likewise violate these principles. Since there is one clearly agreed upon God-given occasion for a person to remarry, other occasions that could allow remarriage certainly are possible.

Third, all divorce includes and results from sin. Whether one is discussing issues of guilt or innocence regarding the parties involved, the fact is that sin is ultimately the cause of divorce. Sin can manifest itself as the reason one marriage partner has acted in a way that breaks the marriage bond. Sin is also present in that an innocent partner suffers the effects of a guilty partner's sinful activity. All discussions of divorce and remarriage must recognize that sin, in varying degrees, is the reason that divorces occurs. As such, issues of healing, reconciliation, and restoration must accompany all considerations in these matters.

Of further note is the fact that, whenever the Bible discusses divorce, without fail somewhere in the context, remarriage is also addressed. Thus, to discuss the legitimacy of

²⁶J. Carl Laney, *The Divorce Myth* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1981), 20-22.

²⁷John Macquarrie, "The Nature of the Marriage Bond," *Theology* 78 (1975): 230-31.

²⁸William F. Luck, *Divorce and Remarriage: Recovering the Biblical View* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Pub., 1987), 6-10, notes that there is nothing inherent within the words of Genesis that demands permanence. The focus is on marriage, not divorce, so the issues of marital termination and/or divorce are not addressed.

divorce is also to consider the merits of remarriage, particularly remarriage without cause of adultery. So, the issue is not just whether there are permissible grounds for divorce. The point is also whether or not certain instances of divorce can occur so that the innocent spouse may, if he or she so chooses, remarry without committing adultery.

Fourth, because of sin (the hardness of heart), God has made provision in certain and clearly defined situations that divorce, while not desirable, is permissible. As noted from the discussion of the primary biblical passages on the subject, these exceptions are: *porneia* (deviant sexual behavior), abandonment/desertion of the marriage by one partner, and, as a concomitant category of one or both of these, physical harm/threat to human life. These are, in my estimation, the only “permitted” reasons for divorce whereby a remarriage can occur without committing adultery by the innocent partner. I say “permitted” because, even in these situations, it is hoped that healing and reconciliation can occur, thereby bringing restoration of the marriage. We should also note that remarriage is not mandated or required by the innocent party. Paul’s admonitions in 1 Corinthians should be taken to heart. God may provide the grace (and the gift of celibacy) necessary for the innocent party to remain unmarried in order to have a singular devotion of service to God (1 Cor. 7:17-24). If singleness is now the plight of the person, serious consideration and prayer should be given to remaining in that state unless God directs otherwise.

Divorces that occur because of these previously identified exceptions should be the final step taken when all other reasonable avenues have been exhausted. Divorce is, in a sense, the lesser of evils that should only occur when all else has failed. To focus on the exceptions, particularly in the Matthew 19 context, is to overlook Jesus’ overall point: divorce is never desirable. Married people should always seek ways to improve and enhance their marital

relationships. They should not wonder or conceive of ways in which they can remove themselves from their marriage without sinning.²⁹

Divorce/Remarriage and the Seminary Professor

The assignment at hand is a difficult issue, to say the least. Little, if any, has been written on the subject of divorce/remarriage and seminary professors. Much has been written on the general topic of divorce/remarriage and the more specific subject of clergy and divorce/remarriage.³⁰ In the following section I will try to address the issue of divorce/remarriage within the seminary context. To do so, I will draw upon the previous biblical/theological materials developed herein. Qualifications of overseers also have an important contribution to make in this debate, and I will incorporate these into my observations when appropriate. The following discussion is therefore in part a synthesis of the previous evidence and conclusions.

At the outset, certain scenarios exist that would, in my judgment, automatically disqualify a seminary professor from continued service. For example, the participation in *porneia* of seminary professors would be cause for removal from their post. Furthermore, they would also be disqualified from continuing in their position if their deviant sexual behavior resulted in the demise of their marriage. Additionally, the desertion or abandonment of a marriage by any seminary professor would be just cause for dismissal. Although not always the case, deviant sexual behavior is often the occasion for the act of desertion/abandonment. These behaviors

²⁹Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 293.

³⁰For an interesting study on the trend of divorce among clergy, see Robert J. Stout, "Clergy Divorce Spills into the Aisle," *Christianity Today* (February 17, 1982), 20-23.

would in my estimation be reasons for the removal of any seminary professor from his or her faculty position.³¹

Should seminary professors be held to the same standard on divorce/remarriage as is typically understood for ministers within the church? The SBC provides a unique context that in part helps answer this question. By and large, Southern Baptists look to their churches for their seminary professors. Many professors have served as church ministers in some capacity. The faculty member who has not spent some time in a church context has traditionally been a rare phenomenon for SBC seminaries. As such, they have functioned “pastorally.” The qualifications that normally apply to “overseers” have therefore already been applied to many professors. Thus, in one sense, most SBC seminary faculty have been qualified or validated in their vocational calling by local churches prior to coming to teach at a seminary.

This does not, however, fully answer the question. Various understandings are found within the SBC on what the qualifications of an overseer are. The particular qualification in question is the expression “husband of one wife” found in 1 Timothy 3: 2. Several interpretations are proposed for its meaning. The statement could be a prohibition against polygamy. Thus, the apostle Paul is prohibiting an overseer from having multiple wives. It could be that Paul is demanding that an overseer be a husband. That is, an overseer must be married to serve in this role. Single men “need not apply.” The phrase has been understood to mean that an overseer can have only one wife per lifetime. If an overseer’s wife should die, he could not remarry. Most of these interpretations should be rejected because they conflict in their understanding with what the Bible teaches in other places on the same subject. For example, the issue of singleness disqualifying a man from serving as pastor is problematic. The apostle Paul

³¹John H. Armstrong, *The Stain That Stays* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2000), 123-135, argues that sexual misconduct by a minister disqualifies that minister permanently from the office.

was single; it is inconceivable that the qualifications for an apostle are less than that of an overseer. Thus, if Paul's singleness did not disqualify him from serving as an apostle, his marital status would not disqualify him from serving as an overseer.

Another understanding, and the one of relevance for the current discussion, is that Paul is prohibiting a man who has been divorced from serving as an overseer.³² This interpretation has enjoyed widespread support in many Baptist churches.³³ The question at hand is, does this verse prohibit divorced men from serving as overseers? If seminary professors have typically served as pastors or served in some kind of shepherding ministry, would this prohibition then carry over to SBC seminary faculty?

Two reasons would lead me to respond "no" to these questions. First, a similar phrase is found in a comparable context that helps us in ascertaining its meaning. The phrase in 1 Timothy 3: 2 can be translated "one woman man." In 1 Timothy 5:9, the term is in the feminine, "one man woman." In chapter five, Paul is providing Timothy guidance for the women's ministry in the Ephesian churches. Of particular importance are his instructions for developing a "widow's list." Evidently, many elderly widows in the area were in destitute situations. The churches had the responsibility to care for and feed these women. Paul gives Timothy instructions for who would and would not qualify to be on "the list" to receive this aid. One of these stipulations was that a widow must be a "one man kind of woman." If this expressions means "never divorced," then the scenario is that only those elderly widows who have never been divorced can be on the list. Any elderly widow who has been divorced and remarried could

³²Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, Jr., *1, 2 Timothy and Titus*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 109.

³³This observation is based on my own personal experience. This is not to say that all SBC churches believe this, or that this is the majority view among SBC churches (although I would conjecture that it has been).

not be on the list and therefore could not receive benevolent assistance from the churches. These women were left to their own devices to fend for themselves. More than likely, Paul was saying that widows who would qualify for this assistance have demonstrated “faithfulness during her marriage to the husband whom she once had.”³⁴

Based on this understanding, the masculine form of this term found in 1 Timothy 3 suggests that an overseer must be a “one woman kind of man.” Paul is demanding that an overseer be faithful to his one wife. An overseer thus should not be a man who is susceptible to sexual temptation or is lax in his sexual deportment.³⁵ This would include a man with “roving eye” or flirtatious disposition.³⁶ Thus, the phrase should not be understood as meaning divorce.

The expression does, however, have profound implications on the issue. For example, suppose a man experiences a divorce early in his life. And, for the sake of argument, he is the innocent party in the breakup. He then later remarries and demonstrates marital faithfulness and loving devotion to his wife for a significant period of time.³⁷ In other words, he is a “one woman kind of man.” He theoretically could, after significant amount of time of demonstrating this trait, serve as an overseer. On the other hand, a man who has experienced several divorces and

³⁴Lea and Griffin, 150.

³⁵Ibid., 110.

³⁶John R. Bisagno, *Letters to Timothy: A Handbook for Pastors* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Pub., 2001), 27, has some interesting pastoral observations regarding the subject of divorce/remarriage and deacons. His comments, although about deacons, also have bearing on the topic under consideration. He writes:

The best thinking today from Greek scholars is that it is impossible in the Greek for this expression “husband of one wife” to refer to a status. It cannot be a status. It must be a trait. It is not what one is (i.e., married or divorced); it is what one is like, (i.e., faithful to his wife). . . . Many men who are married only once are not one-woman men. . . . While remaining married to one woman is commendable, it is no indication or guarantee of moral purity.

³⁷The issue of how long is sufficient is open-ended. I do not think that a few months or a couple of years will suffice. I envision many years in which the man manifests this trait faithfully. For the man who has a divorce in his background, he should patiently wait on God to call him into a vocational overseeing-type ministry, such as pastor and/or professor.

remarriages is demonstrating a problem with being a “one woman man.” I would say that, in this scenario, this man does not fulfill the qualifications given in 1 Timothy 3.

If the preceding interpretation of the text is faithful to what Paul means, then the implications of this understanding carry over to the seminary professor. A divorce should not *de facto* disqualify a person (in this case a man; I will address the issue of female professors momentarily) from serving as a seminary professor. If he has demonstrated the trait of being a “one woman kind of man” for a significant period of time, and thus can serve as an overseer of a local church, then he should also be afforded the opportunity to serve as a seminary professor. Although his divorce could disqualify him (depending on the circumstances), he should not categorically be eliminated from a pastoral kind of ministry (overseer or professor).

Can a seminary professor be “biblically-divorced” and continue as a faculty member? Based upon the interpretations of the passages presented herein and the conclusions drawn from them, I would respond “yes.” To remove persons from their teaching post because of divorce based upon their spouse’s *porneia* or desertion indirectly implicates them. The Bible draws a distinction between the culpable party and the innocent party in this matter, and our response to divorces that result from these circumstances should likewise do the same. As I understand the exception clause of Matthew 19, there are occasions when a divorce has an innocent party. The person can remarry without the fear of guilt for committing adultery.

This distinction has implications for professorial ministry. If the guilt of the divorce rests upon the one committing *porneia* or desertion, and the innocent spouse has biblical “permission,” so to speak, to remarry, then the individual should likewise have biblical “permission” to continue in his or her vocational calling; in this case, the professorial ministry. Granted, freedom to one thing does not necessarily imply freedom to do another. Yet, the lack of

clear and unequivocal direction on this matter leads me to conclude that if the innocent party is not disqualified from remarriage, then the person should equally have the freedom to continue in the professorial calling without fear of disqualification.

Are all seminary faculty “pastoral” in their teaching vocation? Are certain faculty positions “non-pastoral?” These questions can be addressed in different ways. One means of broaching the subject is to ask, how does the seminary professor understand his or her calling? Or, to put it another way, has the professor functioned pastorally in a local church context? Is the professor ordained? More than likely, the professor who has served as a pastor or church staff position is going to perceive his teaching ministry at a seminary as an extension of this pastoral role. Further, the church members or ministers in SBC churches typically view the professors in SBC seminaries “pastorally.” In all likelihood, most seminary faculty (i.e. men) must and should meet the same criteria as pastors.

Another way of looking at this question, however, regards the particular discipline of the professor. Select professors may be asked to teach certain subjects because of the unique skills or experiences they possess. These persons may or may not have served in some capacity as a minister in a church context (although one would hope that they had or eventually would), but the skills they bring may benefit the church and thus merit a presence on a seminary faculty. Although they may occupy a unique place within the faculty or have mastered a unique ministry skill, this should not greatly change the expectations or standards. If they had committed *porneia* or had deserted their marriage, then they would not be qualified to start or continue teaching. Further, just because they are not “pastoral” in vocation or calling does not mean that they should not exhibit marital faithfulness and devotion. Although they may not feel called to function in a pastoral role or may not be biblically qualified to be a pastor (ex., a woman who

teaches music, counseling, etc.), the standards of Christian morality and the teachings of the Bible regarding marriage and divorce still apply to them.

Does divorce before becoming a believer make a difference? My initial response to this is “yes” and “no.” On the one hand, God’s expectations for marriage are part of His creative intention. God desires for a “man to leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife.” This intention, it seems to me, is applicable both to believers and unbelievers. On the other hand, the expectations for Christ-like treatment and the on-going quest for gospel reconciliation remind us that “Christian marriages” do and should have higher expectations than non-Christians. We would not expect obedience to the teachings of Jesus among unbelievers. Thus, we should not be unduly surprised when sinful attitudes and activities result in divorce among unbelievers.

With regard to the issue of divorces that occur before conversion, how much of the “old things” have passed away, and how great are the implications of “all things have become new?” It is difficult to say that the consequences of past actions completely disappear upon conversion. The ramifications of a failed marriage and any culpability on the part of the professor do not cease when the person becomes a believer. As such, while the individual’s previous divorce may not disqualify the person from professorial service, it certainly should be a significant factor in consideration of service upon a seminary faculty. The principles established herein should be incorporated in the overall decision-making process for the person’s service in a professorial ministry.

A final observation is in order. Based upon my pastoral experience, I have observed an interesting phenomenon occurring within evangelical circles. Many Christians in our Baptist churches have experienced a divorce. Throughout their ordeal and, especially in its aftermath, they devote themselves to in-depth study and reflection upon the events that have occurred.

Many of these individuals study various positions and perspectives on divorce and remarriage, seeking to interpret what has happened in their lives. I have discovered among these persons that they, in an attempt to find peace and/or forgiveness for their situation, have concluded that their particular divorce meets the standards for the biblical exceptions. In other words, I have rarely met a divorced believer who did not feel that their divorce was biblically permitted; the person believes that he or she was the “innocent party.” In reality, this may or may not actually be the case. I would therefore counsel great caution and discernment among seminary administrators as they ascertain whether or not the interpretation of the events of the divorce presented to them is actually what occurred.

Conclusion

Divorce is not the unpardonable sin, and the preceding discussions have attempted to separate issues of salvation from issues of discipleship. Unfortunately, some within the church have acted as though divorce is the unforgivable sin. Further, the common practice of divorce makes it a volatile issue, particularly when addressing the issue in relation to clergy (and, in this case, with seminary professors).³⁸ The only appropriate way to address this issue, and with any issue for that matter, is by reliance upon the Holy Spirit and a sense of the need of God’s ongoing grace.

As this discussion demonstrates, the divorce issue is quite intricate and complex. There are no easy answers or “quick-fix” formulas for deciding this matter. In a sense, every divorce is as unique as the individuals involved. Each case should be weighed and evaluated on its own unique circumstances, using the principles established from God’s Word for guidance. As is the

³⁸Two Lutheran ministers, Leigh Jordahl and William Stickley, illustrate the volatility of this subject. Jordahl, “On Clerical Divorces,” *Dialogue* 14 (Summer 1975): 223-225, takes the position of no divorce and

case in all areas of life, reconciliation through Christ of all parties involved in the dilemma of a divorce is the goal. More than anything else, may He find us resolutely and forgivingly faithful and true to His word.

remarriage for clergy. In his reply, Stickley, "On Divorce Clergy, A Response," *Dialogue* 15 (Spring 1976): 148-149, vehemently reacts to Jordahl's position. Evidently, Jordahl hit a little too close to home for Stickley.