

Divorce And Remarriage Today

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Dear Members of the Endtime Issues Newsletter:

The last newsletter (no. 51) dealing with the biblical teachings on divorce and remarriage resonated with a good number of our subscribers who wrote to share the pain of their broken marriage. Reading the many responses received made me painfully aware of the increasing number of broken relationships.

It is evident that Satan is working overtime to destroy two vital creational institutions: the Sabbath and marriage. Both were established at creation as signs of covenant relationships. The Sabbath to express our covenant commitment to God and marriage to enter into a covenant commitment with our spouse.

The method Satan has used to undermine both the Sabbath and marriage is deception. He has deceived people into believing that there is nothing sacred about the Sabbath or marriage. The Sabbath is not a HOLY DAY to seek for divine presence and peace, but a HOLIDAY to seek for personal pleasure and profit. Similarly marriage is not a SACRED COVENANT witnessed and guaranteed by God Himself, but a CIVIL CONTRACT that can be easily dissolved through the legal process. The result of this deception is the profanation of God's Holy Day and the escalation of divorce, which is affecting people from all walks of life, including an increasing number of Adventists.

I believe that to counteract the secularization and easy-dissolution of marriage, it is imperative for us to recover the Biblical view of marriage as a sacred, lifelong covenant. The recovery of such view can motivate us to engage all our resources toward ensuring that no one will put asunder what God has united. This will be the focus of this newsletter which attempts to apply the biblical teaching on divorce and remarriage to our contemporary situation.

The last newsletter caught the attention of several religious editors who asked permission to publish it in their magazines or journals. One of the requests came from Ed Christian, Ph. D., who is currently serving as the editor of the **JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY**. He requested to publish the unabridged version of this study. The article will appear in the very next edition of JATS which is scheduled to come out in few days. To subscribe to this informative journal, e-mail your request to: <ats86@email.com>

SABBATH IN THE NEWS

In the last newsletter we noted the unusual interest for the Sabbath shown by the public media and recent publications. It is encouraging to see new books and articles written by church leaders and scholars who are rediscovering the validity and value of seventh-day Sabbathkeeping for today.

An important factor contributing to bring the Sabbath to national attention, is Al Gore's choice of Joseph Lieberman, senator from Connecticut, as his running mate for the presidential democratic ticket of the United States. The fact that Senator Lieberman is an Orthodox Jew who observes the Sabbath scrupulously from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset, and consequently will not campaign on Saturday for his new boss, raises the important question of religious freedom in the workplace. Lieberman is lucky to work for a boss who is willing to grant him the Sabbath day off to honor God on His Holy Day, but there are thousands of Americans who are not so lucky.

Al Gore's willingness to accommodate Lieberman's Sabbathkeeping, provides a unique opportunity to appeal to the Congress and the Senate, to extend the same privilege to thousands of Sabbatarian who loose their jobs every year, because their employers are not willing to accommodate their religious convictions. This problem could be alleviated if Congress would pass the proposed Workplace Religious Freedom Act (WRFA).

To help us appreciate what is at stake, I am posting a news release prepared by Alan Reinach, an attorney and minister who serves as President of the Seventh-day Adventist Church State Council for the Pacific Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. His email address is <ajreinach@email.msn.com> I found his release very compelling and I am posting it with his permission.

**Pacific Union Conference
Department of Public Affairs & Religious Liberty
Church State Newsflash!!!
News release sent to media**

August 17, 2000

Yesterday, we sent the following opinion article to newspapers in the five states of the Pacific Union. Given Senator Lieberman's convention speech last night, we are encouraged that this release is well timed, and appropriate. Please join us in praying that it is published, and that we build support for the Religious Freedom in the Workplace Act.

**Religious Freedom in the Workplace
by Alan Reinach, J. D.**

Joe Lieberman has one of the toughest jobs in America. For the next 10 weeks, Senator Lieberman will engage in a non-stop, 18-hour daily grind, campaigning in the highest stakes election in the nation. Yet each week, before sunset on Friday, Joe will take what all of us could use, a 24-hour break, a Sabbath rest. He will emerge from this rest revived and ready for the challenges of a new week.

Joe is lucky. He has a boss who knew he wanted Sabbath off, and agreed to "hire" him anyway. Thousands of Americans are not so lucky. When they tell a prospective employer they can't work on the Sabbath, they don't get hired. Thousands more lose their jobs each year when schedules are changed to require them to work in conflict with their faith. These problems arise in every industry, especially those with around-the-clock cycles. They involve people of many different religions, Jews, Christians, Muslims and others.

The suffering caused by such discrimination can be immense. Nydia Gomez was fired from her housekeeping supervisor job at a national hotel chain when, after 15 years,

her schedule was changed to require Sabbath work. When prospective employers heard why she was fired, they shunned her.

Jeff Phillips worked in the warehouse of a multinational paper company for 18 years. For no apparent reason, he was put on night shift and required to work on Friday nights, in violation of his faith. When he requested religious accommodation, they fired him. When prospective employers found out why he was fired, no one would touch him. Out of work for almost three years, at age 47 he had to move back in with his parents.

One of the most difficult employers is the United States Postal Service. Mail carriers have lodged literally hundreds of complaints of religious discrimination. Even though the Postal Service has carriers who cover for those out sick and on vacation, they refuse to use these carriers to give religious accommodation to Sabbath observers.

Thousands of Americans violate their faith each week by working on a day believed to be sacred. They bear a load of intense guilt, assuming they have no other choice. From a legal standpoint, they're mostly right.

Many employers are committed to non-discrimination, and do provide religious accommodation. Their actions prove that it can be done easily, in most cases, without the company incurring substantial costs.

Many more employers are either indifferent or hostile to employees' requests for religious accommodation. They respond to such requests as an affront to their authority, and summarily dismiss these workers. In many such cases, they have rejected accommodation proposals that could be easily implemented.

A coalition of faith communities, led by the American Jewish Committee's Richard Foltin, have drafted the **Workplace Religious Freedom Act (WRFA)**, now introduced in both the U. S. House of Representatives and Senate. The bill would clarify confusion in the current law - whether a "reasonable accommodation" must actually remove the conflict with a worker's faith.

Many companies believe that removing the conflict with a worker's faith only some of the time is "reasonable." This still leaves workers with a choice between their religion and their job. The bill would clarify that a "reasonable" accommodation must completely remove the conflict between a worker's faith and the job requirement. Yet the requirement is not absolute.

A company is excused from accommodations that result in "undue hardship" under current law, even trivial costs now constitute such hardships. The bill would redefine 'undue hardship' to mean 'significant difficulty or expense', insuring that accommodations are required unless the cost to the company really is too high.

Contrary to objections from the business community, this would actually save employers money. It clarifies a gray area that discourages speedy resolution of these problems that often lead to higher cost litigation. By cutting down on the number of discrimination claims, the reduction in litigation costs will more than offset any marginal expenses of providing accommodation. Moreover, companies stand to reap a windfall in productivity gains from appreciative employees who are now frequently demoralized.

America rightly celebrates the breaking down of barriers, and the spirit of inclusiveness symbolized by Senator Lieberman's nomination. But this symbolic gesture needs to be supported with concrete action. Both parties need to act now to pass the WRFA and insure that Americans of all faiths will not be forced to choose between their religion and their job.

THE CHRISTIAN AND ROCK MUSIC

Encouraging responses are coming in every day from readers of the new book ***THE CHRISTIAN AND ROCK MUSIC: A STUDY OF BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES OF MUSIC***. Truly I can say that the demand for this timely book has surpassed our fondest expectations. The first printing of 10,000 copies sold out in few weeks. The second (corrected) edition is selling very well. Every day we mail out the book by the case of 26 copies to churches and institutions around the world.

It is especially gratifying to receive orders from music directors and music professors. During the past few days we received several orders from church music directors and college music professors. Yesterday we mailed two case (54 copies) to Dr. James Bingham, Chair of the Music Department at Columbia Union College. In a telephone conversation he told me that he was very impressed by this book which he wanted to share with faculties and students.

Several pastors have expressed their appreciation for the way the book has helped them to understand the distinction between sacred music for worship and secular music for entertainment. One pastor told me that he was surprised to learn that no percussion instruments such as drums or tambourines were ever allowed in the worship service of the Temple, synagogue, and early church. The reason is not because such instruments are "evil" per se, but rather because they were associated with entertainment music which was and is out of place in God's House. This is an important lesson for the church today, when entertainment music and percussion instruments are often turning the worship service into an entertainment program.

To facilitate a massive distribution of ***THE CHRISTIAN AND ROCK MUSIC***, we are extending indefinitely the following special offer:

1 copy	US\$20.00, postage paid.
2 copies	US\$30.00, postage paid.
26 copies (one complete case)	US\$170.00, postage paid even overseas. (Only \$6.50 a copy, instead of the regular price of \$20.00).

To order copies of ***THE CHRISTIAN AND ROCK MUSIC*** for yourself or your church, feel free to call us at (616) 471-2915 or email us your request with your credit card information at <sbacchiocchi@qtm.net>. We guarantee to process your order on the same day we receive it.

THE GC SESSION SPECIAL OFFER

The special GC session offer on all my **16 books for only \$100.00**, postage paid, instead of the regular price of \$305.00 **will terminate on August 31, 2000**. The same is true of the special offer on the 20 cassettes and 8 videos, containing my popular lectures on the Sabbath, Second Advent, Temperance, Women's Ministry, and the Prophetic Role of Pope John II. You can order the complete set of the **20 cassettes and 8 video tapes until August 31, 2000, for only \$70.00**, instead of the regular price of \$225.00.

Your special offer for the complete package of 16 books, 20 cassettes, and 8 video tapes is only \$170.00, postage paid, instead of the regular price of \$525.00. Note that you have few days left to take advantage of this special offer which expires on August 31, 2000.

DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE TODAY

**Samuele Bacchiocchi, Ph. D., Prof. of Theology,
Andrews University**

Often, it is easier to take a machine apart than it is to put it back together into working order. Even skilled technicians sometimes have problems in reassembling certain machines. The same can be true in the study and application of Biblical teachings on divorce and remarriage. To examine the various Old and New Testaments texts relating to divorce and remarriage is in a way an easier task than applying the teaching of such texts to concrete situations. Yet in the final analysis, what really counts is the way Biblical principles are applied to actual marital situations today.

The task of this Bible study is twofold. First, we shall endeavor to summarize the fundamental principles that have emerged from our study of the Biblical teachings on divorce and remarriage in the previous newsletter. Second, we shall discuss how the church, in faithful obedience to the Word of God can uphold and apply its teachings on divorce and remarriage today. We shall endeavor to be both specific and practical while recognizing the complexity of the subject.

PRINCIPLES AND THEIR APPLICATION

1. Divorce Violates God's Intent for Marriage

Prohibition of Divorce and Remarriage. The first fundamental principle stressed in both the Old and New Testaments is that divorce represents a violation of God's original intent for marriage. The Biblical vision of marriage as a sacred, lifelong covenant is rooted in the creation account of the institution of marriage (Gen 2:18-24). Here, marriage is seen as an institution established by God to enable a man and a woman to become "one flesh" (Gen 2:24). It is because God designed marriage to be a thorough merging of two personalities into one life that separation is disapproved.

The condemnation of divorce expressed by Malachi (2:13-16) in the Old Testament and by Jesus (Matt 5:39; 19:3-9; Mark 10:3-12) and Paul (1 Cor 7:10-10:14) in the New Testament is based on the Creator's vision of the institution of marriage as an indissoluble union.

Difficult Application. The application of the Biblical prohibition of divorce and remarriage is a most difficult task. A major reason is the fact that, in our secular society, marriage is seldom viewed as a sacred, divine institution designed to merge two personalities into an indissoluble union. For the most part, marriage has been "desacralized." It is no longer a permanent, sacred covenant, witnessed and guaranteed by God Himself, but rather a social contract that can be easily terminated. The goal of marriage in our society is not to achieve a spiritual union but to enjoy mutual satisfaction. If one or both partners no longer feel satisfied by the performance of their spouses, they feel free to terminate their relationships and to establish new ones.

The growing acceptance of the secular view of marriage by Christian churches is influencing Christians, including some church leaders, to believe that divorce is a guiltless and at times proper procedure. This perception contributes to the rising divorce rate among Christians. This means that if Christian churches want to substantially reduce the divorce rate among their members, they must propagate through all their resources the Biblical view of marriage as a sacred, permanent covenant. The acceptance of this view will lead to the rejection of divorce as a violation of God's intent for marriage.

It is interesting to note on this regard that Roman Catholics have one of the lowest divorce rates in America. The 1985 study of S. Kenneth Chi and Sharon K. Houseknecht, two sociologists from Ohio State University, indicates that among Catholics, there are just 8 divorced persons for every 100 non-divorced persons.¹ This divorce rate is three times lower than the national average. The reason, as the sociologists point out, is that Catholics have greater reverence for marriage and the family. Their deeply rooted

theological conviction that marriage is an indissoluble, sacramental union, contributes to a high view of marriage, thus discouraging the possibility of divorce.

If Christian churches wish to alter the permissive attitude of people toward divorce and remarriage, they need to reject divorce by aggressively promoting the Biblical view of marriage as a sacred, lifelong covenant. Such a program would involve actively engaging all of the preaching, teaching, and counseling resources that Christian churches possess.

Preaching Efforts. Preaching on the Biblical vision of the indissolubility of marriage and on the Biblical disapproval of divorce and remarriage can be a risky business today. Chances are that most pastors would not survive very long in most parishes if they boldly proclaimed what the Bible teaches on marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Considering that in many congregations half or more members are divorced and remarried, it can be suicidal for any pastor to dare to preach against divorce and remarriage. This may explain why we seldom hear sermons on this subject. I do not recall ever having heard a sermon on this subject during the past 26 years I have lived in the USA. By being silent, however, pastors become part of the problem rather than part of its solution.

The solution must be found in encouraging pastors to seek divine grace, wisdom, and courage in preaching the truth in love. This involves, for example, following the example of Jesus in choosing not to attack those who are divorced and remarried but to help everyone understand what God wants our marriages to be. It involves helping married people to learn how to resolve their differences openly, honestly, and constructively without making recourse to divorce. It involves teaching how to build up the marriage covenant by being willing every day to make a total, exclusive, continuing, and growing commitment to one's marriage partner. To the same extent that pastors succeed in helping their members recover and experience the Biblical vision of marriage as a sacred, lifelong covenant, they will be successful in stemming the tide of divorce in their congregations and eventually in the society at large.

Educational Endeavors. This task, however, cannot be left to preaching alone. Another important avenue is teaching. Christian churches can effectively propagate the Biblical vision of marriage through their various educational programs and publications. There is a great need for literature articulating not the cultural, but the Biblical view of marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

Much of the literature available in libraries and bookstores treat this subject purely from a sociological perspective. Marriage is seen as a societal institution governed by the laws of the land rather than by the higher moral law of God. The "no fault" divorce law makes it possible to put asunder what God has united for less than the price of a good suit. To counteract this societal trend, it is imperative to teach in our church schools, Sabbath, or Sunday schools the Biblical view of marriage as a sacred, lifelong covenant, witnessed and guaranteed by God Himself. It is essential to strengthen the conviction that God, who has joined our lives together in holy matrimony, wants us to stay together and will help us to stay together.

An important part of the educational program is pre- and post-marital counseling. Christian counselors need to help couples contemplating marriage to understand the serious nature of their marriage commitments. They need to help couples find out whether or not they are suited for one another and are willing to commit themselves to maintaining their marital union, no matter what. If the counselor discovers that partners are not suited for each other or that their commitment is superficial at best, then he must advise them to reconsider their marriage plans or at least postpone them temporarily until some of the existing problems have been resolved.

Counseling should continue into the first two or three years of marriage. This is the time when problems arise and the harsh realities become known. More marriages are made or broken during the first few years than at any other period. Counseling during this crucial period can help partners resolve their conflicts and thus facilitate the adjustment

process that will gradually lead to the merging of their two lives into “one.” Preparing couples for good marriages and helping them to maintain their unions through the storms of the first few years of their marriages will go a long way toward rendering divorce obsolete and unnecessary.

2. A Christian Couple Should Not Seek Divorce

A second important principle that has emerged in the course of our study is that a Christian couple experiencing marital conflicts should not seek to resolve them through divorce. We have found this principle best expressed in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 where Paul emphatically affirms twice the “no divorce” principle: “. . . the wife should not separate from her husband . . . and the husband should not divorce his wife.” The basis of Paul’s ruling is the teaching of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels to which he appeals (“not I but the Lord”—1 Cor 7:10).

It is important to note that while today Christians debate whether or not it is right for a divorced person to remarry, both Christ and Paul dealt with the issue of whether or not it is right for married people to divorce. Their answer is abundantly clear: “Absolutely not!” A believer should not seek divorce because the marriage union is sacred and lifelong. To destroy such a union through divorce and remarriage is to commit adultery.

No Application by Jesus. Jesus made no attempt to apply the “no divorce” principle to concrete marital situations. His concern was to counteract the prevailing trend of easy dissolving marriages simply because Moses seemed to have allowed it. This He did by reaffirming God’s creational intent for marriage to be a sacred, lifelong union. While Jesus condemned as “adultery” any attempt to destroy the marriage union through divorce and remarriage, He offered no advice on what Christian couples should do when their marriage relationships becomes intolerable.

Christ’s concern was to reveal God’s creative intent for marriage and to challenge people to live according to such a divine ideal. This does not mean that Christ was insensitive to those who had come short of God’s expectations by divorcing and remarrying. On the contrary, He drew close to publicans and sinners because He had come “to seek and save the lost” (Luke 19:10). When He met the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well, He did not sit in judgment over her abysmal record of five past marriages and a current illicit relationship. Instead, He ministered to her spiritual needs by helping her understand the spiritual nature and worship of God (John 4:16-26).

The purpose of Christ’s ministry was to reveal, on the one hand, God’s absolute creative will and, on the other hand, God’s absolute redemptive love. He revealed God’s *absolute will* in terms of general principles rather than in terms of specific applications of such principles. He taught, for example, that nursing anger is the equivalent of murder (Matt 5:22), that lusting is the equivalent of adultery (Matt 5:28), and that divorcing and remarrying is the equivalent of adultery (Matt 19:9). In none of these instances, however, did Christ explain how to deal with those who had committed such sins. Instead, He chose to reveal God’s *absolute acceptance* of sinners. The prodigal son is accepted back and fully pardoned for his sins (Luke 15:11-32). The lost sheep is sought and found (Luke 15:1-10). The penitent tax collector is justified by God rather than the self-righteous Pharisee (Luke 18:11-14).

The same dual perspective applies to marriage and divorce. We have found that, on the one hand, Jesus condemned divorce as a violation of God’s original plan for marriage to be a permanent union of a man and a woman. Yet, on the other hand, He showed divine forgiveness and acceptance of those who had thwarted God’s intent for their marriage. He offered, however, no explicit directives on how the church should deal with those experiencing marital problems. Perhaps the Lord chose to do so to prevent our mechanical application of few rules to complex marital situations. He left to His followers the responsibility of applying the principles He had revealed.

3. Conditional Separation is Permissible in Cases of Serious Marital Problems

Paul offers us an example of how he applied Christ's prohibition of divorce and remarriage by allowing for a conditional separation in cases of serious marital problems. This is the third important principle that has emerged in the course of our study. We have found that, on the one hand, Paul appealed to Christ's teaching in ruling that a Christian couple should not seek divorce, but, on the other hand, he recognized that marriage can become intolerable even when both partners are believing Christians. In this case, he interprets the "no divorce" ruling of Christ as allowing a conditional separation. The condition consists of remaining permanently unmarried or of being reconciled to one's partner (1 Cor 7:11).

We noted earlier that by recommending a legal separation-type of divorce, Paul respects the spirit of Christ's "no-divorce" ruling by providing an opportunity for the couple to separate while working toward a possible reconciliation. Paul's recommendation suggests that a Christian couple should never feel that it is God's will for them to terminate their marriage relationship. Even if they are so incompatible that it would have been better for them not to get married in the first place, it is always God's will for them to remain married once they are. Overcoming incompatibilities is part of the challenge of being transformed by God's enabling grace. The Lord provides us with resources that can turn incompatible differences into complementary strengths.

Divine Resources. In times of marital stress, it is important to remember that divine resources are available for helping us resolve our conflicts. Such resources include the guidance of the Word of God, prayer, and the transforming power of His Spirit. As we learn to utilize the resources God provides, we will discover that no problem is too big for God to handle. It is important to remember that God is interested in our homes, and that He will move heaven and earth, if necessary, to resolve our marital conflicts. But He needs our cooperation. The problem is that sometimes we fail to cooperate with God by neglecting or rejecting the divine resources He provides us with. The inevitable result is marital breakups.

Reconciliation. When separation becomes necessary, God's one desire for the Christian couple is that they be reconciled (1 Cor 7:11). To facilitate the reconciliation process, a Christian couple who wishes to register their marital breakdown should file for legal separation rather than for divorce. By choosing the latter option, they leave the door open for reconciliation. Many difficult marriages could be saved if the church upheld the principle of "no-divorce," allowing instead only a separation in view of a possible reconciliation. If Christian couples experiencing marital problems were told by their churches that they could file for legal separation but they must leave the door open for reconciliation by not remarrying, chances are that most couples would earnestly seek to resolve their conflicts, rather than risk remaining single.

When separation has taken place, it is God's desire for the Christian couple to be reconciled (1 Cor 7:11). God desires reconciliation because He hates divorce (Mal 2:16). Reconciliation should begin with repentance on the part of both partners since breakups are rarely one-sided. As repentance is the first step in our reconciliation with God, so it is also the first step in our reconciliation with our marriage partners. The spirit of repentance should manifest itself in a forgiving and submissive attitude and in an earnest desire to seek the spiritual resources God has provided to bring about healing and reconciliation.

An Example. An example of a couple we have known for many years might help to illustrate the principle enunciated above. To protect their identity their names have been changed. Mary and John were married for twenty-five years and had brought up two children together. When their two children were "out of their nest," without warning, Mary told John that their relationship had become boring and she wanted to start a new life on her own.

She filed for divorce and soon afterward she moved away into an apartment by herself. John was devastated. It took him over a year to recover from the shock and to put the pieces of his life back together. Then he began asking me, "What shall I do?" An unbeliever would advise him to forget about Mary and look for a good woman to enjoy the rest of his life. But the advice of the Scripture is different. John must continue to pray and work for a possible reconciliation with Mary as long as there exists the possibility of reconciliation.

About two years after their divorce, Mary realized the mistake she had made, and begged John to take her back. At first John was reluctant, but then he finally agreed and they were remarried. Today, John tells me that they are happier than ever before.

4. Divorce and Remarriage are Permissible When Reconciliation is no Longer Possible

Reconciliation, however, is not always possible. Such would be the case if Mary had remarried or if she were living in a common-law situation. In such instances our study has shown that divorce and remarriage are permissible. When remarriage has taken place or when the other partner persists in maintaining an adulterous relationship, the former union is permanently dissolved in God's eyes.

We have found this truth emphasized in Deuteronomy 24:2-4 where God prohibits resuming a former union following a second marriage. Such an action is condemned as an "abomination" that pollutes the land (Jer 3:1). When remarriage has taken place, the former marriage is unalterably broken and reconciliation is no longer possible. In such a situation, the other partner is no longer bound. With repentance, he or she will seek divine guidance in determining whether or not to enter into a new marriage relationship.

The Right to Remarry. The question many divorced persons ask today is, "Do I have the right to remarry according to the Scriptures?" This is a crucial question because it involves the lives of an increasing number of church members who seek assurance from their pastor or church that they can enter into a new marriage relationship with a clear conscience. Such assurance must be rooted in the teachings of the Bible and not on personal feelings. If the Bible is normative for our beliefs and practices, it ought to provide guidance on this crucial issue affecting so many lives today. We believe it does.

Our study has shown that remarriage is wrong while the possibility exists of maintaining a marriage relationship or of working toward a reconciliation. We have found that only the permanent departure of a spouse dissolves a marriage bond (1 Cor 7:15). Such a departure can be caused by death (1 Cor 7:39; Rom 7:2) or by the permanent desertion of an unbelieving spouse (1 Cor 7:15). In either case, the surviving spouse is released from the marriage bond and is free to remarry.

The Unbelieving Partner in Paul's Time. Since we have found that the willful and permanent desertion by the unbelieving partner constitutes legitimate grounds for divorce and remarriage (1 Cor 7:15), it is important at this juncture to define "the unbelieving partner." It is evident that for Paul "the unbelieving partner" was a pagan spouse who refused to accept the Christian faith.

In view of the fact that in cities like Corinth most of the church members were converts from paganism, there must have been a considerable number of mixed marriages, where only one partner was a Christian. This situation caused serious marital problems when, for example, the pagan husband did not want to put up with a Christian wife who refused to engage in pagan practices condemned by the Christian faith.

This posed a serious problem. How can a Christian maintain a marriage with an unbelieving partner who wanted out of the marriage? Paul knew that Jesus proscribed divorce. But applying this principle was difficult in a concrete situation of a mixed-marriage where an obstinate unbeliever wanted out of the relationship. In seeking for a practical solution, Paul, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, upheld the "no-divorce" ruling of

Jesus for believing partners while allowing for the dissolution of marriages in the case of desertion by an unbelieving partner. The reason given by Paul is that "God has called us to peace" (1 Cor 7:15). No peaceful marital relationship would be possible with a hostile unbelieving partner.

The Unbelieving Partner Today. How can we practice the "interpretative freedom" of Paul today in dealing with difficult marriage situations not contemplated in the Scripture. In Paul's time, the major problem in the Corinthian church was that of mixed-marriages in which the unbelieving partner made it impossible to maintain a peaceful relationship and willfully deserted his or her believing spouse. In our times, the situation can be quite different. Often the deserter is not an unbeliever, but a nominal Christian. In Paul's times, most of the church members in cities like Corinth were converts from paganism. Today, most of them come from a Christian background.

Being born, brought up and baptized in a Christian church, however, does not necessarily make a person a "believer." Biblically speaking, a "believer" is one who practices the principles of the Christian faith he or she professes to believe in. This means that spouses who are homosexual, sexually promiscuous, physically and verbally abusive, addicted to alcohol or drugs, treacherous, slanderous, or lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, can hardly be called a "believing Christians," though baptized members of Christian churches. Such persons may hold a form of religion but by their life-style deny its power (2 Tim 3:5).

How should a Christian relate to a spouse who persists in his or her perverse life-style? Paul's admonition is straightforward, "Avoid such people" (2 Tim 3:5). This admonition applies both to social and marital relationships. Living with and loving a person who blatantly and obstinately violates the moral principles of Christianity, means condoning such an immoral lifestyle.

This means that the rule that applied by Paul to the desertion of an unbelieving partner from a pagan background can be legitimately applied also to the desertion by a nominally "believing partner" from a Christian background. In both instances, the desertion is caused by the unwillingness on the part of the other partner to accept or at least to respect the principles and practices of the believing partner. In both instances, "if the unbelieving partner desires to separate, let it be so; in such a case, the brother or sister is not bound" (1 Cor 7:15).

An Example. The following true example may help to illustrate the principle under consideration. The names have been changed. Julie met Robert in her junior year at a Christian college. He appealed to her as a responsible, mature, and intelligent Christian young man. They were married soon after graduation. For the first couple of years, they got along quite well, until gradually Robert started going out with the "boys." When he returned home late at night, he was usually drunk and became verbally abusive and physically violent. Julie soon discovered that Robert also had homosexual preferences, enjoying being with the "boys" more than being with her. When Julie urged Robert to repent of his evil ways and return to the Lord, he left her for good.

Julie was devastated by this whole experience. It took her over a year to recover and to put the pieces of her life back together. Then she began asking, "Do I have the right to remarry according to the Scripture?" In the light of our study, the answer is "yes," because Robert by his lifestyle proved to be an unbelieving partner who wanted out of the marriage. "In such a case," the Scripture says, "the brother or sister is not bound" (1 Cor 7:15).

Julie was released from her marriage bond because in spite of her best efforts, there was no longer a possibility of maintaining a peaceful marital relationship or of helping Robert to change his perverse lifestyle. We noted that the Scripture enjoins "no-separation" as long as a peaceful marital relationship can be maintained and the Christian spouse can exercise a sanctifying influence on his/her unbelieving partner (1 Cor 7:12-14). But if a spouse persists in his or her wicked ways and/or endangers the life of family

members, the admonition of the Scripture is clear: “Avoid such people” (2 Tim 3:5). This admonition applies both to social and marital relationships. For the sake of peace and mental sanity, it becomes a necessity for a Christian spouse to break up a marital relationship with an abusive, violent, and perverse partner.

Desertion and Remarriage. A question that often comes up is, “When is desertion proper ground for divorce and remarriage?” This question is most relevant because desertions are nearly as numerous as legal divorces. In some ways, desertions are more devastating than divorces, not only because of their suddenness but also because of the deserter’s failure to make proper provisions for those left behind.

The Scripture gives no explicit guidelines on when desertion becomes proper grounds for divorce and remarriage. We have found that Paul simply states that the believing partner is no longer bound when his or her unbelieving spouse leaves (1 Cor 7:15). The marriage relationship is terminated by the willful, obstinate, and permanent desertion of a spouse. We can assume that if a desertion continues for a year or more, the deserter has given ample proof of his or her permanent desertion. Though some would argue for a shorter period of time, any future uncertainty would be better allayed if at least a year was allowed to test the permanence of the deserter’s intentions. Such a period of desertion would give ample proof of the dissolution of the marriage.

4. The Church Can Help Prevent Marriage Breakups

A fourth important principle is that the church can play a vital role in preventing marriage breakups. Most of the marital breakups I have known in my itinerant ministry in many parts of the world were caused not by the abusive, violent, perverted behavior of the other partner like in the case of Julie and Robert, but rather by differences in personalities, values, and social, or cultural interests. The inability to discuss openly and to resolve differences gradually weakens the marital commitment, thus tempting many to consider divorce as a solution to their marital problems.

Counseling. The church can play an important role in preventing marriage breakups in these common situations. First, through counseling. A pastor trained not only theologically but also in counseling skills can help a couple having marital conflicts to understand how to resolve their differences constructively, not by seeking divorce but by improving their communication skills. In chapter 4, we discussed seven basic Biblical principles on how to handle marital conflicts constructively. We have found that learning to apply such principles can help a Christian couple to turn conflicts into opportunities for building a stronger marriage covenant.

Teaching. Second, the church can help prevent marriage breakups by teaching that divorce and remarriage should not be considered by Christians as options for resolving their marital problems. If a Christian couple finds it intolerable to live together, they may choose to separate for a time or to file for legal separation. In such instances, the church must make it clear that the only two Scriptural options are (1) to remain single, or (2) to work toward a possible reconciliation. When confronted with the stark reality of choosing between remaining single or being reconciled, chances are that more couples will opt for the latter. Unfortunately, this Biblical teaching is seldom implemented. Most churches have come to accept, in practice if not in principle, divorce and remarriage as a guiltless and normal procedure. By so doing, they are facilitating rather than preventing marriage breakups.

Disciplinary Actions. Third, the church can help prevent marriage breakups by taking disciplinary actions against spouses who choose to divorce and/or remarry on unbiblical grounds. Such actions could involve placing the transgressors under censure for a time by not giving them leadership responsibilities. If during such a time there are no indications of repentance, the church should disfellowship these people in order to express her abhorrence of such evil. Addressing a case of sexual immorality in the church of Corinth, Paul explicitly enjoins, “Let him who has done this be removed from among

you” (1 Cor 5:2). Such an action is necessary in order for the church to uphold its high standard and to sound a clear warning to anyone contemplating divorce.

When church members know that their church does not condone but resolutely condemns any unbiblical divorce and remarriage by punishing them with censure or even disfellowship, they will be less prone to consider divorce as a way out of their marital problems. What encourages Christians to divorce and remarry is the social acceptance of such practices both outside and inside their own church.

On numerous occasions, I have preached in congregations where over half the members, including the pastors, were divorced and remarried. Such situations can only encourage the perception that divorce and remarriage is a guiltless and normal procedure when so many of the members, including some of the church officers, have done it. To the same extent that the church tolerates divorce and remarriage obtained on unbiblical grounds, she becomes morally responsible for failing to prevent marriage breakups.

5. The Church Must Minister to Divorced and Remarried Persons

A fifth important principle is that the church has a responsibility to minister to divorced and/or remarried persons. The church is called, on the one hand, to proclaim God’s will for marriage to be a sacred and permanent covenant and, on the other hand, to extend God’s forgiving grace to those who have sinned by divorcing and remarriage. The challenge is how to extend God’s forgiving grace to sinners without condoning their sin. The tendency is to go to extremes either by totally condemning or by entirely condoning their sin.

Some churches taking the no-divorce position adopt an attitude of hostility and standoffishness toward divorced and/or remarried people. Their perception seems to be that such people have committed the unpardonable sin and that consequently there is not much the church can do for them.

Other churches adopt the opposite position of total tolerance. They welcome divorced and remarried persons, making them feel that there is nothing wrong with what they have done. They extend automatic membership to all, without looking for signs of repentance for past sins or for signs of commitment to a new life of discipleship.

To be faithful to her calling, the church must avoid both extremes. On the one hand, it must avoid the extreme of maximizing sin while minimizing God’s forgiving grace. On the other hand, it must avoid the other extreme of maximizing God’s forgiving grace while minimizing sin.

The church must proclaim that divorce, wrongly obtained, is *sin*—a heinous offense against God and one’s partner. But it must also proclaim that such sin is not too big for God to forgive when genuinely repented of. The Good News of the Gospel is that Christ has saved us from all kinds of sins, including those involving divorce and remarriage. Too often, Christians seem more interested in passing judgment on divorced and remarried people than in extending to them God’s grace and forgiveness.

Role of Pastor. The pastor can play an important role in altering the prejudices of church members against divorced and remarried people. Some of their prejudices may be rooted in a misunderstanding of Biblical teachings. For example, some believe that anyone who divorces and remarries on unbiblical grounds commits the unpardonable sin and consequently cannot be fully accepted into the fellowship of the body of Christ.

The pastor can correct such an attitude by helping his members understand that God forgives all sins, including those of divorce and remarriage. We read in 1 Corinthians 6:10-11 that some of the Corinthian church members, prior to their conversions, had been “adulterers, . . . sexual perverts, . . . thieves, . . . drunkards.” Yet, Paul reassures them that they “were washed, . . . sanctified, . . . justified.” If God forgives murder and sexual

immorality of the basest sort, *the church must do so too*. Forgiveness involves not only cleansing but also acceptance and restoration to full fellowship among the members of Christ's church (2 Cor 2:7-8).

It is significant that in the genealogy of Christ we find Rahab the harlot, and David, who committed adultery and murder. In fact, Christ descended from the sinful union of David and Bathsheba, a union that was eventually blessed by God because of David's repentance and forgiveness. We must not be more pious than God Himself by refusing to accept into full church fellowship those whom God has forgiven and accepted because of their sincere repentance.

The Example of Jesus. Throughout His ministry, Jesus showed more interest in healing broken relationships than in exposing sin in people's lives. The story of the woman taken in adultery (John 8:1-11) exemplifies Jesus' attitude of acceptance and forgiveness. His words reveal no condescension or self-righteousness. He accepts and forgives the woman without condoning her sins. He was the only one righteous enough to cast the first stone, but He would not. Jesus' attitude offers profound insights for the church's ministry to divorced and remarried persons.

In following the example of Jesus, the church must demonstrate more affirmation of than condemnation toward those who are already feeling their guilt deeply. Divorced persons are often weighed down with a deep sense of guilt because they have broken one of the most important commitments of their lives. The responsibility of the church is not to add to the burden of guilt but to extend God's forgiving grace to those in need. Pastors can play a vital role in showing God's forgiving grace through their teachings and attitudes. Sometimes what is caught by the congregation of the pastor's attitude toward divorced and remarried persons may be more influential than what is taught by the pastor in this area.

The Sin of Omission. It is possible that one of the reasons why some members or congregations have difficulty in accepting divorcees is because the members fail to realize the responsibility they share for marriages that end in divorce. The church is a corporate body in which we all share responsibility for one another's attitudes, actions, failures, and successes. If we as a church neglect the teaching of the Biblical view of the sacredness and permanence of marriage, if we fail to help engaged couples see the seriousness of the marriage covenant, and if we fail to attend to their spiritual needs shortly after marriage and during the period of separation, do we dare cast a stone?

In the final analysis, we all share a degree of responsibility in the marital breakups of our fellow believers, if not by commission, then at least by omission. When we fail to challenge the growing acceptance of divorce inside and outside the church, we become indirectly responsible for marital breakups. This does not mean that we should minimize the guilt of those who sin by divorcing or remarrying. It only means that we should accept our fair share of responsibility. When this happens, we will be more charitable and redemptive toward divorced and remarried persons.

Programs for Divorcees. Forgiveness and acceptance to the divorced can best be shown through concrete programs. Words help but often they are not enough. Divorced persons will test the credibility of the church's concern for them by evaluating the programs the church offers them. Generally, divorced persons have practical, emotional, and spiritual needs. They experience a great sense of guilt, loneliness, and devastation of their self-image. The church can help by developing programs to meet such needs.

The church can occasionally, or even regularly, offer a special church service for divorced members. This can be a semi-private service in which an opportunity is provided for expressing sorrow and repentance as well as for experiencing forgiveness and rejoicing. Besides special religious services, there may need to be support groups for divorced persons. One such group could be made up of single parents from one or more local congregations. They can get together to discuss and share the problems divorce brings, such as loneliness, children discipline, lack of finances, and church

expectations. Sometimes a professional person can be invited to talk on a subject and this can be followed by open discussion. Such group gatherings can provide fellowship, counseling, and practical help.

What I am proposing is not that the church become a social agency for divorced persons. Most churches do not even have the financial and professional resources to offer such services. Rather, I am proposing that the church must translate its message of forgiveness and acceptance of divorced persons into concrete programs. Actions speak louder than words. These programs must be seen as part of the mission of the church to reach out to those who are hurting.

The ultimate aim of the ministry of the church is to help divorced persons to experience repentance, forgiveness, cleansing, and reconciliation with God, the church, and themselves. When divorced persons experience this three-dimensional reconciliation, they will develop a new sense of self-esteem, so essential to their well-being. They will also come to view the church as Christ's agency for the reconciliation of the asundered.

CONCLUSION

Faithful to her calling, the church must hold high the banner of marital permanence. It must resist the prevailing secular view of marriage by aggressively promoting the Biblical view of marriage as a sacred, lifelong covenant. Such a program should actively engage all the preaching, teaching, and counseling resources of the church.

To be faithful to her calling, however, the church must not only proclaim God's will for marriage to be a sacred, lifelong covenant, but it must also extend God's forgiving grace to those who have sinned by divorcing and remarrying. It is part of the mission of the church to help divorced and remarried persons to experience repentance, forgiveness, cleansing, and reconciliation with God, the church, and themselves. Our churches should be filled to capacity with sinners who are saved by grace and reconciled to God, and who can then become Christ's agency for the salvation and reconciliation of others.

ENDNOTE

1. S. Kenneth Chi and Sharon K. Houseknecht, "Protestant Fundamentalism and Marital Success," *Sociology and Social Research* 69 (1985): 351-375.

UPCOMING SEMINARS

As a service to our subscribers, I am listing the date and the location of my upcoming weekend SEMINARS on the Sabbath, Second Advent, and Christian Lifestyle. Each seminar consists of three presentations: Friday evening at 7:30 p. m., Sabbath morning at 11:00 a. m., and Sabbath afternoon at 5:00 p. m. Feel free to contact me at (616) 471-2915 for a special seminar in your area.

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SEPTEMBER 8-9: LONDON, ENGLAND

Friday evening: 7:30 p. m. —Willesden SDA Church,
361 High Road, Willesden, London NW10
Sabbath morning and afternoon —Balham SDA CHURCH
16a The Boulevard, Elmfield Road, Balham, London SW17 7BQ For information call
Pastor Hamilton Williams at (01923) 672251

SEPTEMBER 29-30: VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA

Location: Westminster SDA Church
Address: 7925 -10th Avenue, Burnaby, BC V3N 2S3
For information call Pastor David Ellis at (504) 524-3838

OCTOBER 6-7: COLVILLE, WASHINGTON

Location: Auditorium Community College of Spokane
Address: 985 S. Elm Street, Colville, WA 99114
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