

Article reprinted from *Cross+Way* Issue Winter 1999 No. 75

(C)opyright Church Society; material may be used for non-profit purposes provided that the source is acknowledged and the text is not altered.

One or None

by David Phillips

The question of divorce and remarriage is complicated, to say the least. Historically, many protestant reformers allowed both divorce and remarriage. The headline case of Henry VIII and the manouevrings of Thomas Cranmer were hardly commendable but remain a regrettable part of our history.

Under church law, since 1603, the Church has allowed divorce in very restricted circumstances, but has not allowed remarriage at all. Therefore, amongst protestant Churches, the rules of the Church of England are some of the strictest. In 1957 the Convocation of Canterbury upheld this position by agreeing that the marriage service could not be used for remarriage.

Under secular law, both divorce and remarriage are permitted and it is perfectly legal to conduct a remarriage in church. The matter is left to the discretion of the minister. Pastorally, the instances of divorce and remarriage and the host of pastoral issues surrounding this are multiplying rapidly.

Many evangelical writers today defend the position taken by the reformers, which is sometimes based on pragmatism, sometimes based on exegesis and sometimes theologically driven. However, there can be no doubt that the strongest teaching on the indissolubility of marriage is to be found from the lips of the Lord Jesus Christ. Two books mentioned below (Corney and Wenham/Heth) deal with the biblical material very thoroughly. Wenham concludes, 'it seems safest to say that Jesus gave an absolute prohibition of divorce and remarriage'. However, he goes on to say 'if a man is forced to divorce, there is no fault'. Wenham explains that not only is this the biblical teaching but, with one exception, the teaching of every known Christian writer in the first five centuries.

The only biblical passage which might seem to suggest otherwise is Matthew 19:9, 'whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another, commits adultery'. Wenham shows how following Erasmus many reformers took this as allowing both divorce and remarriage. However, this was not the view of the early biblical expositors nor is it a view held by most biblical expositors today. None of the other biblical texts give even the slightest whiff of a possibility of remarriage and very little opportunity for divorce.

Since the Scriptures and the teaching of the early church leaders seem so unequivocal it is worth reflecting on what happened to change this.

The teaching of the Lord Jesus is meant for His disciples. Though marriage is itself a creation ordinance for all humanity Jesus makes it plain that His teaching is hard and needs to be accepted by those who are truly seeking to live as His disciples. In the early

Church this is what made Christians different, they were living by a different creed to those around them. The words of Jesus are not law, rather Jesus made it plain that His disciples should excel the law. The danger with law is that we constantly look for loopholes and try to conform whilst minimizing the cost and inconvenience of obedience. Jesus calls His disciples to live out of love and gratitude, obeying not out of duty but out of love. This means we will want to do what is pleasing to Him, not what we grudgingly feel we must.

It is clear from the New Testament that the Christian community should uphold the honour of the Lord by exercising proper discipline and by requiring those who are ministers to model the commands of Christ. What should Christians do, however, when they are able to shape the laws of a nation? Can we put into law the commands of Christ? Can we legislate so as to require Christians, let alone nominal Christians or non-Christians, to do what is for the Christian an act of obedience. To some extent we must, not least because we believe that God knows best how human society should be organised, but deciding how far to go is far from easy. Since 1603 until the mid 19th Century the Church of England and therefore England as a whole had extremely strict rules. This has created great tensions as we have lost influence in society.

Ironically, our weakness as a Church gives us much more freedom. We do not need to worry quite so much about the legal dimension of marriage and how we treat non-Christians who come to be married in Church. Instead, we can get on with bearing witness to the transforming power of Christ as we seek to live in love and gratitude to him. Like the early Christians this is a great opportunity, if only we are prepared to seize it.

Christians must be prepared to teach clearly what our Lord taught, not being afraid to be as bold as He was. We should say and show that marriage is made by God, it is part of His eternal purposes and it is good in His sight. We need not be apologetic, marriage is a wonderful thing. Moreover, marriage is for life, like God's covenant with us a marriage covenant is not to be broken. Christians need therefore to work through the inevitable problems that marriage brings. Thankfully the Lord does not abandon us when we are weak and sin against Him. In the same way we should bear with one another's weaknesses and see the absolute commitment to the marriage relationship as unshakeable. There is much that local churches can do to strengthen marriage by teaching, pastoral support and fellowship. Moreover, those who are leaders in the congregation should seek to lead by example not because we think they can achieve perfection but because they are to be model to others.

I conclude with a quotation from Wenham and Heth:

The New Testament and the early church as a whole are not vague or confusing when it comes to the question of remarriage after divorce. It is clear that Jesus said that a man may have one wife or no wife, and if someone puts away their partner for whatever reason they must remain single.

BOOKS

From a theological perspective the now classic *Jesus and Divorce* by **John Wenham and William Heth** has been updated and reprinted by Paternoster at £4.99. This engages thoroughly with scholarly debate whilst forcefully advocating the clear biblical and early church teaching.

The substantial volume, *Divorce and Remarriage* by Andrew Cornes is sadly now out of print but well worth picking up secondhand. It deals thoroughly with the exposition of biblical texts but does not engage much with scholarship or historical context.

Another vital part of Andrew Cornes' book is on the practical and pastoral issues. It has been reprinted in *Questions about Divorce and Remarriage* which is presented as series of questions and answers. Published by Monarch and available for £7.99.

An excellent consideration of the historical and legal position of the Church of England (though biblically inadequate) was written in 1957 by Archbishop Fisher, entitled *Problems of Marriage and Divorce*. This has recently been reprinted and from a less biblically based position comes down very forcefully for a biblical view. Available from Belmont House Publishing. These books are available at reduced rates to members of the Society through the Book Club.