

# MARRIAGE, DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

(Topic # 16)

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## **Creation**

The institution of marriage is grounded in God's very creation of the human race and in His covenant of redemption. According to Genesis 1:27, God made man, male and female, after His own image and likeness (referred to as the *imago dei* in mankind). He created sexual distinctions as part of the very essence of humanity. And God created them, both male and female, as stewards of His creation (Gen. 1:28), commanding them to "be fruitful and multiply" and to have dominion over the earth.

Genesis 2 describes the most fundamental and overriding fact of marriage -- the organic unity, both spiritual and physical, of a male and female bound in the marriage covenant.

Since man could not have authentic fellowship with animals, God created woman out of man's side. She is authentically and equally human ("bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh," Gen. 2:23). Their coming together also indicates this fullness of fellowship ("they became one flesh," Gen. 2:24). Verses 24-25 outline the essential features of marriage: the marriage relationship takes precedence over others, even natural family ties ("a man shall leave his father and his mother"); marriage is designed to be a lasting union ("shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh"); marriage involves an intimacy of fellowship at the most basic level ("and the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed").

Though the institution of marriage is complete without children, as indicated in Genesis 2, children are an integral part of marriage and family. God tells man and woman to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" as responsible stewards of His creation (Gen. 1:28). This command appears to be part of what it means to be created in the image and likeness of God: as God is creative, so mankind is procreative. The revelation of the Godhead uses family imagery: God is Father, Christ is Son. So the community of family is fulfilled in the persons of father, mother, and children. Throughout scripture, children are always viewed as blessings from the Lord, while barrenness is viewed as a curse (Gen. 5:29; 28:3; 30:1; Psalms 107:28; 113:9; 127:3-5; Prov. 17:6). The birth of children is never

discouraged, but rather appears to be an integral part of the ordinance of marriage and family throughout scripture.

In sum, the biblical creation account outlines the primary components of marriage as companionship (emotional intimacy), sexual intercourse (physical intimacy), human wholeness (mutual complementarity), procreation, and joint (yet differentiated) responsibility in general dominion over creation.

### **The Fall**

Genesis 3 describes the willful disobedience of the first man and woman to the will and command of God. In this disobedience, they chose their own way, which they believed to be superior to God's order, and thus introduced estrangement into all of their relationships: with God, with the created world within which they operated, and with each other. Though the act of disobedience did not specifically involve any facet of marriage, it had a disastrous impact upon it.

First, the man and woman, knowing good and evil, experienced estrangement at the most basic level of their existence, a fact which immediately produced shame ("they knew that they were naked," Gen. 3:7). Not only did their attempt to invade God's exclusive realm of comprehensive knowledge ("knowing good and evil") separate them from direct intimate fellowship with God, it separated them from direct intimate fellowship with each other.

Second, the mutual complementarity of the partnership between man and woman became distorted as part of the curse ("Yet your {Eve's} desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you," Gen. 3:16). Marriage mutuality was necessarily now rearranged into a hierarchical order, for the sake of governmental restraints against sin.

Third, both man and woman became estranged from nature. For the man, the joyous nature of work was turned to toil and sweat (Gen. 3:17-19). For the woman, the joyous nature of childbirth was turned to pain (Gen. 3:16).

Thus, disobedience to God resulted in guilt and shame, reordered governmental relationships, and pain in the natural functions of life. God would have clear consciences and a "marriage bed undefiled," mutuality in marriage, and joyous productivity in work and the fulfillment of the natural roles.

### **Survey of Biblical Law Concerning Marriage**

#### **MOSAIC LAW**

The law of God was given to Moses for the direction and protection of God's people. God made explicit what He had made implicit in Creation. The divine instructions of God are given in the form of the Decalogue and elsewhere in a more detailed and applied form with specific laws and punishments. Both forms outline principles for marriage, sexuality, and divorce.

The books of Exodus and Deuteronomy prohibit adultery and the coveting of the spouse of another (Exod. 20:14,17; Deut. 5:18,21). The female slave whose master designates her for himself or his son but then either rejects her or takes another wife must either receive food, clothes, and marital rights, or else be granted her freedom (Exod. 21:7ff). An unbetrothed woman who is seduced cannot be abandoned, but an offer of marriage must be made, and if her father rejects the offer, a money payment had to be made instead (Exod. 22:16ff).

The book of Leviticus exempts from the general penalty for fornication a master and his female slave who have intercourse even though the slave is already engaged to someone else (Lev. 19:20). The owner must make a guilt offering in atonement. A daughter must not be given up for prostitution (Lev. 20:29).

Adultery and incest carry the penalty of death (Lev. 20:10ff). It lists prohibitions of marriages with close relatives (Lev. 18:6ff), as well as prohibits homosexuality and bestiality (Lev. 18:24ff). Priests are not to marry widows, divorcees, prostitutes, or any women who have been defiled, but only virgins (Lev. 21:14ff). Polygamy is nowhere specifically forbidden, although most examples of it portrayed in scripture carry evidences of unhappiness, rivalry, jealousies, and other negative consequences. Although prostitution by its very anti-marital nature is morally condemned, there is no civil penalty.

The book of Deuteronomy sternly forbids intermarriage between Israel (God's Covenant People) and the demonically idolatrous inhabitants of Canaan (Deut. 7:3ff). (This has significant implications for what we shall later call New Covenant Marriage.) Several passages of Deuteronomy protect the rights of children and women. The rights of the male firstborn in a polygamous marriage are protected when he is the son of a wife who is disliked (Deut. 21:15ff). Wives receive protection from husbands who falsely accuse them of shameful conduct and threaten to destroy their reputation (Deut. 22:13ff). Women are protected from rape (Deut. 22:23ff). A betrothed woman who is raped and has a chance to cry out but does not do so is to be stoned along with the rapist. If she has no realistic chance to cry for help and be heard, only the rapist is to be put to death. If the woman is unbetrothed, the rapist must marry her with the father's permission or pay a penalty. Widows are also protected. If a man dies without children, his brother (or nearest male relative) must marry the widow in order to perpetuate the family name (Deut. 25:5ff).

### **MARRIAGE LAWS IN THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS**

We shall have much to say concerning Christ's announcement of the conditions of marriage under the New Covenant later in this discussion. At this point, however, we continue with our survey of biblical law concerning marriage and now examine what Jesus says concerning the Mosaic law on that subject.

First, Christ endorses the Old Testament priorities in marriage and family. Commitment to God must have priority over all relationships, as the First Commandment had established. Jesus, using forceful language which has perplexed many and confused those who read His words superficially, warns His disciples that they must "hate" their fathers, mothers, wives, children, and their own lives for His sake (Luke 14:26). This scripture, among other things, grounds those who voluntarily remain celibate in their service to God (Matt. 19:11-12).

Second, Christ reaffirms the creation theology of marriage (Matt. 19:4-6). He concludes, "Consequently, they are no more two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate" (Matt. 19:6).

Third, the opportunity to marry has an eschatological limit. Marriage is depicted throughout scripture as the supreme and perfect relationship between a man and a woman in their life on earth, but the opportunity to enter that relationship appears to be limited to the earthly existence (Matt. 22:23-30).

Fourth, Jesus goes to the root of adultery by condemning not only behavioral adultery, but also adultery of the heart (Matt. 5:28). Lust for one other than one's marital partner is considered adultery.

Indeed, in summary, Christ used marriage to illustrate the most transcendent of all relationships, His union with His Body, the Church. He said He has become the bridegroom (Mark 2:18ff; 25:1ff; John 3:29). The marriage supper of the Lamb appears to indicate that while earthly marriage does not last, the marriage of God and His Covenant People does (Rev. 19:9; 21:9; cf. Luke 22:30; Matt. 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:18), a fact with utmost significance toward a New Covenant view of earthly marriage.

### **ST. PAUL AND THE LAWS OF MARRIAGE**

The Epistles of St. Paul repeat, reinforce, and illuminate the legal principles of marriage as outlined in the Old Testament law, teachings of the prophets, and the proclamations of Christ. But, as Jesus did, Paul goes further in developing a New Covenant theology of marriage. And at one point, Paul announces a whole new commandment related to marriage (see below).

As always, Paul puts obedience to God first. Marriage is a permanent but temporal relationship, reflective of a transcendent, eternal relationship between Christ and His Body, the Church. Celibacy, whether permanent or temporary, is a special gift of God for those utterly devoted or dedicated to God's service (I Cor. 7:7-8; 32-35). Celibacy for this purpose is grounded in that transcendent marriage relationship of Christ and His Church. If the celibacy is of a temporary nature chosen by persons who are married, the choice of celibacy must be by *mutual* consent, again underscoring the essential nature and obligations of earthly marriage.

Paul commands husbands and wives to have sexual intercourse in mutual submission, since they have authority over each other's bodies (I Cor. 7:1-4). Sexual intercourse is an *obligation* of marriage, a "debt" which must be paid to one's spouse, because it is the seal of marriage's essential quality, union. Indeed, the sexual needs of the partner should be met, says Paul, to prevent Satan from successfully tempting the partners to break their union in adultery. Unilateral refusal of sexual relations defrauds the partner of an aspect of his or her very being as a married person. It is a disintegration of the essential unity of the married person.

Marriage is the legitimate manifestation of something which illegitimately manifests itself in raw passion or lust (I Cor. 7:9). Passion in itself is not a ground for marriage. Rather, righteousness, holiness, and obedience to God are its ground: "That each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor, not in passion of lust like heathen who do not know God.... For God has not called us for uncleanness, but in holiness" (I Thess. 4:4,5,7). Paul explicitly condemns adultery, fornication (I Cor. 6:9-19), and incest (I Cor. 5:1). Since spouses are a united entity, sexual betrayal in marriage is a sin against one's own body, the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. Likewise, Paul portrays homosexual behavior as a perversion of nature, since sexuality as expressed through heterosexual marriage is the natural order (Rom. 1:26-27). Homosexuality thus is treason against the created order.

Just as Deuteronomy forbids members of the dedicated nation of Israel to intermarry with those outside the Covenant (heathen unbelievers), Paul forbids Christian believers to marry unbelievers (II Cor. 6:14-20).

Paul is much more explicit about the true nature of relations between husband and wife than the Old Testament is. This is because Paul is describing a New Covenant view of marriage, the implications of which we will discuss below. Organized around the central biblical principle of earthly marriage as a symbol of our union with Christ, Paul outlines marital "obligations" as being expressions of self-sacrificial service. As Christ did not come "to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom to many" (Matt. 20:28), marriage is characterized as mutual submission. Husbands and wives must be "subject to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph. 5:21).

Under the general theme of submission, Paul outlines an ordered and differentiated equality between the husband and wife. The husband is the head of the wife, and the wife is to be subject to her husband (Eph. 5:23f; Col. 3:18; I Peter 3:1ff). In the spirit of Christ, this endorses neither tyranny nor servitude. Rather, on the premises of equality in salvation (*i.e.*, legal standing before God), service (I Peter 3:7); Eph. 5:21), mutual forgiveness, and discipleship, marriage is an institution and order of equality (not egalitarianism) and love.

The husband is to love his wife as he loves his own body, nourishing and cherishing her, showing her honor and consideration (Eph. 5:28f; Col. 3:19; I Peter 3:7), and exhibiting self-control (Titus 2:6). The wife should obey her husband with a gentle and quiet spirit (Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:18; I Peter 3:1ff), and express her love by being sensible, chaste, domestic, kind, and submissive, *i.e.*, deferential to the line of divine authority which runs from God through her husband to her.

Like the law, prophets, and Christ, Paul stoutly affirms the permanence of marriage (I Cor. 7:10f). Partners united in divinely instituted marriage are to stay together and work out all obstacles to the full realization of their union. Finally, the epistles of Paul offer special instructions to bishops (elders) and deacons of the Church. They must be the husband of one wife (I Tim. 3:2,12; Titus 1:6). Although the specifics of this command have been hotly debated and are beyond the scope of the current study, these instructions underscore the principle that familial responsibilities are both patterns for relationships within the Church and sometimes competitors for the attentions of those devoted to special Christian service.

### **ROMANTIC LOVE**

Though there are examples in Scripture of "falling in love," divinely sanctioned "sexual attraction," and betrothed or wedded "bliss," (Gen. 29:18-20; the Song of Solomon) these are never established by Scripture as the ground of marriage. "Romance" is, at most, a blessed adjunct to marriage, though it also can result in ruination, as Solomon's experience illustrates (I Kings 1:1ff). Love, not romance, is commanded within the marital relationship. Outside that relationship "romantic" attraction is better seen as what scripture calls "lust," which manifests itself ethically in adultery, incest, rape, or other forms of immorality.

### **The Covenantal Nature of Marriage**

Marriage is depicted throughout scripture as a *covenant*. There is no more important concept to internalize if marriage is to be correctly understood in its biblical context and is to succeed as God intended. "Jehovah has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have broken faith, though she is your companion and the wife of your covenant" (Mal. 2:14; *cf.* Prov. 2:17). It is quite understandable that marriage is instituted as a covenant, since it is reflective of and finds its ground in a relationship which is entirely covenantal, God's relationship with mankind. In the Old Testament, the marital relationship is the primary symbol of God's relationship with Israel, and thus an understanding of Old Testament marriage necessitates an understanding of the Old Covenant. The marital relationship is also the primary symbol of God's relationship, through Christ, to the New Testament Church, and thus a New Testament understanding of marriage necessitates an understanding of the New Covenant. It is, furthermore, necessary to understand that there is an essential difference between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. It should be noted that both of the Covenants are described in both sections of the Bible (O.T. and

N.T.) and therefore both sections of the Bible are instructive on the subject of marriage and, as we shall see, on divorce.

Nowhere do the two Covenants and the two views of marriage which are related to them come together better than in Jesus' discourse on divorce in Matthew 19:1-11. In this discourse, Jesus acknowledges that there are two views of marriage and divorce, one related to the Old Covenant -- the Covenant of the Law; and one related to the New Covenant -- the Covenant of Grace, which is a sovereign act of God designed to restore the created order of organically integrated relationships among God, men, and the cosmos. In one sentence, Jesus, the mediator of the New Covenant, recognizes both: "Moses [the mediator of the Old Covenant of Law] permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning [the Creation Order] (Matt. 19:8, NIV). In the latter part of this statement, Christ is making an appeal to the original, creation-founded essence of marriage; and in that appeal, He establishes for the Church His commandment on the subject of marriage and divorce. If we are ever to have a biblical understanding of these two related subjects, therefore, we must understand what Jesus was talking about in this verse.

He begins to clarify His intent in the very next verse: "Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery" (Matt. 19:9, AV). In this commandment, Jesus summarily outlaws all divorce -- except on one, and only one, ground. It is more than safe to say, therefore, that all discussion on the subject of divorce outside that one ground ceases. It is forbidden because it is adultery, a forbidden, capital crime under the Law of God. Ninety-nine percent of the debate over divorce is thereby brought to a conclusion, and all that remains to be discussed is that solitary ground for the legitimate dissolution of marriage between living partners.

*Unfortunately, it is the debate over and disregard for this one ground that has produced untold misery and disintegration in human society and in the Church. What is this one ground? It is fornication, porneia (porneia). That would seem simple enough if it were not for the slipperiness of that word, that is, the difficulty in translating and understanding that key word. William Hendriksen, like many other scholars, demonstrates the difficulty in a footnote to his commentary on this passage:*

The term *porneia* ("fornication") is very broad in meaning. In its widest sense it indicates immorality or sexual sin in general (15:19; Gal. 5:19), illicit (often clandestine) relationships of every description, particularly unlawful sexual intercourse (John 8:41). In Paul's epistles the word occurs frequently. In addition to Gal. 5:19 see also I Cor. 5:1; 6:13,18; 7:2; II Cor. 12:21; Eph. 5:3; Col. 3:5; I Thess. 4:3. In the book of Acts it occurs a few times; also several times in Revelation. In the latter book, as in the Old Testament (LXX), it may at times be used figuratively, to indicate

departure from the Lord, who was considered his people's "husband." Hence, in such passages (see, for example, Hos. 6:10 and Rev. 19:2) it has at times been translated "whoredom," "harlotry," or even "idolatry." By reason of the context it is clear that here in Matt. 19:9, as also in 5:32, the reference is to the infidelity of a married woman....

Hendriksen's view that the word is best understood as "infidelity" is typical of the preponderance of opinion expressed in recent scholarship and modern biblical translation work. Some of this scholarship understands "infidelity" narrowly to mean illicit sexual relations within marriage, activity which is tantamount to the common understanding of "adultery." Others, such as R.J. Rushdoony in his *Institutes of Biblical Law*, interpret *porneia* as infidelity in the broadest possible sense of the word, leaving Jesus' "loophole" large enough to accommodate virtually any untoward action which tends to hinder fullest fulfillment of the marital relationship, including emotional distress.

The various views interpreting "fornication" to mean "infidelity" coincide with the spectrum of views extant during Jesus' time, and it was this range of opinion which actually prompted the questioning of Jesus on this matter, in a typical attempt to corner Him and trick Him into taking one or another side in a hotly contested contemporary controversy. For the Rabbi Shimmai, the reference was only to sexual unchastity or adultery. This view, similar to that of such contemporary expositors as John MacArthur, was the narrower of the general interpretations. On the other side was the Rabbi Hillel, who took a more liberal view. Hillel emphasized the Old Testament words "If then she finds no favor in his eyes" and allowed divorce for the most flimsy reasons imaginable. In our day, this would be typical of the perspective of Rushdoony, who paradoxically insists that *porneia* be rendered "fornication," not adultery (*moicheia*), because he wishes to define "fornication" as broadly as possible. The operative issue in Rushdoony's view is that "fornication" encompasses everything from the grossest of sexual sins to "insubordination," mental cruelty, and, after Grotius, "plain contempt," as well as, after Milton, "stubborn disobedience."

Jesus, in answering the crafty challenge from the Pharisees, rejected both rabbinical views and thus refused to fall into the trap laid by his critics. Instead, as He always did, He appealed to the scriptures. He proceeded to establish from them a pointed *contrast* between the generalized views of divorce which grew out of Old Testament practice and the interpretations of the rabbis on one hand and the true biblical view on the other. For Jesus, the true biblical view was expressed in the *Creation Order*, and it is to this order that He refers:

"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate" (*Matt. 19:6, NIV*).

To this, Jesus' questioners immediately counter with a rhetorical appeal to Moses' alleged leniency. According to them, Moses made divorce easy -- the grounds were broadly open, so long as the proper papers were filled out, as MacArthur as described it.

Jesus' answer to this further challenge is to *contrast* that view with one narrowly rooted in the Creation Order. If Jesus had intended that *porneia* be defined broadly, He would not have couched His answer in terms of contrast to a broad view. To define it broadly he would have been accepting the traditional broad view that *porneia* and its Hebrew equivalents refer to any form of unfaithfulness, from sexual to whatever. This practice of teaching from *contrast* was typical of Jesus' approach; "You have heard it said ... but I say."

What then is the contrast Jesus is establishing? It is a contrast between the Old Covenant view of marriage/divorce (Moses) and a New Covenant view (the re-established Creation Order, the way it was "in the beginning").

What does the divine revelation say about the way it was in the beginning and what does this tell us about the nature of marriage? It tells us that marriage is the establishment of "one flesh," or, as is conversely true, the establishment of a "one flesh" relationship is, in God's estimation, a marriage. We see from the New Testament revelation, furthermore, that this "one flesh" is more than a physical union, but that it has spiritual dimensions.

Paul uses the term "mystery" in two contexts. In one, he says that the "mystery" of the Gospel has been revealed in Christ and that this mystery is that God has drawn separate peoples from disparate sources and melded them into an organic "new creation," the Church (Eph. 2:11-22). In the other, the "mystery" revealed by the Gospel is that Christ Himself is united to this new creation in the same way that a husband is united to his wife ("This is a profound mystery -- but I am talking about Christ and the church," Eph. 5:32, NIV). The two unions -- first, the union of disparate peoples (Jews and Gentiles) into a new Body and, secondly, the union of Christ to that Body -- have the same essence.

We can conclude, therefore, that under the Creation Order and its re-establishment in the New Covenant, these relationships involve, in fact and reality, an *indissoluble organic union or integration of the once separate parties*. This is the meaning of "one flesh": an *organic union which God has ordained (joined together) and which man cannot "put asunder" without abject violence to God's will and order*.

What then is the Old Covenant (Law Covenant) foundation for marriage and divorce to which Jesus is drawing a contrast? To understand this, we must have a thorough understanding of the nature of the Old Covenant.

In all respects, the Old Covenant was one based on the *faithfulness* of the parties. Faithfulness and obedience to contractual terms was the essence of the Old Covenant. There was (and still is, for those who choose to live and operate under its terms) always a cause-and-effect relationship: faithfulness resulting in blessing and good order; unfaithfulness resulting in curses, judgment, and disorder (Deut. 8; Deut. 28-30). When the Law was given, it covered all of life, including marital relationships. Marriage, under the Old Covenant and its law system, was thus based on faithfulness between the parties. It was logical and necessary, therefore, that Moses would establish a system that allowed the dissolution of marriage on the ground of unfaithfulness. It was to this that Jesus was referring when He said that Moses allowed divorce due to the "hardness of their hearts." As Andrew Murray put it, "The whole Old Covenant was dependent on man's faithfulness: 'The Lord thy God *keepeth covenant* with them *that keep* His commandments'" (emphasis in original).

In contrast, what is the nature of the New Covenant? Andrew Murray describes it well:

The one supreme difference of the New Covenant; the one thing for which the Mediator, and the Blood, and the Spirit were given; the one fruit God sought and Himself engaged to bring forth was this: a heart filled with His fear and love, *a heart to cleave unto Him and not depart from Him*, a heart in which His Spirit and His law dwells, a heart that delights to do His will.

Here is the inmost secret of the New Covenant. It deals with the heart of man in a way of Divine power. It not only appeals to the heart by every motive of fear or love, of duty or gratitude. That the law also did. But it reveals God Himself, cleansing our heart and making it new, changing it entirely from a stony heart into a heart of flesh, a tender, living, loving heart, putting His Spirit within it, and so, by His Almighty Power and Love, breathing and working in it, making the promise true, *I will cause you to walk in My statutes, and ye shall keep My judgments.*" A heart in perfect harmony with Himself, a life and walk in His way - - God has engaged in Covenant to work this in us. He undertakes for our part in the Covenant as much as for His own.

What more apt or beautiful description could there be of marriage, especially in light of scripture's clear teaching that human marriage is reflective of the New Covenant between Christ and His Church? In the New Covenant -- announced already in Creation and in the promise of Redemption following the Fall, announced again to Abraham and in the proclamations of the Old Testament-era prophets -- the unfaithfulness of man was assumed, acknowledged, and declared irrelevant. In the New Covenant, *all* was to depend upon *God's* faithfulness, a mighty, loving faithfulness which would work the desired righteousness within man and eternally establish an indissoluble union between God and man and horizontally among all human members of the Covenant.

This is the essential nature of New Covenant marriage. It is a covenant along the lines of the Divine Covenant of Grace and Redemption. Rather than a cold contract depending upon human ability to remain obedient and faithful, it establishes a fleshly, living, breathing, tender, harmonious, organic union, divinely instituted and permanent, and built upon a heart of sacrificial love. This is *real* marriage. It is a "*one flesh*" union in the fullest and best sense, the creation of an entirely new spiritual entity. When a husband and wife are joined together in such a union, a single, integrated new creature emerges in the cosmos, and to divide it in any way is to maim and murder. It is the ultimate adulteration of humanity. This is why Jesus was being perfectly reasonable and truthful when He said man may not separate what God -- this covenant-making and covenant-keeping God -- has joined together. It is why the Creation account says that a man who is to be married (joined by God to a woman) *must* leave his father and mother and *cleave* unto his wife. In salvation, as in New Covenant marriage, the old order of physical birth and its natural relationships (law/parents) is passing away, to be replaced by a new order of spiritual birth and union in love (grace/wife).

Why does Jesus yet leave one ground for dissolution of a marriage? In fact, He really does not. He does cite *fornication*, but in so doing He is *underscoring* the absolute and permanent nature of establishing a one-flesh relationship. As we have seen, Jesus could not have had in mind a broad definition of "fornication," meaning general unfaithfulness. He was specifically offering His position as a *contrast* to that Jewish tradition, including both the conservative and liberal rabbinical interpretations. No, Jesus meant "fornication" in the commonly understood sense: "pre-marital" sex, the first sexual union between unmarried partners.

But, of course, there *is no such thing* as pre-marital sex. A sexual union, as we have seen, by its very nature, establishes a one-flesh relationship, a *de facto* marriage, according to the Creation Order. So, again, there is no such thing as "pre-marital sex", although there may be, so to speak, pre-wedding sex. When that occurs, any subsequent sexual union is nothing more than an adultery of the first, even if the first was immoral. Jesus is saying, therefore, that when a public "marriage" is attempted subsequent to a "fornication," which is a prior establishment of a marital relationship, the second attempt is void and adulterous. A legitimate ground for "divorce," the only one, is thus established. Critics who find this extremely narrow interpretation too tight for comfort will undoubtedly appeal immediately to the lexicon and its entries regarding *porneia*. It will be argued, as it has been against even less restrictive interpretations, that this word has a wide variety of meanings. That fact may be granted. But among its many meanings is the meaning of "pre-marital" sex, *i.e.*, a sexual union without the benefit of a formalized or ordained marriage -- "fornication" in its commonly understood meaning.

What if Jesus indeed had intended to specify such an act as the sole grounds for divorce? Which word would He have wanted the Holy Spirit to give to the author of the Gospel of Matthew writing in Greek? Would it not have been *porneia*? Why should we here select this one this specific use of a word-of-many-meanings? Because, as we have repeated several times, any broader meaning defies the context in which Jesus seeks to discredit the broad definition of the Pharisees and their progenitors and to re-institute the Creation-Order concept of "one-flesh."

## **Divorce**

If the foregoing interpretation is correct, and we submit on the basis of scripture that it is, should it be further argued that these principles apply only to Christian marriages, that is, those built on a New Testament or New Covenant foundation. The answer is: yes, and no.

Without a doubt, marriage between Christians is subject to these parameters. There may be no divorce, save upon discovery of a prior one-flesh relationship. Period. This is because all of life for a Christian is lived within the context of the New Covenant. The New Covenant is the context and pattern for all of life, and, most pointedly, for marriage. The Holy Spirit specifically chose to analogize the marriage covenant and the Covenant of Grace. Nothing could be more unmistakable.

A question then arises concerning non-Christian marriages. How do the foregoing principles apply? First of all, it must be noted, perhaps in the abstract, that God forbids non-Christian marriages. No marriage should be established without an acknowledgment of His lordship. In addition, the Old Testament and Paul both specifically forbid a "mixed" marriage between a non-believer and a believer, a non-Covenant person and a Covenant person.

Having said that, it is fully admitted that millions of "marriages" have indeed been entered by non-believers. Concerning these we must say, based on Genesis, that a marriage is a marriage. The one-flesh union is established as a fact of nature when a man and woman consummate a marriage. Divorce, except for the one ground of fornication, is therefore forbidden and it is a sin, no matter what the spiritual condition of the partners may be. Nevertheless, we must also recognized that a marriage between non-believers is in reality a marriage that exists under the provisions of the Old Covenant, simply because non-believers still live under the terms of the Old Covenant. Thus divorces may be granted under the same circumstances that the Old Covenant Law, with its faithfulness/unfaithfulness conditions, allowed. We hasten to add, however, that while divorce among non-believing marriage partners living by their own choice under the Old Covenant may be *technically legal*, it is still displeasing to God, disobedient to His created order, and therefore cursed and disastrous in its results. That has always been the case with regard to violations of God's ordinances. Sin always brings disaster, sadness, bitterness, disruption, disintegration, captivity, etc. upon those who

practice it and upon their societies. And the Old Covenant has always been a failure for those who attempt to find life, fulfillment, happiness, and salvation under it. Divorce will always be a failure for those who try to find life, fulfillment, happiness, and salvation from their distresses under it. For this reason, Christians, especially pastors and counselors, should do everything in their power to turn people, including unbelievers, away from divorce. But because of the "hardness of their hearts," circumstances may arise which make divorce less disastrous than ungodly marriage for those who refuse to submit their lives to the grace of Christ. We must keep in mind, however, that even then, there will be a price to pay for the individuals involved and for the society in which they live. Those who wish to live by the Old Covenant must realize that they will die by the Old Covenant. We may further inquire, at this point, about professing believers who may be experiencing a lapse in sanctification which results in marital difficulty. It is well known that these lapses can be serious indeed -- sometimes even life-threatening. St. Paul's declarations in I Corinthians 7 are instructive.

Paul begins with a general reiteration of the prohibition against divorce. He says this is "from the Lord" (vs. 10) in the sense that it is a rule which scripture and Christ have already enunciated. It is nothing new. This prohibition is underscored when he adds that if a partner "departs" or separates from a spouse, both partners must not marry again. This is, as we have seen, based on the fact that a marriage is *de jure* permanent, even if not permanent *de facto*.

Paul continues with a new command ("I, not the Lord," *i.e.* this is a command newly given through Paul and not previously announced in scripture). This new command is that *believers*, as a matter of general principle, should not divorce unbelieving spouses who are willing to remain in the union (I Cor. 7:12-13). Paul reasons that the unbelieving partner is actually, in some respect, sanctified by reason of his organic union to a sanctified person, and that which issues forth from that union, namely children, is thus sanctified, *i.e.*, "set apart" or dedicated unto God, children of the Covenant. However, in cases where the unbelieving spouse chooses *not* to remain *in the company* of the believing spouse, Paul's new commandment provides that the believing partner may, with divine allowance, release the departing, unbelieving partner from the believer's presence. The only rationale given in this passage for this allowance is God's desire that His people live peaceable lives (see additional discussion below). We may perhaps deduce a further rationale from other scriptures; namely, that a union between a believer and non-believer was not originally based in God's will and can never reach the full realization of the perfect, organic union which God designed into His creation order. This rationale is, however, speculative.

Perhaps the most difficult provision of this new commandment is Paul's further statement that believing spouses deserted by unbelieving spouses are "*not bound* in such circumstances." Does this mean that the remaining believer is free in the same sense as he or she would be if the spouse died -- free to remarry? Or is this simply a restatement of Paul's comment in the previous breath that the believer

should just let the departing partner go, *i.e.*, unbind him, but remain unmarried thereafter?

In favor of the latter view, one could return to the general principle stated at the beginning of the discussion (vss. 10-11) that partners should not separate, but if they do, they should not remarry.

In favor of the former view, one could refer to Paul's conclusion that God gives priority to having His people live in "peace," and presumably this "peace" contemplates fulfillment of the human potential, including the completeness that marriage offers. This presumption is based on an examination of the word Paul uses here, translated into English as "peace." The word is *eirene*, which is derived from the verb *eiro*, meaning "to join." *Eirene* thus carries the meaning of peace, quietness, and rest based on the fact of being "set at one again" or "re-integrated." Paul's use of this word strongly suggests, therefore, that the new commandment here set forth includes provision for believing spouses who are deserted by unbelieving spouses to again enjoy the blissful joys of marital union.

Even if this limited-circumstance provision for remarriage of formerly married Christians is conceded, it must be emphasized that on any other basis remarriage is outlawed by scripture. In the Old Testament, adultery was supposed to result in the death penalty, and thus the adulterated marriage reached its eschatological end, freeing the remaining partner to remarry. But in the New Covenant, marriage never ends prior to death; and thus remarriage is a moot point.

It may further be asked whether there are any nuances in meaning to the term "unbelieving spouse." What makes a spouse an "unbeliever"? Obviously, the term would include a person who makes no claim to saving faith in Jesus Christ. But does the term also contemplate a person who makes a Christian profession, but whose sinful life and unrepentant conduct, including illicit marital conduct (*e.g.*, adultery), belie that profession? Is such a person actually living in "unbelief," *i.e.*, living without reliance on the work of Christ? This question is difficult to answer in the abstract, and the answer may depend upon careful, prayerful, and lengthy examination of the life and conduct involved. This calls for great wisdom on the part of the Church and its overseers.

### **Forgiveness**

Serious Christians are all too familiar with the depths of depravity to which men and women may plunge in our fallen world. This depravity is manifested with a vengeance in our contemporary society in the area of marriage and family. Pastors and counselors, especially, can attest to the hopelessly complex tangles that can develop among those who refuse to honor God and His Will in sexual and marital relations. The landscape is littered neck-deep in shipwrecked marriages and families, and the consequences are disastrous beyond description. Yet into this awful scene, the grace of God still enters, as individuals are called to salvation through His mercy.

How is the Church to deal with newly won converts and penitents whose past lives have included this sin, even gross sin upon sin in the marital and sexual realm? Frequently the tangles are impossible to untangle according to any course outlined in scripture. In these situations, we may rely upon God's mercy and forgiveness, and the Church's authority to administer it through the Keys of the Kingdom.

Let this promise of mercy and forgiveness never be used in advance as a license for sinning, as Paul warned in his Epistle to the Romans. But we may rejoice in the fact that *through genuine repentance and effectual forgiveness*, the slate is wiped clean, and Christians thus forgiven should begin to re-establish holy marriages, to the glory of the Bridegroom of the Church.

### Error Refuted

Although we have in the course of this study already refuted certain errors in teachings about marriage and divorce, we wish in conclusion to address one other prevalent, but unscriptural view. This error holds that scripture's teachings on marriage and divorce merely outline God's "ideal," but that He has allowed divorce "due to mankind's sinfulness." This argument is usually based on an interpretation of Jesus' reference to Moses' allowance of divorce due to the hardness of men's hearts. It is argued that while God has plainly said He hates divorce, He permits it due to man's weakness in the flesh.

While having a ring of plausibility on its surface, this argument is utterly wicked, heretical, and blasphemous. It says, in effect, that while God forbids sin, He is lenient about it and allows men to order their lives around it simply because they have hearts of flesh. This is preposterous, and it is an untenable view of grace! God surely knows that sin exists. But He has never been lenient about it. His eternal plan, the Covenant of Redemption, has been to destroy sin and all its works. His provision for sinful man is not one of leniency but one of substitutionary atonement. This atonement wipes away sin, restores righteousness and holiness, and calls men thus redeemed to live in gratitude according to His eternal will.

### **Is New Covenant Marriage Possible?**

The highly restrictive view of marriage and divorce which we have outlined here will likely be criticized as unrealistic and impossible in today's world. We are not deterred by such a charge. Jesus was not deterred by it. His disciples, realizing the implications of His commandment, were astonished and reacted by saying, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry." The disciples and modern critics seem to imply that if conduct within the marriage state has such absolute boundaries that there is no hatch through which a person may escape with impunity, the whole relationship should be avoided.

Jesus came close to agreeing. He acknowledged that New Covenant marriage cannot be handled by everyone. Some have legitimate Kingdom-related reasons for avoiding it, he said, a fact which bachelor Paul underscored later. Others have been rendered incapable by birth of fulfilling the obligations that come with marriage; still others have been rendered incapable through the actions of men. These too should not marry, Jesus said, because such marriages would be frauds. Who then can enter New Covenant marriages?

"Those to whom it has been given," Jesus says. The Covenant of Grace is, after all, a Covenant of *Grace*. It is a gift given to those whom God has chosen to favor with His love. The same is true of marriage. It is God's gracious gift to His people. To those who are willing to accept the gift and live in gratitude for it, faithful covenant marriage is clearly possible. The Church must affirm this, fearing not to testify to its members concerning the absolute sanctity of marriage and hesitating not to administer loving Christian discipline to those who violate this holy covenant.