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DAVID J. ENGELSMA

The Prohibition of the Remarriage of the “Innocent Party”

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**Published by Hope Protestant Reformed Church
Evangelism Committee
2014
1307 E Brockton Ave, Redlands, CA 92374
(909) 792-6776**

Preface

This pamphlet is an edited version of a sermon first preached in 2013 at a worship service of the Hope Protestant Reformed Church in Redlands, CA.

The sermon addressed the question whether the “innocent party” in a divorce is permitted to marry another man, or another woman. This question is invariably the opening of an attack on the doctrine that marriage is a lifelong bond. Therefore, it becomes a powerful agent in the appalling dissolution of marriages with the accompanying destruction of the home and family in North America. Completely ignoring the negative answer to the question by the church of the West for some one thousand years after the apostles, most Protestant churches, ministers, and members virtually take for granted that the answer to the question is yes. Although their position on the matter is based mainly on feelings, they will argue for the position by denying that Scripture anywhere specifically and plainly forbids the remarriage of the innocent party.

The sermon and this pamphlet prove them mistaken.

I Corinthians 7:10, 11 specifically and plainly forbid the remarriage of the innocent party in a divorce when it reads “let her remain unmarried.” Thus, the text is the rock-bottom defense of marriage as a lifelong bond, which verse 39 of the chapter expressly declares. In the introduction to the sermon, I confessed shamefacedly that the meaning of the text had escaped me in the past, despite my extensive and intensive study of the truth of marriage. To my relief, I have since discovered that I was not so blind as I had thought myself to be. In a lecture given in April 1998, later published as a pamphlet, I said this:

This interpretation of the text [Matthew 19:9, as teaching that fornication is ground *only* of divorce, *not* also of a subsequent remarriage] is proved correct by the apostle in I Corinthians 7:10, 11. There he repeats certain commands about marriage

that the Lord Jesus Himself gave during His ministry. One command is that if a believing woman departs from or divorces her husband, she must either remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. Since Christ gave only one ground for departing, or divorcing, namely fornication, the apostle here must refer to departing, or divorcing, on the ground of the husband's fornication. Inasmuch as the apostle states that the innocent party must remain unmarried, he interprets Christ in Matthew 19:9 as teaching that fornication is a ground *only* of divorce, and *not* of remarriage ("Marriage: A Life-long Bond," pamphlet published by Redlands, CA Protestant Reformed Church, 1998, 15).

If, as is evident, I saw the meaning and force of I Corinthians 7:10, 11 already in 1998, I yet have a fault: I did not emphasize and publicize the teaching as it deserves and as the times demand. This fault I remedy in this pamphlet.

The word of God proclaims marriage to be a lifelong bond between one man and one woman until death, and death only, dissolves the bond. This truth is fundamental to home and family, as well as to the church, since in the church God saves families.

And the one argument that has even a semblance of weight against the basic truth of marriage, namely, that the innocent party is permitted to remarry, is shown to be false by I Corinthians 7:10, 11.

Therefore, the text not only substantiates the biblical stand of the Protestant Reformed Churches but also calls the other Protestant churches to re-examine their stand, repent of it, and begin confessing and practicing the truth of marriage.

Prof. David J. Engelsma
April, 2013

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I Corinthians 7:1-17, 39, 40

- 1 *Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman.*
- 2 *Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband.*
- 3 *Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband.*
- 4 *The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife.*
- 5 *Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency.*
- 6 *But I speak this by permission, and not of commandment.*
- 7 *For I would that all men were even as I myself. But every man hath his proper gift of God, one after this manner, and another after that.*
- 8 *I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, It is good for them if they abide even as I.*
- 9 *But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn.*
- 10 *And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband;*
- 11 *But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife.*
- 12 *But to the rest speak I, not the Lord: If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away.*
- 13 *And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him.*
- 14 *For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy.*
- 15 *But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace.*

16 For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband? Or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save thy wife:

17 But as God hath distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk. And so ordain I in all churches.

39 The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord.

40 But she is happier if she so abide, after my judgment: and I think also that I have the Spirit of God.

Please take special note of I Corinthians 7:10 and 11. “And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband: But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife.”

Introduction

The reason for this sermon on this subject tonight, beloved, is not that I think there is any special need of this congregation for a sermon on this subject. But I do judge that it would be for the benefit of all of the congregations in our denomination that a sermon on this passage would be preached.

The Protestant Reformed Churches have a good and right stand with regard to marriage. Our confession is that marriage is a lifelong bond between one man and one woman, one male and one female, that can be broken and will be broken only by death. But this stand is under strong attack today. It is under attack from enemies of this confession from without, not so much the ungodly world, as other churches and other ministers and theologians. But our confession concerning marriage is also under attack today from within. Such are the circumstances in which various members find themselves, or find their relatives, that pressures are put upon this stand and confession concerning the institution of marriage from within the churches.

I have made this sermon in the past week or so with the intention, as I have opportunity, to preach this sermon in every congregation in the denomination that gives me the opportunity to do so.

The important feature of our text is that it directly and clearly addresses the issue of the remarriage of the so-called innocent party in a divorce. The importance of this text is what it declares about this specific issue: that it is forbidden, or prohibited, for the innocent party in a divorce to remarry after the divorce.

I speak of the “so-called innocent party” because, although it certainly happens that only one of the married persons commits adultery, in some of the cases the husband has so mistreated his wife for many years, or the wife has so behaved miserably towards her husband, that, if they have not virtually driven their marriage companion to adultery, they bear some responsibility for the adultery and subsequent divorce. Some who have not committed adultery are, nevertheless, not an innocent party in the divorce, but very much a guilty party.

The enemies of the confession that marriage is a bond for life that can be broken only by death always launch their attack upon this confession first of all by asserting that it is permissible to the “innocent party” to remarry after divorce. Usually, this attack is hypocritical and deceitful because the churches and the theologians who launch the attack in fact allow remarriage after divorce for many reasons, indeed for almost every reason. They do not limit remarriage to the innocent party in a divorce. Nevertheless, this is the spear-point of their attack upon the confession that marriage is a lifelong bond between one man and one woman.

Invariably, if they argue on the basis of the Bible at all, they argue on the basis of one text in the Bible and one text only. In fact, they argue not on the basis of the entire text, but only on the basis of the first half of the text. That first half is the first part of Matthew 19:9. There the Lord says, “Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery.” Obviously, the Lord here permits and authorizes divorce

on the ground of the sexual unfaithfulness of one's husband or wife. But those who argue for the permission of the remarriage of the innocent party explain the text as allowing, not only for the *divorce* of the innocent party, but also for the subsequent *remarriage* of the innocent party.

If this attack upon our stand is successful, not only is the attack fatal to the stand of the Protestant Reformed Churches, but the attack is fatal also to the institution of marriage itself. For if the innocent party may remarry, that is because the marriage bond has been broken. And, in this case, marriage is not a lifelong bond, but merely a breakable contract. Furthermore, this contract is so weak, if this attack upon our stand is successful, that every husband and every wife are able to break this contract. Nor is it very difficult to do so. Sex with another than one's own wife or husband is sufficient to break what is now viewed as a contract between a man and a woman.

In passing, it ought to be noted also that if the popular interpretation of Matthew 19:9 is correct, that the innocent party is permitted to remarry because the adultery of the mate has broken the bond of marriage, the implication is also that the guilty party is permitted to remarry. For, according to this interpretation, the marriage bond has been broken. But the marriage bond cannot be broken for only the innocent party. If the bond is broken, it is broken for the guilty party also. And if the bond has been broken, the guilty party is permitted to remarry. The Bible permits all unmarried persons to marry. Thus, the popular interpretation of Matthew 19:9 holds that the fornicating man or woman *by his or her own fornication* enables himself or herself to marry the object of his or her sinful passion. Permission of the innocent party to remarry necessarily involves permitting also the guilty party to remarry.

Not only do the enemies of our confession assert over against it that the innocent party is allowed to remarry on the basis of the first part of Matthew 19:9, but they also contend that there is no passage in Scripture that specifically forbids the remarriage of the so-called innocent party in a divorce. This contention is false, altogether apart from the teaching of our text in I Corinthians 7.

Genesis 2 records that marriage is a divine institution that causes a married couple to become one flesh. No human agency, no human act, including the act of illicit sex, is able to separate what has become one flesh. Only God is able to make that separation, as only God is able to separate our human nature into body and soul, as He does by our death.

Besides, I Corinthians 7:39 is clear prohibition of the remarriage of the innocent party. We read in verse 39 these words: “The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord.” Marrying another is permitted only upon the death of one’s spouse. Marrying another is not permitted under any other circumstance, including the divorce of one’s mate on the ground of his or her fornication.

In addition, there is the second part of the text that the foes of our confession appeal to, Matthew 19:9, where the Lord goes on to say about the woman who has been divorced by her husband, even though she has not committed fornication or adultery, and whose husband has then subsequently married another woman, that whoever marries her commits adultery. This word of Jesus implicates the woman, the innocent party in a divorce, in the adultery with the second husband. Her second husband does not commit adultery by himself.

But in addition to these biblical testimonies of the impermissibility of remarriage after divorce, there is the specific teaching of our text.

Now, I must confess to you that it is only recently that I myself have recognized the importance of the teaching of our text as specifically prohibiting the remarriage of the innocent party in a divorce. I am almost ashamed to admit this. Some years ago, I preached a series of sermons on this outstanding chapter in the Bible on marriage. At that time I did not recognize the force of the text. Later, I published a book on this chapter. And again, if my memory serves me correctly, I did not include in this book the important teaching of this text with regard to the permanency of marriage. The only defense I can make of myself is that we grow in our understanding

of the Word of God as we continually search and study it. But there is no doubt that this passage is specific and clear prohibition of the remarriage of the innocent party.

And this is the Word of God to us: The Prohibition of the Remarriage of the “Innocent Party”. Notice with me: The Prohibition Itself; The Reason for That Prohibition; and Our Obedience to This Prohibition.

The Prohibition Itself

Crucial to our understanding of the text as the prohibition of the remarriage of the innocent party is our recognition of the distinction that is made in the text between the apostle’s own command and the command of the Lord. This distinction is fundamental to the right understanding of the passage.

The apostle writes in verse 10: “Unto the married I command,” and then quickly adds these words, “yet not I, but the Lord.” The command in verses 10 and 11 is not the apostle’s own command, but the Lord’s command. Therefore, the command in verses 10 and 11 differs from the command in verses 12-14. In verse 12, the apostle goes on to say, “to the rest speak I, not the Lord.” Verses 10 and 11 are the Lord’s command to the church. Verses 12-14 are the apostle’s command to the church.

The meaning is not that there is any difference in authority between the two commands, as if the command of our text is authoritative because it is the Lord’s, whereas the command in verses 12-14 lacks authority because it is not the Lord’s, but the apostle’s, command. Neither is the explanation this: that in verses 10 and 11 (our text) the apostle has the backing of the Lord, whereas in verses 12-14 he speaks on his own without the authoritative backing of the Lord. Both of the commands are authoritative. Both of the commands are inspired Scripture and, therefore, have Scripture’s authority.

Rather, the meaning is this (and this is of fundamental importance): In verses 10 and 11 the apostle is only repeating a

command that the Lord Himself gave during His earthly ministry. It is a command which is also recorded in the gospel accounts of the ministry of the Lord. There are several aspects to the command of verses 10 and 11. The wife may not depart from her husband. If she does depart, she must remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband may not put away his wife. All of these aspects of this command are almost word-for-word what Jesus Christ Himself commanded in His earthly ministry. You can find this very same command more than once in the gospel accounts of the ministry of Jesus Christ (Matt. 5:31, 32; Matt. 19:3-12; Mark 10:2-12; Luke 16:18).

In contrast, the command about marriage that the apostle gives in verses 12-14 addresses a marriage problem that Jesus Himself did not have occasion to address in His own ministry and about which you will not find in the words of Jesus Christ in the gospel accounts of His ministry. The command in verses 12-14 concerning the marriage of a believer with an unbeliever is original with the apostle. But, of course, the apostle is only expressing the will of the ascended Jesus Christ, so that the command of verses 12-14 has all the authority of Jesus Christ, even though Jesus Himself, during His ministry, did not utter these words.

It is this, namely, that verses 10 and 11 are the command that Jesus Himself gave concerning marriage, divorce, and remarriage in His earthly ministry, that proves that Matthew 19:9 (the first part) is not giving permission both for divorce and remarriage for the innocent party but is only giving permission for the divorce of the innocent party. The fact that our text is only repeating the command that Jesus Himself gave in His earthly ministry is conclusive proof that remarriage for the innocent party is prohibited by Jesus Christ and His apostle.

In the text there is a command, a negative command, and a negative command is a prohibition. The prohibition is that the wife may not divorce her husband, and that the married man may not divorce his wife. The words in the text, “depart” (“Let not the wife depart from her husband”) and “put away”, (“Let not the husband put away his

wife”) are biblical terms for divorce. We must understand the text this way: Let not the wife divorce her husband; and let not the husband divorce his wife. You may think here of a full, legal divorce. Divorce is prohibited. Jesus Christ Himself prohibits divorce. This, all by itself, is a message that all the churches and all professing Christians very much need to hear in our divorcing day. The question is not, first of all, may the innocent party remarry? But the question is: What does our Lord think and say about divorce?

And there are several instances in the gospel accounts of the ministry of Jesus Christ prohibiting divorce. During His ministry, Jesus forbade divorce on more than one occasion. He prohibited divorce in Matthew 5:31, 32. He prohibited divorce in Matthew 19:2-12, He prohibited divorce in Mark 10:2-12. He prohibited divorce in Luke 16:18. The command of the text, do not divorce, is not the apostle’s own command, but it is the command of the Lord, the prohibition of Jesus Himself, during His earthly ministry.

But there is an exception to that command, an exception to that prohibition of divorce. The apostle recognizes that exception and gives expression to that exception in verse 11. Having said, “Let not the wife depart from [or divorce] her husband,” he adds: “But and if she depart,” which is the same as to say, “But and if she does divorce her husband.” Here the apostle is recognizing a lawful, legitimate divorce among the people of God and in the church. He certainly is not allowing some disobedient wife to rebel against the command that he has just given that she not depart from her husband. In that case, he would have said, “But if she does depart, let her repent of her sin of departing and return to her husband.” He says no such thing, because in this case her departing, or divorcing, is lawful, legitimate, and permitted. Under certain circumstances and in connection with a particular assault on the marriage by her husband, it is permitted, it is right, that a Christian woman divorces her husband. By implication, the same is true for a believing husband.

There can be no question about the particular event and circumstances that make a divorce permissible and right, in light of the fact that all that the apostle is doing in the passage is repeating

for us what Jesus Christ Himself had taught and commanded on the matter, as is recorded in the gospel accounts of His ministry. Almost always, when Jesus was forbidding divorce, He expressed a legitimate exception: “except it be for fornication.” He said this again and again. In the case of a woman’s husband committing fornication, that is, having a sexual relationship, (or, in the weak language of our day, carrying on an affair) with another woman, it is lawful, it is legitimate, it is permitted that the wife leave her husband by a full, legal divorce. This was the exception to the prohibition of divorce that Jesus Himself approved. This exception to the prohibition against divorcing is found in Matthew 19:9. The apostle is merely recognizing the exception of Jesus Christ to his own prohibition of divorce: “But and if she depart,” because her husband has been sexually unfaithful. I Corinthians 7:10, 11 recognizes a divorce on the ground of fornication.

Now, the fundamentally important, and controversial, question is: Is it permitted to this innocent woman in our text to marry somebody else? She is the wife who has been sinned against. She has not been the sinner. Her husband has been guilty of sexual unfaithfulness, of an adulterous relationship, or of an “affair.” She has divorced him as she has a right from Jesus Christ to do. About her, the question is: May she, as the innocent party, remarry?

To this question most churches today, most theologians, most ministers, and, I suppose, most confessing Christians answer, without hesitation: Yes! Even if there are a few who would deny the right of remarriage when the divorce is for some other reason than the adultery of one’s mate, almost all are agreed that in the case of adultery the innocent party may remarry. Their position really is that adultery dissolves the marriage. Adultery annihilates the marriage bond and institution.

But to this question, “May the innocent party remarry?” the apostle in our text answers: No! And he informs us that Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church, answers: No! For in the text we have not the command simply of the apostle, but, as the apostle tells us,

the command of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. With regard to that woman who has divorced her husband legitimately because he has been guilty of fornication, the apostle says she has two options now as a divorced woman. And neither of those options is the right to marry someone else. “But and if she depart, *let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband.*” There is clear prohibition of her, the innocent party’s, remarrying, for we read, “Let her remain unmarried.”

Since the apostle is here repeating the Lord’s command, which He gave in the gospels, the text proves that the first part of Matthew 19:9 is not in fact giving a ground both for divorce and for remarriage, but only a ground for divorce in the case of adultery. Our text clearly explains the command of Christ in Matthew 19:9 as teaching that the divorced person who has not been guilty of adultery is prohibited from remarrying. The apostle’s explanation of the command of the Lord in Matthew 19:9 is: “Let the woman who is the innocent party in a divorce remain unmarried.” Specifically addressing the issue of the remarriage of the innocent party, the text prohibits that remarriage. “But and if she departs [lawfully and rightly, as an innocent party], let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband.” She has these two options, and these two only.

If the Lord in the first part of Matthew 19:9 were teaching that one divorced on the ground of the fornication of her or his mate is permitted, not only to divorce, but also to remarry, the apostle in I Corinthians 7:10, 11 would have written, “Let her marry another man, if only he is a believer, or be reconciled to her husband.” But the apostle wrote no such thing. Claiming to be repeating the Lord’s own command in Matthew 19:9, the apostle declares that a woman who is lawfully divorced must remain unmarried.

The text is a clear, specific, and incontrovertible prohibition of the remarriage of the innocent party.

The Reason for That Prohibition

The reason for this prohibition is especially important. This is not only because of the popularity among Christians of the position that the innocent party is permitted to remarry, but also because all of us are emotionally sympathetic to the plight of the innocent party in a divorce. And when the circumstances affect ourselves personally, or our families, then our sympathies all the more lead us in the direction of concluding that the poor woman, or the poor man as the case may be, should not have to live a lonely and single life for the rest of her, or his, life and should not have to be deprived of the sexual relationship with a husband or a wife. Let her remarry. Let him remarry. With the blessing of the church.

The command of the Lord, repeated by His apostle, is contrary to our sympathies and emotional inclinations.

There must be good reason for the prohibition of the remarriage of the innocent party, and there is.

The reason for this prohibition the apostle himself gives at the end of this chapter, one of the most outstanding and important chapters in all the Bible on marriage, divorce, and remarriage. The apostle gives the reason in verse 39, his concluding text in the chapter. "The wife is bound by the law [to her husband] as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will, only in the Lord."

Marriage is a divine institution. It is governed by the sovereign will of God, who instituted marriage. This is the meaning of "law" in verse 39: the sovereign will of the Creator of the marriage ordinance. Marriage is not governed by developments in society. Marriage is not controlled by our sympathies and by our emotions. Marriage is not a merely human arrangement, that may be adjusted according the passing whims of society, or to suit our pleasures and comforts. The nature of marriage does not change because of the painful circumstances of the lives of some of God's children. God instituted marriage. God's will governs marriage. And the

will of God, determining what marriage is and governing marital life, as made plain in verse 39 of I Corinthians 7, is that marriage is a lifelong bond between one man and one woman. Marriage is a bond. It is not a contract or agreement. If the wife is “*bound*” to her husband in marriage, the marriage is a bond. By the law of God, that bond can be broken only by death. Very clearly the apostle states in verse 39: “If her husband be *dead*”, truly dead, physically, with his body in the grave, she has freedom to be married to someone else, only in the Lord. Only the death of the husband gives a wife the liberty to marry another man.

We Calvinists should find this reason, or ground, for the lifelong permanency of marriage compelling. We reverence and adore the sovereignty of God. This sovereignty of God not only applies to His work of saving us, but it also extends to the institution of marriage among us and to our behavior with regard to that institution of marriage. God is sovereign over marriage, over its nature and over our behavior in that institution. We honor this sovereignty of God by recognizing that marriage is not a breakable contract, capable of being dissolved by the passion of every lustful man or every promiscuous woman. The sovereignty of God regarding the matter of marriage, *His* institution, determines that marriage is lifelong, so that only God Himself may, and only God Himself can, break this bond.

We should not overlook that it is to the honor of marriage that even for God dissolving the bond takes some doing: Nothing short of the mighty power of death is able to dissolve the bond of marriage.

Still more compelling a reason for the prohibition of the remarriage of the innocent party for us is that this intimate relationship known as marriage, a one-flesh relationship between one man and one woman for life, is the outstanding earthly symbol of the spiritual marriage, that is, the covenant between God and His people in Jesus Christ. The permanency of marriage represents the faithfulness of God to His church, which is often adulterous toward God, going after other lovers, other gods, as we find in Psalter number 291:9: “When unto God they cried, He heard/
And turned again His face,/ In boundless love remembering/ The

covenant of His grace.” God remains faithful to His church. Our spiritual adulteries do not break the covenant of marriage between God and us. But in His faithfulness God brings us back, and in His grace He takes us back, reconciles us to Himself, and then renews us so that we on our part are faithful to Him. Of this faithfulness of God to His church as the real marriage, after which earthly marriage is patterned, the prophet testified in Ezekiel 16 and the apostle witnessed in Ephesians 5:22-33. Although Paul teaches and commands concerning our earthly marriages in I Corinthians 7, always in the background of his thinking and instruction is the truth he expresses in Ephesians 5:32: “This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church.”

There is good reason why the apostle notes in the text, where he is prohibiting the remarriage of the innocent party, that this is the command of the *Lord*. He is referring, of course, to Jesus, who has become the Lord in His resurrection from the dead and as he sits at God’s right hand. Jesus is the revelation of the faithfulness of God to us in the covenant. And Jesus is our Husband. As the Husband of the church and of you and me personally, Jesus Christ is faithful to us, although by our many sins we often show ourselves unfaithful to Him. All of those sins invariably involve our going after some other lord, some other lover than Jesus Christ. All are spiritual whoredom, or fornication. But He does not cast us off. Daily, when we come to Him, saying, “Forgive our debts,” we are asking Him to forgive our spiritual adultery, to restore us to the intimacy from which we have strayed and which we have defiled, and to maintain the real marriage with us.

And He does this. He does not allow His covenant bond with us to be broken. He maintains the bond. And He does this at the cost to Himself of His own cross and agony on Calvary.

Our spiritual adulteries cannot dissolve the covenant of grace.

As God is faithful in the covenant, and as Jesus Christ is faithful as the Husband of the church, so also does the permanency of

marriage, even a marriage violated most grossly by fornication, display this covenant faithfulness of God and of Jesus Christ.

The church's defense of marriage, both by her official witness and by the lives of her members, is her testimony to the unbreakable covenant of God in the gracious faithfulness of God in Jesus Christ.

When a church abandons this biblical truth about marriage and approves the breaking of the marriage bond (but the bond remains, until the death of one of the original couple, regardless that the state, churches, and a majority of professing Christians announce its dissolution), when a church by its actions allows marriage to be presented as breakable and broken, that church necessarily at the same time compromises the glorious truth of God's faithfulness in the covenant of grace. The truth of marriage and the truth of the covenant of grace are inseparably related. Maintaining the truth of the unbreakable, lifelong bond of marriage, we maintain also the unconditional faithfulness of God in His covenant with us. To lose this truth of marriage would mean at the same time, and by virtue of this fact, to abandon the truth of the covenant.

The text itself provides the reason for the prohibition of the remarriage of the innocent party. It states that one of the options of the innocent party is that she "be reconciled to her *husband*." Her husband has sinned against her in the marriage in the worst possible way. He has committed fornication with someone else. The woman is divorced with a full, legal divorce, as is her right. But the man to whom she was formerly married, and from whom she is now rightly divorced, is still her husband. The apostle does not say, "But and if she depart let her be reconciled to her *ex-husband* or her *former husband*." Rather, "let her be reconciled to her *husband*." He is still her husband. His adultery did not dissolve the marriage. Their lawful divorce did not break the marriage. Adultery and divorce *cannot* break the marriage. The guilty, divorced man is still her *husband*. She is still, therefore, his wife. The bond is still a reality.

And this is why reconciliation is a possibility. It is not a necessity for her. The apostle does not command the innocent party, "Be

reconciled to that man.” She has a right to have departed from him or to be divorced from him. But she very well may be reconciled to him. The church may not compel her to be reconciled, but the Spirit of God may work upon her soul so that she is willing to be reconciled. And that is, of course, only if he has repented of his adultery and if it is obvious that he has changed his ways. But she has good reason to do this, that is, to be reconciled to her unfaithful, but now penitent, husband. God graciously reconciled her to Himself in spite of her own spiritual adulteries, which are far worse than her husband’s physical adultery against her. And as Jesus Christ, her personal Lord and Savior, takes her back into His bosom daily, forgiving and forgetting, so also may she be reconciled to her husband.

And this is another reason for the prohibition of the remarriage of the innocent party. When remarriage is prohibited, the way is left open for reconciliation. But if the innocent party remarries, the door is slammed shut against the possibility of reconciliation with the original husband or wife.

Our Obedience to the Prohibition

That the wife or husband, who divorces on the ground of a mate’s sexual unfaithfulness, remains unmarried is a command. This is a command to every church and to all believers. It is a command from the apostle of Christ. And it is explicitly the command of the Lord Himself: “yet not I, but the *Lord*.” He is Lord over our marriages and He is Lord over our behavior with regard to our marriages. He bought us with His blood. He owns us, body and soul. Jesus has absolute authority over the church, specifically with regard to the church’s position on marriage, divorce, and remarriage. His will determines our confession concerning the institution of marriage, and our behavior in marriage.

The apostle notes in verse 17 of this chapter that what He ordains concerning marriage in our text and in everything that precedes verse 17 He ordains in all the churches: “So ordain I in all

churches.” I Corinthians 7:10, 11 is not only a command for the church at Corinth. This is not only a command for the Protestant Reformed Churches. This is a command for all churches in the world, everywhere, always, and under all circumstances. Therefore, we must not be ashamed about what is regarded as our particular stand regarding the permanency of marriage. We must proclaim it. We must declare it. We must publicize it. This is the command of Jesus Christ for all the churches: Let not the wife divorce her husband. But if she does, on the lawful ground of his fornication, let her, the innocent party, remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband.

The question is: Will the churches and confessing Christians obey this command?

Many are disobedient and show themselves to be rebellious against the Lordship of Jesus Christ. There are many professing Christians who simply say, “I don’t care what the apostle or Christ commands in the text. I’m not going to live a lonely life. I’m going to remarry.”

Then there is the danger that when these difficult circumstances affect us personally, our own friends or our own relatives, we take the position, “I’m not going to condemn the remarriage of the innocent party in this case. And I’m not going to admonish the one who is entertaining this remarriage or who has actually engaged in remarriage.” The church today must remember the warning of Jesus Christ: “If we love our relatives more than we love Jesus Christ, indeed if we are not willing to hate our relatives for Christ’s sake, we are not worthy to be disciples of Jesus Christ” (Luke 14:25-27). The individual Christian who finds himself or herself in distressing marital circumstances, causing deprivation and suffering of physical life, must remember the warning of Jesus that if we are not willing to hate our own life we cannot be His disciple (Luke 14:26).

There are also some who foolishly say, “The kind and loving Jesus would never require one of His dear children to live a life of loneliness and to deprive himself or herself sexually.” Jesus speaks in the text. Jesus speaks about one of His dear children who has had

to divorce her husband because of his adultery. And Jesus says, “Let her remain unmarried.” That is, let her live a single life, perhaps for many years, and let her deprive herself of the relation to the man that is natural to the female.

A more serious objection to the truth of the prohibition of the remarriage of the innocent party is that of the Presbyterian who can appeal against this truth to his creed, the Westminster Confession of Faith. In Chapter 24, section 5, the Westminster Confession approves the remarriage of the innocent party: “In the case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce, and after the divorce, to marry another, as if the offending party were dead.” The last phrase of the article itself not only exposes the error of the statement, but also indicates that the men of the Westminster Assembly were aware of the error, indeed were troubled by it.

The last phrase of the Westminster Confession 24.5 is a deliberate reference to I Corinthians 7:39, the Holy Spirit’s plain declaration that the marriage bond is dissolved by death and by death only, thus forbidding all remarriage while a husband or wife is still living, regardless of divorce on the ground of adultery. Westminster felt it necessary to explain away the text’s teaching that only death dissolves the marriage bond by suggesting that the innocent party and the church may regard the guilty party in a divorce as though he were dead.

But if the guilty party is still alive physically, he is not dead. For anyone to regard him as dead, in the sense of I Corinthians 7:39, is sheer foolishness. The truth is that I Corinthians 7:39 does not say about the wife, who is “bound by the law as long as her husband liveth,” that she is at liberty to be married to another man, if she and her church conveniently decide to *regard* her husband as dead. But the text states that she is at liberty to marry another man “if her husband *be dead*”, actually and physically dead.

The grave error of Westminster concerning remarriage is also evident in the first section of Chapter 24, in light of I Corinthians

7:10, 11. In 24.1, the Westminster Confession correctly states the truth about marriage: “Neither is it lawful...for any woman to have more than one husband at the same time.” I Corinthians 7:10, 11, as we have seen, teaches that the guilty party in a divorce, whom the innocent party has divorced, remains her husband: “let her... be reconciled to her *husband*.” According to I Corinthians 7:11, if the innocent party marries another man, as the Westminster Confession permits the innocent party to do in chapter 24.5, she will have two husbands at the same time, thus violating the fundamental rule concerning marriage that the Westminster Confession itself has laid down in chapter 24.1.

Judging the creed by Holy Scripture, particularly I Corinthians 7:10, 11, as the Reformed faith, calls Reformed and Presbyterian believers to repudiate chapter 24.5 of their creed as erroneous in the important matter of the truth of marriage. And in all their ecumenical endeavors with churches holding the Westminster Confession, the Protestant Reformed Churches must make an issue of this part of the Presbyterian creed (as well as of the unbiblical statement in the following section that also “willful desertion... dissolves the bond of marriage”).

Faith responds differently to the biblical prohibition of the remarriage of the innocent party. Faith responds to the command by obeying it. Faith yields willingly to the authority of the Lord Jesus. The faithful church will proclaim the prohibition against remarriage. And the believing children of God will walk in submission to this command of Jesus Christ.

This can be a very narrow and painful way for some of God’s children. But it is a narrow way that honors the institution of marriage. It is a narrow way that acknowledges the Lordship of Jesus Christ. It is a narrow way that displays the faithfulness of God to His people and of Christ to His church in the covenant of grace. And it is a narrow way that leads to life eternal and joys evermore, the consummation of the real marriage.

Appendix

Other published works by the author on marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

Marriage, the Mystery of Christ & the Church: The Covenant-Bond in Scripture and History (Grandville, MI: RFPA rev. ed. 1998).

Better to Marry: Sex and Marriage in I Corinthians 6 & 7 (Grand Rapids: RFPA, 1993).

“Until Death Us Do Part: ‘The Sad Case of Bert Zandstra’ and Other Essays on Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage” (booklet published by South Holland [now Crete] Protestant Reformed Evangelism Committee, [present address] 1777 E. Richton Rd. Crete, IL 60417).

“The Lord’s Hatred of Divorce” (pamphlet published by Hudsonville Protestant Reformed Church, 5101 Beechtree Ave., Hudsonville, MI 49426).

“Marriage and Divorce” (pamphlet published by the Evangelism Committee of First Protestant Reformed Church, 2800 Michigan, NE, Grand Rapids, MI 49506).

“Marriage: A Life-Long Bond” (pamphlet published by the Redlands, CA Protestant Reformed Church, 1307 E. Brockton Ave., Redlands, CA 92374).

“A Brief Study of Jeremiah 3 on Divorce” [on God’s divorce of Israel on account of Israel’s “whoredoms,” while yet remaining her husband and eventually restoring Israel to the intimacy of the marriage bond, which had not been dissolved either by Israel’s whoredoms or by God’s divorce] *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 39, no. 2 (April 2006): 2-16.

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